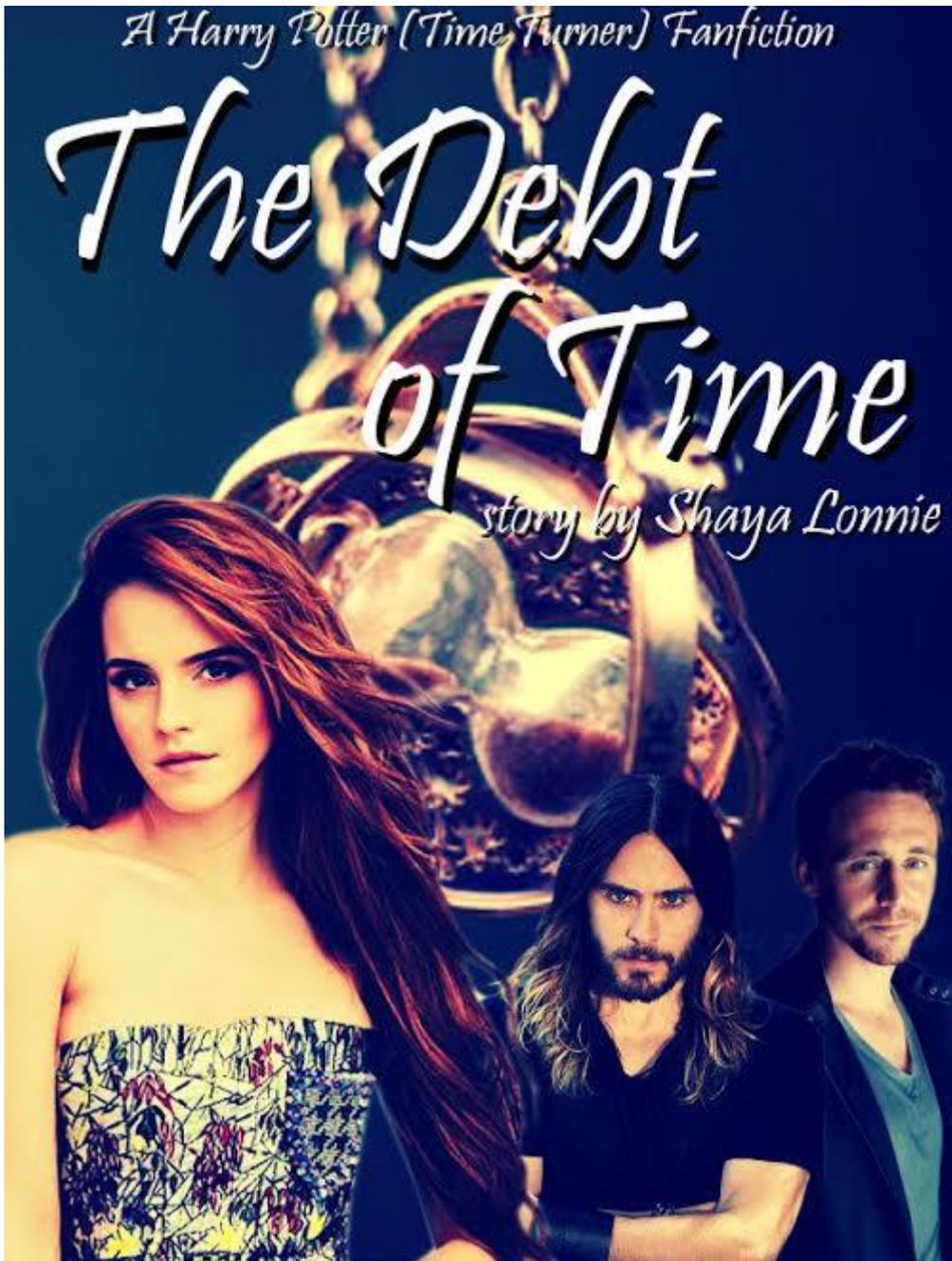


*A Harry Potter (Time Turner) Fanfiction*

# The Debt of Time

*story by Shaya Lonnie*



# The Debt of Time

by Shaya Lonnie

*To my husband, Matt, my own personal Sirius Black.*

*And to my readers . . .*

*Your tears keep my Horcruxes so very shiny!*

# Acknowledgements

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I know there are likely still errors hidden inside, but nothing in this world is perfect. Consider any mistake within just one of the many scars of this story.

*"Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls;  
the most massive characters are seared with scars."*

— Khalil Gibran

# BOOK ONE

*The Life Debt*

# Chapter One

## *The Life Debt Ritual*

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*Tears stream down your face  
When you lose something you cannot replace  
Tears stream down your face  
I promise you I will learn from my mistakes  
(Fix You - Coldplay)*

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**July 2nd, 1997**

"Harry, his funeral is today," Hermione tried to reason with her best friend once again. "I'm sorry. I'm *so* sorry, but we need to focus on the future and destroying Voldemort. That's what's important." Her tears had been threatening to spill over for some time now. The look on Harry's face kept her in perpetual grief; more so on his behalf than her own. "It's what Dumbledore would have wanted."

Their headmaster, the greatest wizard who ever existed, was dead. Though the rest of the world seemed all too ready to embrace grief and move forward, Harry Potter was determined to find a way around it. Hermione knew he blamed himself for Dumbledore's death, regardless of how often she and Ron insisted otherwise. The fault rested in the hands of the Death Eaters who had broken into the school, Draco Malfoy for letting them breach the protective wards of Hogwarts, and the murderer himself: Severus Snape.

It almost felt obscene to be at school after everything that had happened, but shortly after the funeral, they would be getting back on the Hogwarts Express and heading home to an uncertain future. While the professors and house-elves prepared for the funeral, most of the students were happy to be outdoors now that the weather was decent enough. As gloomy as the castle felt without Dumbledore at the helm, the majority of students could not stop themselves from embracing the typical excitement that came from preparing to go home for the summer. Either that or they were nosy and wanted to watch as funeral guests arrived.

Gryffindor Tower was empty save for Harry and Hermione. However warm it was outside, the common room felt cold even as embers continued to dance in the fireplace. Ginny, holding her head high after her breakup with Harry, had abandoned last minute

packing in favour of one final pass around the Quidditch pitch. Ron had been all too eager to accompany her, leaving Hermione to "fix" the angry and desperate look in Harry's eyes on her own.

"You can't know what he would have wanted, Hermione," Harry stubbornly contended. "Can't you just . . . ? There must be something in the library; the Restricted Section, maybe. You could use my cloak to go. No one has to know about it. Can you look? For me?"

"Harry, you can't bring back the dead," she said, hoping to put an end to the outlandish idea. "Snape used the Killing Curse. No one survives that!" The immediate expression on Harry's face made her regret her choice of words.

"I did!"

She recoiled at his volume but still placed a gentle hand on his arm. "You are not to blame. Just because you survived the Killing Curse does *not* mean anyone who is killed is more deserving of being spared from it than you." She lowered her tone to something softer as she saw his eyes begin to glaze with tears. "Besides, you didn't die and come back, Harry. You *repelled* it. There's a difference."

She hoped he would finally allow himself to grieve and move on. Dumbledore was dead, and there was no bringing anyone back from the dead. They had been taught that lesson entirely too well over the past few years.

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### **July 9th, 1997**

One week later, Hermione sat in Ron's bedroom at the Burrow, a book on Horcruxes open in her lap. It was one of the tomes that she had summoned from Dumbledore's office prior to leaving Hogwarts, and while there were things in the texts that she would have rather never read, she had other chapters saved with several bookmarks for later perusing. The subject of death had become something of an obsession for her. There was definitely no coming back from the dead. However, in-depth research

of Horcruxes had shown her the concept's grey areas; a far cry from the black and white demarcations that Hermione had previously believed about life and death.

One thing was certain: there was no possible way to bring back Albus Dumbledore. Nevertheless, something in the book called out to her.

After skimming a few paragraphs, Hermione perused the rest of the volume with great interest. If they were going to hunt and destroy the things keeping Voldemort connected to this world, she wanted to know as much about life and death as possible, so as to take down the Dark Lord without losing anyone else in the process.

There was an informative chapter on the Killing Curse that went into detail on how to use it *and* its physical effects before and after death. While there was no mention of survival, there was a small, handwritten note at the bottom of one page. In the script she had come to recognise as the hand of her former headmaster, read: *Sacrificial Love: Lily Potter, 1981.*

Eager to avoid the reminder of how and why they had ended up in this situation, Hermione snapped the book shut. Chores needed to be tended to. While she had been able to avoid most of the Weasleys thus far—especially since they were walking on eggshells around her after discovering that she had Obliviated her parents—it was time to face the rest of the world.

Hermione stood, adding the volume to a stack that continued to grow in the corner of Ron's bedroom. All the books she had brought from her home and Hogwarts were heaped on top of one another in organised piles, waiting to be either set aside or packed for the Horcrux hunt. When she made to leave the room, the books tumbled onto the floor behind her. Letting out an exasperated sigh, she turned to clean the mess, noticing as she did that the volume she was just reading had fallen open. The chapter title on display caught her attention, and she narrowed her eyes:

### *Life Debts*

Pulling the text back into her arms, she scanned the words carefully.

*A magical bond formed between a wizard or witch and the person whose life he or she saved. The one who owes the debt to the saviour is one day obliged to repay the deed by performing something beneficial to or for said saviour. Such a bond can be formed between even the worst of enemies,*

*regardless of whether either of the involved parties desire it. As this bond is magically binding, the indebted could commit the act of repayment without acknowledging it or even against his or her will.*

*Because the magical binding of a life debt is so resolute and impossible to resist when called upon, most witches and wizards in such a debt offer to repay it immediately and without hesitation.*

*The life debt ritual itself is a spell that calls the debtor to settle their account by use of Blood Magic and sacrifice. This powerful magic flows through the pair so strongly that, once enacted, the debtor is bound to the saviour. Life debts were often abused in times of war, when a Dark wizard would purposely endanger the life of a witch in order to save her and indebted her to him. He would then use the life debt ritual to bind the witch to him against her will, most especially if a proposal of marriage had already been refused by the witch and her House.*

*The ritual itself was banned—though never specifically outlawed—in 1242 after the wizard Cadmus Peverell was thought to have endangered and subsequently saved the lives of six daughters of a rival House with the intent to use the life debt ritual to bind them all to him. Peverell used the leverage over the rival House patriarch in order to gain the marriage of one daughter willingly as opposed to six by force.*

*When his betrothed perished before their wedding, it is rumoured that Cadmus intended to use the life debt ritual to call her from the grave but was unsuccessful. When performed correctly, the life debt ritual, as detailed below, can extend through time and space. Though it is powerful enough to pass beyond the veil, death by Killing Curse is the one exception to this ritual.*

"Exactly what I told him. No one comes back from the Killing Curse." Hermione shook her head in mild frustration as she recalled her argument with Harry before Dumbledore's funeral.

With a deep sigh, she closed the book again and reorganised her stacked archive, but not before placing a red ribbon between the pages. Though unrelated to the Horcrux search, life debts had always been something of interest to her, and it would not hurt to keep the page marked for light reading later on.

She had already known a bit about life debts from casual reading, though nothing about a ritual had been mentioned to her before. She could only imagine the lengths that greedy wizards would go to in order to hold power over others. Hermione was confident that she owed a life debt or two to plenty of people. Harry for certain, though he owed her just as many himself, if not more. She smiled, thinking how grateful she was that this ritual was, for the most part, unknown. Hermione knew that Severus Snape had owed Harry's father, James Potter, a life debt for saving him from a werewolf attack during a full moon.

The thought of Harry's father purposely binding *Professor Snape* to himself in order to call in a life debt was almost laughable. From what she had heard about James Potter, he was not one to be *that* cruel. Sirius Black on the other hand . . .

Hermione stopped in her tracks as the colour drained from her face. She darted back to the stack of books, almost tripping in her haste over a Quaffle at the foot of Ron's bed. Flipping open to her bookmark, she re-read the passage.

*When performed correctly, the life debt ritual, as detailed below, can extend through time and space. Though it is powerful enough to pass beyond the veil, death by Killing Curse is the one exception to this ritual.*

"Powerful enough to pass beyond the veil." She stared, eyes wide at the words, her hands shaking. "Oh my God."

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### **July 21st, 1997**

After almost two weeks of intense research that involved two trips to the Hogwarts library, courtesy of the Floo Network in Professor McGonagall's office, Hermione had a plan in motion. Unfortunately, she was not the only one:

Mrs Weasley had a demanding plan regarding a rather large wedding for Bill and Fleur. The Order had an intricate plan relating to the removal of Harry from Privet Drive. Ron had a lazy plan on how to tell his parents that instead of returning to Hogwarts for their seventh and final year, he, Harry, and Hermione were going to traipse around Great Britain in the hopes of discovering severed bits of Voldemort's soul wrapped in shiny packages like rings and locket.

Everyone had a plan.

Hermione's plan, however, required immediate action before the ability to enact it became limited by the Ministry, the Order, and the Weasleys. It did not help that she felt she had to keep both Ron and Harry in the dark. However, she needed to tell *someone*.

While Mrs Weasley was outside tending to the garden and Ron was upstairs sleeping in late, Hermione threw Floo powder into the fireplace under the guise of heading out for

a last minute trip to Diagon Alley for school supplies. She waited for the green flames to erupt before shouting, "The Den!"

On the other end of the Floo, Hermione stepped out of a shallow fireplace and into Remus and Tonks's cottage, also known as "The Den." Coughing, she dusted the soot off her robes before clearing her throat and calling out, "Remus? Tonks?"

The couple had only been married for a few weeks, so Hermione stayed put, unwilling to creep about their home and accidentally walk in on the newlyweds in a private moment. She smiled, gazing around the comfortable drawing room. It looked lived in and warm, like the Burrow, but not nearly as cluttered. It felt quiet and peaceful, like Remus—subdued in nature, if a room could be such a thing. However, the bright splashes of colour here and there—in addition to the Auror robes that were flung over the back of a chair—made it very clear that Tonks lived here.

"Wotcher, 'Mione!" Tonks said as she entered the room from the small, adjoined kitchen.

Hermione winced at the nickname that Ron had given her. She detested nicknames and had been vocal about it from the beginning. The only person allowed any deviations from her full given name was Grawp, because how exactly does one argue with a giant? Correcting anyone who called her anything other than her name became a futile mission, and she had given up when it became apparent that her friends were either ignorant of her wishes or too lazy to say more than three syllables.

Tonks's bright, bubble-gum-pink hair shone even in the shadows of the dimly lit room that was kept dark by the curtains closed against the rising sun in the distance.

"Sorry. Full moon was last night," Tonks mumbled with a tender smile before opening the drapes. "He gets headaches sometimes the morning after."

Hermione waved off Tonks's apology and returned the smile. "It's good to see he's being well cared for."

Despite the momentary lack of faith she once had in regards to her former professor years ago in the Shrieking Shack, Hermione had always felt a strong sense of concern when it came to his well-being. She chalked it up to her empathetic nature when it came to all beings despised by the pureblood supremacists in the Wizarding world. Muggle-borns, werewolves, elves, goblins, giants, and centaurs: all unworthy of magic. Though she, as a

witch, would be given far more opportunities than the others, the unfairness of it made her want to strive for their freedoms all the more.

"I would have come to help if you needed it."

"It's not a problem," Tonks said. "Got to learn how to deal with him on my own."

"Is he well?" Hermione quietly asked.

"Much better, thanks to a fully stocked potion cabinet." Tonks's smile took a slight mischievous turn as she added, "Plus, I slipped him a Sleeping Draught yesterday at breakfast and forced him to rest up."

"Are you sure you were a Hufflepuff? That sounds terribly Slytherin of you," Hermione teased. "You're a good wife, Tonks. I'm glad he has you."

Hands on her hips, Tonks blew a strand of hair out of her face, feigning exasperation. "Well, I'm kinda stuck with the big beast now, aren't I?"

A dishevelled Remus Lupin yawned as he entered the room, a warm-hearted look directed at his wife. As he kissed her cheek, he asked, "Weren't those your wedding vows?"

Hermione's smile brightened. "Good morning, Remus!"

Her voice drew Remus's attention, and his face briefly lit up. He inhaled, squeezing Tonks lightly around her shoulders before offering a calm smile in greeting. "Hermione, you're looking well."

Hermione watched the subtle way that Tonks leant into Remus's touch, the sight tugging a bit at her heartstrings. "And you. Marriage looks like it agrees with you, Remus."

When he inclined his head in agreement, she could see a faint blush creep up his cheekbones. It was a delightful sight compared to the sickly pale he developed during the week of the full moon.

"It's 'cause he's got such a fit, young wife," Tonks boasted, teasing her husband.

Remus barely flinched at the mention of their age difference, a startling contrast to his behaviour only a month or so prior.

Hermione smiled thoughtfully. "Youth is wasted on the young."

"Oscar Wilde," Remus said with a knowing grin.

"Muggle."

He chuckled, gently correcting her, "Wizard."

Eyes wide at the revelation, Hermione asked, "Really?"

"Who?" Tonks raised a brow in confusion at Hermione's excitement. "I swear I never know what you two chatter on about. Might as well be speaking Mermish for all the good I get out of your conversations." She laughed, throwing herself down in a large, fluffy armchair. "So what brings you by, 'Mione?"

Hermione's smile faded, and she began wringing her hands together. "Actually, I need your help with something of *serious* importance," she said, choosing her words and the emphasis of those words deliberately.

While Tonks's expression implied that she was oblivious to Hermione's tone, Remus's jaw twitched slightly, and his brows raised a fraction of an inch.

"Is it about Harry?" Tonks asked.

"In a way, yes, but not directly," Hermione tried to explain. "I need, first, for you to trust me. And then I need your assistance in something dangerous and . . . possibly illegal." She spoke the words softly, waiting for either of them to shove her back into the Floo. When neither Tonks nor Remus made a move, she continued, "I need to get into the Ministry of Magic."

Remus's mouth pinched in trepidation, a concerned expression growing on his face. "Again?"

"Don't frown; you'll get wrinkles," Hermione chided him automatically without thinking, something that only made his frown deepen. "No, not like last time. Security is different, which is why I need an Auror." She cocked her head at Tonks. "I'm aware that Minister Scrimgeour is making a grand declaration tomorrow morning."

"Yeah," Tonks confirmed. "Some big press conference to remind the world that the Ministry knows what they're doing." Her eyes rolled, changing in the process from a deep brown to a bright blue. "So you want to go to the press conference?"

"No." Hermione shook her head, taking a deep breath to steel her nerves. "I want you to get me in the door, and then," she said, turning to Remus, "I want you to come with me to the Department of Mysteries."

Remus's brows retreated to his hairline. "Are you serious?"

"Interesting choice of words," Hermione said carefully. "And yes, I genuinely want to go back there. It's important. I've made a discovery, and I need to test it out. I don't know when else I'll have the chance to. I know the Order believes that the Ministry will soon be infiltrated if it hasn't been already. Currently, there's enough confusion that I can

get away with what I want to attempt. If Voldemort takes over the government, there may not ever be another chance. What I need right now could be destroyed at any point in the future, and I'm not willing to let that happen before I can test my theory."

Tonks looked more than pleased to help, which was surprising, considering the fact that she had absolutely no idea what exactly Hermione was planning.

Remus, brilliant wizard that he was, seemed to be in tune with Hermione's thoughts somehow, or perhaps it was something more primal than that. His intense gaze made her feel like he was looking for a quality in her that she did not possess; as though the way she breathed around words and held her posture when speaking was missing something crucial. To be found lacking made her want to look away in shame.

"All right," Remus agreed after a long moment of contemplation. "I trust you."

"Thank you." Hermione breathed a sigh of relief, her shoulders losing a bit of the tension she had been carrying. "I have everything I need ready to go. Shall we meet here tomorrow morning, say six?"

"That will work," Remus said.

"Are you sure? Do you need more time to recover?" Hermione inquired, a worried look in her eyes.

He smiled kindly at her. "I'll be fine, Hermione, thank you. Six is good."

"Sounds good enough to me," Tonks echoed. "Big speech is set for seven since Scrimgeour is an early bird pain in the arse. That'll give us enough time to get ready to Side-Along to the Ministry. I can get you through during the commotion. Security's only going to be tight in the main Atrium where the Minister will be. I can take you in through the Auror entrance in the back; we've got a private lift. How long do you think you need to do whatever it is you're gonna do?"

"I'm not sure." Hermione winced, the tension in her shoulders returning as she thought back over the details of her plan. "Do you know if the Department of Mysteries is active right now?"

"It might be. They put a lot of effort into repairing the damage you lot caused last summer." Tonks's words were tinted with mirth and admiration as though she were applauding the destruction that had been caused during the battle against the Death Eaters. "Course, I threw a few good hexes myself," she said smugly, settling back in the chair as though it were a throne. She doubtlessly did not want anyone to overlook her part in the

fight, especially considering she had ended up unconscious by the end of it. Battle scars were like badges of honour to Aurors who had been trained by Alastor Moody.

"Will they be there tomorrow?" Hermione asked. "The Unspeakables, I mean."

Tonks snorted, shaking her head as she answered, "Unlikely. Whole bloody building will be set up for the Minister's big speech. Scrimgeour's just trying to make the Ministry look like they're all one big team on this. Bloody nonsense."

"I agree." Hermione reached into her pocket and removed a small Galleon, handing it over to Tonks. "Here."

Tonks grinned, rolling the coin back and forth between her fingers. "Late wedding gift?"

"Communication," Hermione explained, bouncing on her heels. "I created them a few years back when Umbridge took over Hogwarts. The defence group Harry created needed a way to communicate so we would know when and where to meet. I put a Protean Charm on these Galleons. When I charm mine to send a message, yours will grow hot, and then you can read it. I used to charm the numbers to change to a specific date and time, but I've been trying to adjust them to send short phrases. When Remus and I are done with my mission, I'll send you a message so you know we're ready to leave, and we can exit."

"Wicked!" Tonks exclaimed as Remus snatched the Galleon out of her fingers.

"You said you created this a few years ago?" Remus asked, examining the coin with a familiar curiosity as though he had seen one like it before.

"Yes. I got the idea from Death Eaters, actually," Hermione said with a nervous laugh. "The Dark Mark, I mean. It's not Dark Magic, but I figured I could use a Protean Charm to mimic the type of spell I think is used."

Remus nodded in understanding, quickly burying his previous expression to instead smile at her. "It's extraordinary, Hermione."

"Right," Tonks said, "so you'll heat up the coin, and I'll come and fetch you out. If you're done in time, we could probably slip out with the rest of the media. I could transfigure your features, make you less noticeable."

"No," Hermione objected right away but then reconsidered after a moment. "Well, maybe transfigure me a bit, just in case. If I'm successful, we'll need to leave back through the private entrance and Disapparate as fast as possible. Here, preferably, if you don't mind," she said, gesturing to their home. "I would suggest Grimmauld Place but—"

"But we don't know if Severus alerted the Death Eaters to its existence," Remus finished her thought with an understanding nod. "Good thinking."

"Thank you. So, we'll meet back here tomorrow at six and go over everything again before leaving?"

"Sounds like a plan to me." Tonks stood up quickly and embraced Hermione. "Can't wait. I love surprises," she said with delight. "You will eventually tell us what you're planning, yeah?"

Hermione smiled nervously. "If it works, I won't have to."

"Go on then." Remus gestured to the fireplace. "I can't imagine you've told anyone else about this plan of yours, which means you've lied to Molly about your current whereabouts." His eyes flashed with mischief for a moment, and both Tonks and Hermione grinned a little, though the latter flushed with embarrassment. "Better get back before she catches on. Tonks will owl later to ask for your help with something tomorrow morning. Something for Bill and Fleur's wedding, perhaps. I imagine that'll put Molly at ease with letting you out the door."

Hermione chuckled. "Might be the *only* thing that would do it. If I were one of her children, she wouldn't let me set foot on the front porch unless I was there to sweep it." She hugged Tonks once more and then moved to embrace Remus, who looked hesitant to return the affection at first. As he gave in to her hug, it felt as though he were holding his breath. "Thank you both so much."

"All right, safe trip back, Hermione," Tonks said as she moved toward the kitchen, stopping to turn and level a teasing glare at her husband. "Remus, get in here and eat some bloody breakfast! You're still much too skinny for your own good. I like a wolf with some meat on his bones." She winked at him before leaving the room.

Hermione smiled as Remus turned—an embarrassed blush on his cheeks—to offer her a look of apology on behalf of his irrepressible wife before retreating after her.

Stepping toward the fireplace, Hermione reached for the Floo powder when her beaded handbag fell from a pocket in her robes. She cringed on instinct, wondering if Remus and Tonks would have heard the sounds of shifting objects as the illegally-charmed bag tumbled over itself on the ground. The Undetectable Extension Charm had been essential considering all the necessities packed inside of it for the Horcrux hunting trip. She

made a mental note to put a Sticking Charm on the bag as well so she would not be in danger of losing all of their supplies.

As she leant down to retrieve the bag, she overheard Remus and Tonks in the kitchen. Though she was not one to normally eavesdrop—especially on her friends—she could not help but be a little curious when she heard her name spoken. Desperate to know whether or not they were genuine about wanting to help her, Hermione listened.

"I'm sorry about that," Remus muttered. "Sometimes Hermione can just—"

"No need for that," Tonks insisted in a loving tone. "We've been through this for a year. Ever since you told me the truth. It's nothing to be ashamed about. It's definitely nothing I need to worry about."

Hermione could hear the smile in Tonks's voice. For some reason, it filled her with ease despite not knowing the specifics of the conversation.

Remus's tone, however, was tense and worrisome as he asked, "You're certain?"

"As certain as I am that I'm your mate," Tonks said firmly. "You think she's going there to get the—?"

Remus sighed. "It's possible. Though I doubt her reasons are the same as mine."

"But you're sure that it's close?"

"Close." Remus sounded uneasy. "If we survive this war, then maybe. Only time will tell, I suppose."

"You worry too much."

"You know I love you, right?" Remus asked with quiet fervour.

"I know," Tonks replied. "It's okay, love. There are some things you can't help, and this is absolutely one of them. You didn't plan how all of this turned out. We can't help how we feel."

"But you know I love you, right?" he asked again.

Tonks laughed. "Yes, Remus, you love me, you'll never leave me, I'm your mate; I get it."

Hermione could tell that the conversation was something that had occurred more than once. At the sudden silence coming from the kitchen, she blushed as she realised that she was intruding on a very private moment between the couple. Stepping into the fireplace, Hermione tossed the Floo powder and whispered, "The Burrow," before disappearing.

"She was still here," Remus informed Tonks the exact moment he knew that Hermione had vanished from the cottage. "Probably heard every word we said."

Tonks flicked one of his ears teasingly. "You and that lupine hearing."

She left his side, opening up the cooling cabinet and staring at it with an intense glare as though she could intimidate it into making breakfast for them. When nothing happened, she shrugged and grabbed a plate of leftover roast that Molly had sent over at some point. She set the food down in front of Remus—still cold because she had yet to even manage Warming Charms when it came to cooking without burning the food—and smiled sweetly as he took a bite without hesitation.

"So, has she always been a terrible snoop?"

"You have no idea what that girl is capable of," Remus said with a tired chuckle. "And right now, neither does she."

## Chapter Two

### *Invocato Vita Debitum*

---

*Wake me up inside, wake me up inside  
Call my name and save me from the dark  
Bid my blood to run, before I come undone  
Save me from the nothing I've become  
(Bring Me To Life - Evanescence)*

---

**July 22nd, 1997**

"I told you, it's a surprise." Hermione smiled brightly. "Just let me do this, okay?" Her smile turned stiff as she faced a tired Ron in the living room at the Burrow. With Bill and Fleur's wedding fast approaching, Mrs Weasley was done letting anyone in the house have a lie in. "Tonks and Remus just got married, and she's got plenty of ideas on wedding gifts for Fleur, so I asked for her help." The lie came with ease, though inside, her stomach twisted into a large knot.

"I just don't see why she can't come here," Ron whinged, sighing in obvious frustration. "Everything that's going on . . . Hell, Mum hates it when Dad leaves for work every morning. It's not a safe world out there, 'Mione."

Hermione rolled her eyes in response. "Yes, well, I'll be with an Auror—"

"Who trips over her own feet," Ron interrupted.

"And Remus will most likely be with us. I'll be perfectly safe. Besides, speaking of safe," she said, giving him a reproachful glare, "you should take this opportunity to tell your mum what our plan is this year." When he cringed, her glare intensified. "Don't you dare wait until the last minute, Ronald Weasley." She poked a finger into his chest. "You will not throw Harry and me under the bus."

Ron cocked a brow, brushing away her finger poke. "Under the bus?"

Sighing in mild frustration, Hermione explained, "It's a Muggle expression. It means that you will not leave this for Harry and me to explain because you're too afraid of your own mother. Do it yourself, and I'll see you when I get back." She headed toward the fireplace, double-checking the Sticking Charm on her beaded bag. "I don't know how long

it'll take—might be a few hours—so just in case, don't have your mum save me any meals. I might convince Tonks to make a girls' day of it."

Screwing up his face, Ron slumped his shoulders forward and groaned. "But you hate girl stuff."

"I do not." Hermione planted her hands firmly on her hips. "I hate Lavender and Parvati girl stuff, not Tonks and Ginny girl stuff. There's a tremendous difference," she clarified, giving him a contemptuous look that she hoped rivalled Malfoy's when Ron laughed at her in reply. "There's less giggling and squealing. Now stop stalling, and go talk to your mother. Write out a speech if you think it'll help."

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Just after half six in the morning, Remus and Hermione approached the back entrance of the Ministry of Magic, led by Tonks in her Auror robes. Remus had not been transfigured at all, as he was known to wander about the Ministry from time to time to speak with various acquaintances, put in job applications, or visit his wife. Hermione, on the other hand, was too easily recognised. Before Disapparating, Tonks had transfigured Hermione's hair black, straightened her curls, and aged her a good ten years in the process. A pair of glasses and a set of secretarial robes later, and Hermione would not be recognisable to anyone except maybe Harry or Ron.

Remus found her new appearance disconcerting.

Tonks pressed the tip of her wand against a dirty-looking door next to a large skip, and it immediately opened onto a lift. It was not until they were fully inside with the door shut, plunging them into darkness, that Tonks reached for a protruding box, slamming her hand against it. A metal cover opened up, giving her access to a dimly lit panel of numbers. When she pressed the number nine, the lift jolted, and then began its descent.

Unlike the guest entrance into the Ministry of Magic, there was no overhead voice welcoming them in this lift, only the loud, echoing sound of gears grinding together. Remus looked at Hermione, noticing how on edge she appeared.

"You all right?" he asked. "Does the noise bother you?"

She looked up at him, forcing a smile that did not reach her eyes. "The last time I was here, we'd been following Harry into battle, and I was much too distracted, but now I'm wondering how the lifts run without electricity."

Chuckling softly, Remus offered, "I have a book on Muggle to magic engineering. It's old and likely outdated, but you might find a few chapters interesting."

Before she could reply, the lift jolted again, throwing them forward. He stopped himself from falling by catching his hand on the door, but Hermione stumbled into Tonks. She muttered quick apologies that were brushed off with an easy, "You get used to it."

As they descended, Hermione reached into her pocket and removed the Galleon. "You've got yours, right?" she double-checked with Tonks.

"Yup!" Tonks smiled, showing off the coin before stowing it back in her own pocket. "I'll be checking it from time to time just in case. I'm not scheduled to be at the front of the press conference, just lingering in the back, so no one will notice me. In fact . . ." She trailed off, concentrating a bit until her bright pink hair became the same sandy shade as Remus's, save for the flecks of grey his bore.

Remus rolled his eyes. "Lovely."

"Aww, you know you're beautiful, love." Tonks grinned at him, and Hermione stifled a laugh as he crossed his arms over his chest petulantly while his wife affectionately ruffled his hair.

The lift came to a halt, and the doors opened to the ominously dark corridor that led toward the Department of Mysteries.

"Right," Hermione said with a slight tremble, exhaling nervously. "This is us." She stepped slowly out of the lift when the grilles opened.

Remus followed behind, pausing only to kiss Tonks goodbye. "Be safe."

"See you soon," Tonks said. "Don't do anything stupid!" she added before the doors on the lift shut tight and carried her away to the Atrium.

Remus could hear the way that Hermione's breath quickened as she turned and looked around the area. "Take it slowly." He placed a calming hand on her shoulder, and she reacted by touching it, presumably using his gesture to ground herself.

"Thank you," she whispered before moving forward down the corridor, Remus close on her heels.

They walked in absolute silence before reaching the large black door at the end of the long hallway. Hermione closed her eyes, taking in a sharp breath before putting her hand on the doorknob. The door opened immediately.

"Seriously?" She shuffled back a step, her mouth falling open in astonishment. "It's not even locked. What on earth are they thinking? Six teenagers broke in here a year ago, and they can't even bother to keep the department locked—"

"Hermione?" Remus interrupted her with a wink. "Let's not look the gift hippogriff in the beak." He held his wand out, equally suspicious and ready for an attack just in case. It was not mere speculation that the Ministry had been infiltrated; the Order just lacked an exact count of which departments were corrupted by Death Eaters.

"You're right, you're right. Still, maybe I'll send an anonymous owl later," Hermione muttered under her breath, causing Remus to chuckle quietly.

Moving into the large room, she waved her wand. Suddenly, the darkness around them was broken by illuminated candles, the light revealing a number of large doors encircling the two of them.

"All right, close the door."

Despite being older and more experienced, Remus conceded, closing off their entrance and eventual exit at her insistence.

The moment the door shut behind them, Hermione aimed her wand. "*Flagrate!*"

A large, fiery line appeared across the door to mark their exit. Almost immediately, the wall began to spin around them, making them lose track of which door was which, save for the one she had marked.

Remus wrapped an arm protectively around her, and Hermione braced herself against him to stop from getting dizzy, though it only took a moment to assure herself that the floor had stayed steady.

Once the wall stopped spinning, she reluctantly let go of Remus and turned her attention to the door she had marked. "It won't last forever."

"How about we add this?" Remus pointed his wand at the flames and whispered, "*Immobulus.*" The fire that marked the door froze in place. He smirked when Hermione huffed.

"How did *I* not think of that?" she grumbled. "It's in *The Standard Book of Spells Grade 2*, for goodness' sake. I've been using that charm since I was twelve."

He chuckled. "You're too bright sometimes. You think too big. Remember, it was all of those small charms in your earlier years that kept you alive when roaming the castle on Harry's heels."

"Please," she said with a roll of her eyes. "It's more like *chasing* after his heels. That boy can't help but run into danger."

"All the better that you're always there looking out for him," Remus said and quietly added, "For *everyone*."

Hermione smiled appreciatively up at him. "To be fair, Harry has looked out for me from time to time. Granted, he does tend to get me into a bit of trouble as well." Her gaze turned forward, and she took a breath. "Here we are."

"Which door is it?" he asked. "I can't remember, myself. When we arrived to rescue you all, it was a bit of a mess, and most of the doors were already open with people rushing about in here."

"I can't recall specifically. I suppose we'll just have to investigate." She sighed lightly, approaching a door. Upon opening it, she peeked in without stepping foot inside and blinked a few times. "Huh," she muttered. "What does that look like to you?"

Remus glanced within and cast a Wand-Lighting Charm, which had no effect on the darkness of the room. When he squinted, he could see lights glimmering above them. "The sky, I suppose."

"Space Room," Hermione said and promptly shut the door. "Not going in there. They have a variation of a Limbo Mist Charm on the ground. Harry faced something similar in the Triwizard Tournament. Ron, Ginny, and Luna got caught in here last time," she said, marking the door with a large circle to differentiate from the exit, and immediately immobilised it per his example.

Remus turned to the next door and opened it. The sight within caused his eyes to widen.

"Oh!" Hermione exclaimed, stepping inside. "Be careful, I've seen first-hand what Time-Turners are capable of."

"You have no idea," Remus murmured, his heart racing as he stepped into the room, scanning every detail.

Hermione's sudden smile carried a surprised nostalgia. "I can't believe they were able to put it all back together."

"You destroyed it? Why am I not surprised?" He laughed quietly before his attention was caught by a particular object. A Time-Turner with blue sand inside a carefully constructed hourglass, wrapped in a silver casing with a thin chain hanging off it like a necklace. He reached his hand out and touched the piece with reverence and fear, looking at the bottom of it where he saw engraved a rune he knew meant "predestination."

A hopeful smile crossed his face.

"Death Eaters," she corrected him, her voice echoing off the walls and ceiling as she examined a large hourglass sitting on a shelf on the opposite side of the room. Huffing, mildly offended, she added, "I did not destroy anything. I know better than to mess about with Time-Turners. Then again, you know all about that."

"What?" Remus jumped and turned around, looking as though he had been caught with his hand in the biscuit tin. "Why would I know that?"

"Because I used a Time-Turner during third year," she clarified. "I've told you this before. When we saved Sirius from the dementors?" She raised a brow with a concerned look in her eyes.

"Oh. Of course." He shook his head. "Forgive me; I was lost in thought."

Hermione smiled and headed for the door. "Well, we're procrastinating."

"We're leaving?" Remus's forehead crinkled in confusion.

"Yes. I don't need the Time Room," she said quickly as she exited.

Remus hesitated, looking around the room. He glanced back at the Time-Turner with the rune marking. Reluctant to put his faith in destiny, he snatched up the device and slipped it securely into his robes before making a hasty retreat to the large circular room once again.

As the door shut behind him, Hermione marked it and moved along to the next doorway.

"Hermione, are you going to tell me . . . ?" Remus began as she opened the next door.

The look on her face silenced him immediately. He turned his attention to the inside of the room and let out a gasp, his nostrils flaring at the sight.

A large, dimly lit, rectangular room stood before them. Stone benches lined the walls on every side, descending like large steps toward the centre where a familiar pit held

a large stone dais. On the dais stood a massive archway unsupported by any surrounding wall.

Remus could barely take his focus off the thing. His gaze on the heart of the room was so intense that he did not notice Hermione had stepped inside the door until she began to move down toward the pit.

"Hermione!" he called out after her in a panic. "What do you think you're doing?"

She turned back and glanced at Remus, a hint of remorse on her face. "This is why I came. I asked you to trust me," she reminded him. "Do you still?"

"I . . ." He wanted to, but the words caught painfully in his throat. "Hermione, please, please don't go near that thing. I can't . . ." The idea of losing her the same way he lost Sirius was unfathomable. He could not go through it again.

"If you won't come down with me, then guard the door."

Remus stood there, gobsmacked as Hermione continued to move forward, approaching the stone arch much too fast for his comfort. He had not had the time to observe the arch and veil closely when he had last been here. Now, he could barely stand to look at the thing. To the casual observer, it looked to be just a simple construction, though what lie beyond was indefinite.

This was a terrible idea. Remus had been *positive* that she had come for the Time-Turner. In fact, he knew that this *specific* Time-Turner in the pocket of his robes now was the sole reason for him being there. So why had she brought him into this horrible room of death and misery?

"I'm sorry that I didn't tell you everything, but I was coming here regardless of your assistance." Putting her wand down next to her, she knelt in front of the large archway. She pulled a small, beaded bag out of her robes and sank her arm into it up to her elbow.

He tried to reason with her as he made his way down toward the centre of the room. "Hermione, I can't imagine what you think you can accomplish here, but I beg you to get away from that thing. Please." His heart sank at the thought of the worst-case scenario.

"I'm not going through it, I assure you," she promised as she dug around in her bag.

She pulled out what looked to be a stained t-shirt, followed by a small black pack that Remus recognised as a field mediwitch kit, which generally held an assortment of potions. Finally, she picked up her wand with a shaky hand and stood, facing the arch.

"Hermione . . ." Remus moved closer, his gaze frozen. Terrified, he kept a diligent watch on her, taking note of every step she took. He was prepared to pull her away if she got too close to the veil. He had been unable to save Sirius. He had been miles away when Voldemort murdered James and Lily. He could not live with himself if he watched Hermione fall away.

"I appreciate your concern, Remus, I really do, but I need to concentrate or else we've come here for nothing." There was a note of irritation in her voice.

Remus shut his mouth in reply and breathed heavily through his nose, his heart beating hard within his chest.

"*Invocato Vita Debitum!*" Hermione shouted, waving her wand in a circular motion in front of her. Golden swirls hung in the air as she moved, and the hovering circle pressed forward at her gesture, floating toward the archway. "*Aperi!*" The golden circle pressed against the stone, engulfing it with light.

Suddenly, the flowing black curtain in the archway turned white, and Hermione and Remus fell back, shielding their eyes with their hands from the brightness of the veil.

Hermione reached for the t-shirt, which Remus could now see was stained with blood. He swallowed hard, hunching his shoulders and pressing his hands against the floor, not wanting to smell the air to find out whose blood it was. He did not want to know. She had not told him a thing about what she was doing here, and he was honestly petrified of the answer. A part of him was apprehensive about facing his next boggart, all things considered.

"By blood," Hermione whispered, regaining her feet as she set the t-shirt on fire, levitating the ashes into the air and pushing them through the veil. "And sacrifice." She held out her open palm and inflicted a light Severing Charm against her skin, cutting it just enough to bleed. Hermione squeezed her hand tightly, allowing the blood to pool in the palm of her hand before flinging it into the veil. "*Do ut des!*"

The veil grew brighter.

"I have come to collect! *Debitum Naturae! Domum Filius Nigrum!*"

Remus's jaw dropped as she spoke, all at once very clearly aware of what it was that Hermione was trying to do. He took in a sharp breath of worry and anticipation. It was not possible. How could she have found such a spell? He stepped forward, hands shaking, aching to reach out for her.

The light surrounding the veil burst, throwing them both backward again, away from the arch and into the back of the pit before the room fell completely dark.

Remus coughed, holding his bruised ribs. "Hermione . . ." he muttered, reaching out for her. "Hermione, what were you thinking?"

"Son of the House of Black," Hermione whispered, repeating the last words of her incantation, this time in English. She panted, moving to stand, and reached for the wand that had fallen from her hand.

Remus growled at her. "I know *what* you said!"

"*Accio* wand!" Hermione ignored Remus's roar as her wand flew into her hand. "*Lumos Maxima!*"

A bright light ignited from her wand, illuminating the entire room.

His focus fell to the arch, which looked as it had upon their entering the room, save for Hermione's beaded bag on the ground, the medic kit, and a large shaking figure lying in the centre of the stone dais.

"It can't be," Remus murmured as he stood, gazing at the body with trepidation. Long, black hair covered the face, but the sight of tattoos peeking out from the edges of burgundy robes had him sucking in a sharp breath.

"Sirius!" Hermione screamed, rushing toward the shivering form and placing her hands tenderly on his back.

The man flinched in response.

"Help me, Remus! Turn him over," Hermione instructed as she opened the medical kit, sticking her lit wand between her teeth. Before touching anything in the kit, she smeared dittany onto her bleeding hand, fumbling for potion phials as soon as the cut had stopped bleeding.

Dumbfounded, Remus moved without conscious volition, dropping to his knees next to her and staring at the trembling form in front of him. His hands shook as he grasped solid shoulders and pushed. The body rolled, and he stared, horrified, into the face of the best friend he had thought long dead. Yet there Sirius was as if he had been struck down by Bellatrix's curse but not pushed through the veil by it.

"He's . . . Sirius . . . Merlin, Hermione, how did you do it?"

"Life debts," she answered as she fumbled with the phial stopper. "Cast a Warming Charm." She tilted Sirius's head back and opened his mouth, letting the green liquid slip down his throat.

Remus reacted right away, casting the charm and watching quietly as Sirius's body stopped shaking. When his limbs relaxed, the chestnut wand that had still been tightly gripped in his hand fell free, clattering to the ground. Remus pocketed the item right away.

"Life debts?" he echoed automatically, wondering if he was going into shock as he watched Hermione administer a third potion.

"I saved Sirius, remember?" she answered quickly as she continued to rummage around in the kit, fumbling with the wand in her mouth. "Here, hold this." She handed her wand to Remus. "He would have been given the Dementor's Kiss. They were already on their way, and I broke him out of the classroom he was locked in. He owed me a life debt."

"Hermione, life debts can't bring people back from the dead!" Remus shouted, noticing his volume and wincing. "Sorry." He focused his attention away from her and rubbed his hands over his face.

She handed him a phial. "Here, have some Pepper-Up." With a shrug, she added, "I'm sure as hell not giving it to *him*." Her chuckle was nervous as she reached for the Calming Draught. When she poured the liquid into Sirius's mouth, she frowned in concentration. "And no, *generally*, life debts can't bring back the dead."

"So *how* did you—?"

"Unless they didn't die from the Killing Curse," she said and then hesitantly muttered, "and you use a life debt ritual."

Remus gaped, silently scolding himself for underestimating her. "Hermione, that was Blood Magic."

"Yes," she confirmed, not going further into detail.

"How did you get Sirius's blood?" he demanded, wondering how long she had been planning this mission of hers.

"I didn't. Not exactly. That was Harry's t-shirt. Malfoy broke Harry's nose on the train last year, and this was the shirt he was wearing. Glad I never took the stain out. I honestly didn't know if it was going to work." She laughed shakily, clearly depleted by the energy she had put into the spell.

"How *did* it work?"

"Harry is James Potter's son, and James's mother was—"

"Dorea *Black*," Remus finished her sentence, shaking his head as memories of the formidable witch flew through his mind.

Turning, he fixed his attention on Hermione. "That gold light. I've only ever seen something similar during bonding rites; Tonks and I had one at our wedding." He gave no further information as she considered him with an inquisitive gaze; it was the look that she always got when eager for knowledge of something new. When he turned the expression back on her, she shrank away from his attention.

"Right," Hermione mumbled. "Let's go ahead and not talk about that right now." She snatched her wand from Remus's hand and aimed it at Sirius. "*Petrificus Totalus!*" His body went rigid. Zipping up the mediwitch kit and sticking it back into her bag, she reached further in and pulled out something that shimmered silver.

"Not talk about it?" Remus eyed her with suspicion. "Hermione, did you accidentally *marry* Sirius?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she said with a shake of her head, handing him the fabric in her hand. "It's completely different, so stop talking and help me."

Remus grimaced as a migraine began to develop. "And you *stole* Harry's Invisibility Cloak."

"Borrowed," she corrected him. "I was doing some research for Harry and needed to get into the Restricted Section of the library. I'd meant to return it to him on the Hogwarts Express, but I had my mind on other things. Besides, even if I did steal it, I think he'll forgive me, don't you?" She gestured to Sirius before taking the cloak back and covering him with it. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out the charmed Galleon, tapping it with her wand. "Now, levitate him if you will, because I barely have the strength to move, and we need to get out of here quickly."

"Is he . . . Is he really alive?" Remus asked her, not wanting to get his hopes up. "Hermione, he's my best friend, and he . . ."

She reached out, taking Remus's hand gently within her own. "He's alive."

Before she could take a step toward the exit, Remus wrapped his arms around her. He pressed his face into the crook of her neck and whispered, "You're brilliant," before kissing her temple, cheek, and then forehead. "Absolutely brilliant."

Hermione laughed, hugging him back, and beaming at the praise. She would have likely basked in it a touch more, but her attention refocused on Sirius, and she sighed. "Come on, Remus. There'll be plenty of time to celebrate after we get him out of here."

Minutes later, they reunited with Tonks outside the lift. Slowly, they made their way inside, Remus holding his wand out as he levitated an invisible Sirius ahead of him.

Tonks gave them a teasing grin. "Good trip? Bring me back anything?"

"You could say that," Remus muttered, removing a section of the Invisibility Cloak to reveal Sirius's face.

"What the fuck?" Tonks screamed, jumping backward and almost into Hermione's arms.

Unprepared for the attack, Hermione collapsed beneath the weight, and the two women hit the floor as the lift began to move upward.

Remus chuckled mischievously.

Shifting her focus up from the floor, Tonks saw the underside of Sirius's body where it was not covered by the Invisibility Cloak.

Hermione groaned. "You said you *liked* surprises." She removed her glasses as Tonks's transfigurations faded away, her straight black hair shifting back to honey-brown and winding back into bushy curls.

"Bloody hell," Tonks spluttered, looking up to meet her husband's eyes. "Is that actually—?"

"Yes."

"And is he—?"

"He is."

Tonks gestured to Hermione. "And she—?"

He nodded. "She did."

"Bloody hell," Tonks repeated, lifting the Invisibility Cloak once more to look at her cousin's body. After a beat—with Remus and Hermione anxiously observing her—Tonks flicked her wand and Disillusioned Sirius, muttering, "Just in case."

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Once safely back at Lupin Cottage, Hermione let out a loud sigh of relief and collapsed into the large, fluffy armchair.

Lowering Sirius to the sofa, Remus removed the Invisibility Cloak, passing it to Hermione so she could secure it away in her bag and return it to Harry. He then released the Body-Binding Curse, watching as his friend relaxed into the cushions.

"I should go," Hermione said. "If I don't get back to the Burrow, they'll all come looking for me. The last thing I want is for anyone to show up before there's been a chance to explain. Certainly, not before things can be explained to *him*." She gestured to Sirius, kneeling down beside him and affectionately brushing the hair from his face.

The hollow, sunken cheeks he had upon their first meeting in the Shrieking Shack were gone, and his hair was no longer matted and hanging down to his elbows. He was the Sirius she had come to know over the last handful of years, not having aged a day since he had fallen through the veil.

As her hand brushed lightly against his cheek, his pale grey eyes opened and stared up into her face. "M-My . . ."

Hermione gasped. "Sirius?"

Remus and Tonks flew to her side.

"Pads?" Remus asked, leaning over Hermione's shoulders.

"My . . . My-uh," Sirius repeated, dazed.

"Do you think that it was the potions?" Hermione asked, worried, as she cranked her head to look up at Remus only to catch him sharing a knowing look with his wife. She didn't have time to question it; her attention was returned to Sirius when she felt him squeeze her hand.

He stared at her as though he were frightened. His free hand reached up, his fingers brushing against the softness of her face, tracing the outline of her jaw.

She saw the beginnings of tears in his eyes, and her breath caught.

His voice was shaky, but clearer, when his chapped lips parted, and he whispered again, "Mia?"

## Chapter Three

### *Chipper As Ever*

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*Something always brings me back to you.  
It never takes too long  
No matter what I say or do  
I'll still feel you here 'til the moment I'm gone  
(Gravity - Sara Bareilles)*

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**July 22nd, 1997**

"Sirius?" Hermione touched his cheek affectionately, her worry written clear as day on her face as he stared at her in shock. When she said his name, he opened his mouth to repeat the only word he had uttered since waking: *Mia*. "Sirius, it's Hermione. You're going to be just fine. We're here with Remus and Tonks. You're safe."

Sirius's wide, grey eyes stared at her as if she were the only thing in the room that mattered. His fingers flittered over her skin as gentle as a butterfly's wings—worshipping her. Finally, he swallowed hard, his gaze turning over Hermione's shoulder to Remus, who stood there looking grief-stricken as he slowly shook his head.

*No.*

Sirius removed his hand quickly from Hermione's face as though he had been burnt and turned his focus completely away from her, trying to move, but physically unable to.

He hissed as pain shot through his body. "Fuck, it feels like I haven't moved my legs in . . ." He looked up at his surrounding audience. "What happened?"

"You should get some rest, Sirius," Hermione instructed. "Remus will explain everything when you feel better. I have to get back to The Burrow. Harry's coming home soon," she offered with a bright smile.

Her words triggered something inside of him: panic. "Is Harry all right? I remember . . ." He blinked rapidly before shutting his eyes tightly in an attempt to focus. "I remember something."

"Don't worry about it. Focus on getting better," Hermione urged. "Meanwhile, Harry is perfectly safe and healthy."

Sirius silently nodded in reply, finally looking up at her, grateful for the news of Harry's safety. Tears began forming in her eyes, spilling over onto her cheeks, and it was physically painful for him to not brush them off her skin.

She smiled at him and leant forward, pressing her lips to Sirius's forehead, and he shivered in response.

"I have to go." Standing quickly, she turned to Remus, hugging him close to her and chastely kissing his cheek. "Thank you."

Sirius watched as Remus clenched his jaw tightly while the girl held onto him, his gaze meeting Tonks's sad smile as he let Hermione go.

"Thank you. I can't tell you . . ." Remus began but looked down, clearing his throat.

"Then don't." Hermione turned to give Tonks a hug. "Thank you so much for your help."

Tonks grinned and hugged her back. "You know me, always up for a little adventure."

Hermione laughed and made her way toward the Floo, glancing back once more. As brown eyes met grey, she exhaled shakily and turned her attention back to Remus and Tonks. "Can you call an Order meeting? Tomorrow night? If he's well enough, bring him to the Burrow; if not, then . . . I'll just explain as best I can, but the Order needs to know." She gave them all a smile as she threw the powder into the fireplace and said, "The Burrow!"

"What the hell happened, Remus?" Sirius roared the moment Hermione vanished. He sat up, albeit too quickly, and started to slide off the sofa before Tonks rushed to his side to help him stay upright. He grimaced, bringing a hand to his head.

"You should be resting, idiot," Tonks scolded. "Do you want some Sleeping Draught?"

"I want some firewhisky," Sirius grumbled.

"That's definitely not going to happen." Remus shook his head firmly as he approached the fireplace.

On the mantle rested a stack of parchment, an inkwell, and a set of quills. While Sirius complained under his breath from the sofa, Remus scribbled out several short notes, folded them quickly, and walked over to the window where a small cage housed a young

barn owl. "Get these to the Order," he instructed, passing the bird a small treat before attaching the neatly folded pieces of parchment to her foot. "The Burrow first."

The owl promptly took flight through the open window, and Remus let out a small sigh before turning back to his recently-returned friend.

"Coffee then? Am I allowed coffee? Or am I back in Azkaban where every move I make is dictated for me?" Sirius said, his voice gravelly as he levelled Remus with a hard glare to emphasise his indignation.

"Well, you're just as chipper as you've ever been, love." Tonks stood, dusting her hands off on her robes. "I'll go and get you some tea." She paused as Sirius narrowed his eyes at her. "No, you'll drink *tea*. Hermione was insistent that you need rest." She smirked at him before turning, squeezing Remus's hand, and then leaving the boys in the living room.

"What happened, Remus?" Sirius asked again, this time at a lower volume.

He scanned the room, immediately recognising it as the old Lupin Cottage where Remus had grown up. Sirius had not been here since Voldemort's return. Before that, it had been when he had broken out of Azkaban and fled Hogwarts on Buckbeak's back. He had gone to the cottage for a quick stop to get information before making a break for it and spending another year on the run.

Remus chuckled, but the laughter never reached his eyes. "That's the question, isn't it?"

Sirius stared into the face of his best friend, catching sight of many new lines, a few extra scars, and a bit more grey hair than he remembered. "Mia?"

"Hermione."

Scowling at the correction, Sirius cleared his throat. "She's grown up."

Remus angled his brow at his friend. "Still *Hermione*."

"Shit."

"Agreed."

"Harry?"

"You've missed a bit since you've been gone."

"He's all right, though? Safe? I remember fighting." Sirius narrowed his eyes in concentration, trying to focus on the details that he felt were slipping away from him. His

emotions ran strong—worry and panic at the very top of the list—but also the brilliant feeling of adrenaline coursing through his veins.

"Department of Mysteries. Voldemort put a vision in Harry's head and made him think you'd been captured. Harry and his friends broke into the Ministry to save you," Remus explained in short sentences as he tried to fill in the blanks, while Sirius put the pieces together himself.

"I think I remember something like that," Sirius muttered. Suddenly, an image flooded his mind, and his fists clenched. "My cousin?"

"Tonks?" Remus blinked and glanced toward the kitchen where he could hear his wife putting on the kettle.

"No," Sirius growled fiercely, shaking at the memory. "The crazy bitch!"

"Bella," Remus hesitantly confirmed. "She got away."

"Fuck!" Sirius threw his arms and legs out in frustration, unable to reach anything to throw or break, and became abruptly aware that he could not feel a wand on himself. He looked up and saw the familiar piece of chestnut wood resting on a nearby table, and he snatched it up quickly, checking to make sure it had not been damaged.

At the feel of his wand in hand, Sirius scowled as the memories came flooding back. The Department of Mysteries. He had gone to rescue Harry. Not just Harry, though. No, *she* had been there too. She and a number of other students: the youngest Weasleys, he remembered; Alice and Frank's boy had been there; and there was a girl who bore a striking resemblance to a witch Sirius had been acquainted with in school.

There had been fighting. Death Eaters had broken into the Ministry: Lucius Malfoy, Bellatrix, and a number of other people Sirius had the misfortune to know by name.

"I remember duelling," he recalled laboriously. "And you and Tonks were there. Kingsley and Moody too. Some big room that looked like the most depressing theatre I've ever seen."

"It's a room in the Department of Mysteries. Appropriately called the Veil Room or . . . the Death Room."

Sirius's eyes widened as he peered up at his friend. "She killed me, didn't she?"

"To be fair, you're not exactly dead right now," Remus said with an awkward shrug.

Sirius glared at him impatiently. "You know what I mean, Moony!"

"Well, yes and no. She didn't physically kill you, but she is the one who caused you to fall into the veil."

"And Mia brought me back?"

"*Hermione* brought you back, yes," Remus corrected him again.

Sirius snarled at him. "Don't talk to me like I'm stupid, Remus. I know who she is."

It was starting to feel like their first real conversation after the incident in the Shrieking Shack following his breakout from Azkaban: Sirius asking questions, demanding answers, and Remus constantly setting him straight on the proper use of names.

"No, we both know there's a difference," Remus insisted. His eyes, while normally a soft green colour in human form, briefly flashed specks of gold—the wolf coming to the forefront as it did during stressful and emotional peaks.

Sirius caught the change immediately and inclined his head until Remus's eyes softened once more. "How have *you* been handling it?"

"Not . . . well." Remus shook his head. "It was hard enough dealing with the ghosts of my past before you . . . left, but between losing you, the war, and . . . other inconveniences, I sometimes have difficulties even on days when the moon *isn't* closing in on me."

Sirius nodded sympathetically. The extra grey hair was starting to make sense.

"Tonks has been very understanding, all things considered," Remus added quietly.

Catching the tone, Sirius glanced down at Remus's modest wedding band and smirked, glad for something to break the uncomfortable tension in the room. "You *married* my cousin? I knew you were stupidly in love with her, but I didn't think you'd ever take the leap, Moony. You're old enough to be her father, you know."

Remus rolled his eyes dramatically. "If that isn't the cauldron calling the kettle black."

Sirius grinned. "I'm *always* Black."

Letting out a sigh of relief, Remus clapped Sirius on the shoulder. "It's good to have you back, Padfoot. If you're well enough to make terrible name puns, then the world has somehow righted itself."

"Drink up, love," Tonks said as she walked in with two cups in hand, passing one over to Sirius and the other to her husband who smiled up at her with grateful, adoring

eyes. Sirius chuckled softly as he caught the glance, shaking his head in amusement at the idea of the two of them married.

Tonks smiled down at him. "You all right then, Sirius?"

He gave her a lopsided grin. "I will be. You know me. Can't keep this old dog down. And speaking of old dogs . . ." He winked at his young cousin. "Looks like you finally got *this* one collared."

Remus growled in reply, and Tonks ran her fingers affectionately through his hair. "Yeah, I did," she said with a hint of triumph in her voice. "You should see the matching leash."

Sirius let out a loud, barking guffaw while Remus groaned.

"Right, boys," Tonks said with a laugh. "You look after each other. I've got to get back to the Ministry before they realise I'm not there. I need to make sure no one caught our great escape."

Remus stood to walk her to the fireplace. "Be careful."

"Always am, love." She grinned, kissing him quickly before vanishing into the Floo.

Sirius sat up straight, grimacing as he finished his tea and set his empty cup on a nearby table, surreptitiously scanning the room for Remus's stash of firewhisky. He knew that his friend's father had had an old shelf in the corner of the room that housed the few decent bottles ever on hand; ones that Sirius, Remus, and James had constantly been replacing the few times they had been allowed over prior to their sixth year at Hogwarts. Unfortunately, while the shelf was still present, the beautiful bottles of liquid amber had been replaced with wedding photos.

Temporarily giving up on his treasure hunt, Sirius ran his hands over his beard thoughtfully. "All right, fill me in. What's happened with Harry?"

"We're at war, officially," Remus said on the end of an exhausted sigh.

Sirius scraped his hair back from his face. "We're *always* at war."

"True, but this time the Ministry isn't arguing the point. Rather, they're going above and beyond the call of duty to remind the people how safe we all are and how everything's under control." At this statement, both men made rude hand gestures.

"Which essentially means that it's worse than we imagined?"

Remus nodded in reply. "Moody's sure that the Ministry has been infiltrated by Death Eaters." When Sirius raised an incredulous brow at the declaration, Remus added, "Kingsley agrees with him."

"That's good enough for me." Sirius ran a fidgety hand through his hair, contemplating its length. "How long was I gone?" While it could not have been too long, the way Remus and Tonks spoke suggested that a lot had happened in his absence.

"A little over a year," Remus answered.

"Shit," Sirius grouched. "Haven't I lost enough years?"

"We'll be collecting Harry in a few days," Remus said, trying to distract his friend. "The Order has put together a plan. It's his coming of age next week. We'll be removing him from his aunt and uncle's house permanently."

Sirius's nose twitched in disgust. "Sodding pricks."

"We're being paired off when we go to Little Whinging. Half of us will be Polyjuicing ourselves into Harry's likeness to distract potential ambushing Death Eaters."

"Good plan. Mia's idea? Girl's always loved her Polyjuice."

"*Hermione*," Remus clarified again. "No. It was Mundungus's actually."

Sirius raised a sceptical brow and scoffed incredulously. "I *highly* doubt that, Moony."

"So," Remus carried on, ignoring Sirius's disbelief, "we'll pair off, fly out to separate safe houses, and Portkey back to the Burrow. It's headquarters now."

"What about Grimmauld Place? My mum's screaming finally drive you lot out?"

Remus turned his attention briefly away from Sirius's stare. "We think it may have been compromised."

"Impossible. Dumbledore is the Secret-Keeper. It can't be compromised, and I know because I made him the Secret-Keeper myself. I know better now than to be switching Keepers about. Fool me once—"

"Sirius, he's dead."

Sirius gaped in shock at Remus, feeling the blood rush out of his face. He opened his mouth to say something, likely on the profane side, but no words came to him.

"I'm sorry," Remus continued, "there's no easy way to say it."

A heavy silence fell over the room as the two friends sat, regarding one another. Remus held Sirius's gaze as he flashed between anger, confusion, and grief—trying to focus on not letting his emotions get the better of him.

He tried not to take his fury out on his friend. Remus had been there during the moments of Sirius's life when he had lost people: his father and brother, James's parents. Though Remus had not been there the night James and Lily were killed, Sirius knew that he understood well enough to know that it took a thing like death to bring him to tears, however angrily he fought them off.

"Who?" Sirius finally broke the silence, the word pushing through his teeth on the edge of a low growl.

"Snape," Remus said quickly.

"Are you fucking kidding me?!" Sirius stood up and kicked the nearby table hard enough that it flipped over, knocking the teacups to the ground. He staggered briefly, trying to establish balance, his strength still greatly lacking. "I knew it! I told you! I told all of you that we couldn't trust that snivelling traitor!"

"Well, you'll have a lot of time to say 'I told you so,' but it won't do a bloody thing to change what's already happened." Remus moved from his seat, flicking his wand to repair the damage Sirius had caused.

As the two men stood face-to-face, Sirius looked into Remus's eyes belligerently. His friend had a good four or five inches on him and was clearly using that leverage to get Sirius to calm down and return to his seat on the sofa.

"Dumbledore's dead, Grimmauld Place is compromised, Snape's a traitor, Voldemort is infiltrating the Ministry, and Harry's in danger. He's *always* in danger," Remus said, taking a step forward and forcing Sirius back.

The friends growled at one another, their canine and lupine counterparts vying equally for territory. Sirius's nose twitched, and he let out a low, dog-like whine when Remus growled louder and stepped forward again, invading his space. When a sharp pain stung his shoulder—a magical reminder of his place when it came to the old game of werewolf versus Animagus—Sirius finally backed down, and he collapsed on the sofa behind him, unable to stand any longer.

"So, where do *I* come in?" he asked in defeat, arms crossed over his chest like a petulant child stuck in the corner. "I assume Mi—*Hermione* had a purpose for bringing me back? Some grand plan where I am greatly needed?"

"Actually, no." Remus shook his head, looking surprised by the day's events. "Not that I'm not thrilled you're alive, Padfoot, believe me, but she gave no reason. Mentioned that she'd discovered something while researching and needed to get into the Department of Mysteries to test a theory. That's all she said. I agreed, of course, because I naturally assumed she was going there—"

"To get the Time-Turner?" Sirius interrupted him.

"Yeah," Remus affirmed. "We found the Time Room, but after a minute of looking around, she left to find the room with the veil."

"So she didn't . . . ?"

"No. She didn't get it."

"So, what does that mean?" Sirius asked, panic in his voice. "How old is she?"

"Almost eighteen."

Sirius did the math in his head. "Another year?"

Remus nodded. "If we survive it."

"And then what?"

"And then I do my part," Remus said with a small smile as he reached into his robes and removed a Time-Turner.

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". . . and you think we're just going to let you, Harry, and Hermione go gallivanting off on some hare-brained adventure!?"

Hermione could hear Mrs Weasley screaming from the kitchen the moment she stepped out of the fireplace. Wincing, she tried to quietly make her way toward the staircase in order to avoid being caught up in the conversation that Ron should have had with his parents weeks ago.

"Oh, no you don't!" Ron called after spotting her. "Don't go throwing me under the bus!"

She turned and crossed her arms over her chest, glaring at her red-headed best friend, a dare in her eyes. "If you can remember what that expression means, I will gladly step in and fix this for you."

Ron stared back, stuttering out a few syllables as his ears turned red.

"Hermione?" Mrs Weasley appeared in the doorway, and her gaze worried. "Could you please explain to me why my son thinks he's not going back to school this year?"

Hermione sighed in defeat but not before glowering in Ron's direction. "I'm sorry, Mrs Weasley, but we have to do this. It's up to Harry now. It's always been up to Harry, and I, for one, am not going to let him go it alone," she tried to explain. "Ron has voiced that he feels the same."

Mrs Weasley's voice was high, bordering on a shriek as she demanded, "And where are you going? What will you be doing? Why can't the Order or, Merlin forbid, your own *parents* know about it?"

Hermione flinched at the word *parents*, and Mrs Weasley caught the reaction immediately.

"Oh, my dear girl." She walked quickly over and pulled Hermione into a hug. "I'm sorry, Hermione, but . . . I can't lose any of my children. That includes you, just so that you're aware."

"I know." Hermione nodded. "But we've put our trust in Dumbledore and in Harry. Unfortunately, this mission is not the only thing we need to deal with. Harry needs to come here—come *home*," she clarified with a sad smile as she looked up at Mrs Weasley, who was now crying for what was clearly *not* the first time that day.

The conversation was interrupted by a tapping sound at a nearby window. Hermione inhaled sharply as she recognised Remus's owl. Ron raised a questioning brow, catching her reaction, but she shook her head, a silent plea for him to drop whatever suspicions he had about the anxiety on her face.

"Order meeting tomorrow," Mr Weasley said as he walked into the room. "Remus says it's important, but that we shouldn't worry ourselves."

"Easier said than done," Mrs Weasley said with a huff. "Don't think you're getting out of this, young man." She pointed a stern finger at Ron who swallowed, a lump in his throat, and nodded his head hastily as his parents left the room.

Once out of their sight, Ron snatched Hermione's hand, practically dragged her up the many flights of stairs to his room, and slammed the door shut.

"Silencing Charm," Hermione scolded him before he opened his mouth.

"*Muffliato!*" Ron threw it up quickly and turned to face Hermione. "What was that about? You knew that the Order was getting together tomorrow?"

"Yes. I was with Tonks and Remus today," she revealed calmly.

"What's it about? Something wrong with Harry? Has the plan changed?" he demanded in obvious panic.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Sit down before you pass out. No, the plan has not changed as far as I'm aware. Just . . . something new." She shrugged her shoulders lightly and knelt on the floor where she removed the mediwitch kit from her bag. "Remind me to refill this tomorrow. I need to make sure our potions are stocked and ready before we go."

"Why's it empty?"

She sighed. "You'll find out soon enough."

The worried edge of his voice grew more pronounced as he asked, "Hermione, what's going on?"

She turned to face him. "Calm down. I'm fine. It's just, well, tomorrow at the meeting there are going to be a few people who are very *happy* with me, and some others who are probably going to be very *angry*."

"What did you do with Tonks? I thought you were putting together a wedding present for Fleur?"

"I lied."

"You lied? Why would you lie to me?"

"Because if anyone knew what I was planning on doing, no one would have let me out of the house. Before you ask me again, no, I'm not telling you. You'll just have to wait. I hope, however, that no matter what happens tomorrow, you'll be by my side." She looked up at him with pleading eyes. "*On* my side."

"Of course," Ron assured her, "but I don't like the secrets."

"I know you don't. I'm sorry."

"Am I going to be one of the people who's happy with you, Hermione?"

"I hope so. But really, in the end, it was all for Harry. *He'll* be happy, and that's what matters."



## Chapter Four

### *Some Welcome Home Party*

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*Someone who knows when you're lost and you're scared  
There through the highs and the lows  
Someone to count on, someone who cares  
Beside you wherever you go  
(Gift of a Friend - Demi Lovato)*

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**July 23rd, 1997**

In the late afternoon, the members of the Order of the Phoenix gathered in the Weasleys' living room. As each wizard or witch stepped through the fireplace, another member was there to quiz them using a previously established security question. Considering that the entire Order would be engaged in a mission involving Polyjuice Potion in just a few days, they, more than anyone else, appreciated how tight security needed to be.

Mrs Weasley had created a feast as usual, though instead of waiting to sit down to eat at the end of the meeting like they often did, most people gravitated to and from the table of food, snacking as they moved about the room, engaging one another in conversation.

Everyone, save for Hermione, openly wondered why the meeting had been called in the first place.

Green flames lit up the living room once more, and they all turned to the fireplace as Tonks stepped through with a look of excitement on her face.

Before anyone had a chance to say anything, Alastor Moody approached, wand pointed directly at her. "Your first day as an official Auror, you stepped into my office and tripped. What item of mine did you break?"

Tonks snickered, daring to look proud. "Two Sneakoscopes, a brand new Foe-Glass, and a Secrecy Sensor."

"Aye, and you still owe me a new one of each," Moody grumbled. "Where's your husband, and what's this meeting all about?"

"Learn some patience, and stop worrying so much." She smiled and directed a wink at Hermione, who felt as if she were about to vomit. "Calm down, love," Tonks whispered as she moved to Hermione's side. "Everything's going to be fine. Everything and *everyone*," she added, "is fine."

"They are?" Hermione asked, almost choking on the words. She clenched her hands together, lacing her fingers to stop from fidgeting. "Nothing's wrong?"

Tonks chuckled softly. "Someone might need a bit of an ear-bashing, but that's normal, innit?"

The fireplace lit with another burst of green flames, and Remus stepped into the room, immediately seeking out Tonks and Hermione. His reassuring smile left Hermione feeling as though she had not only his approval of what she had done but also his support in this meeting.

"Remus!" Bill Weasley stepped forward. "If that really is you . . ." He eyed the man with a smirk on his face, feigning suspicion. Between the two men, who would likely be able to smell the lycanthropy in one another, the security questions were pointless. To appease the anxious crowd, however, Bill asked, "When I woke up in the hospital wing last month, what's the first thing you said to me?"

"I told you that I hoped you like your steaks rare." Remus grinned and clapped Bill on the shoulder. "Speaking of which, are you doing all right?"

Bill shrugged, brushing off the concern even as Mrs Weasley huffed over the reminder of the attack on her eldest son. "Better than you, I'd imagine. I got a little anxious a few nights ago, full moon and all, but it was nothing I couldn't handle."

"Now that the *pups* are all reacquainted," Moody interrupted with a scowl, "anyone going to tell me what the bloody hell was so important we needed to risk another meeting so close to retrieving Potter?"

Hermione's breathing and heart rate increased as she began to shuffle restlessly. When she felt a comforting hand on her shoulder, she assumed that either Remus's enhanced senses picked up the change or she was being profoundly obvious.

"We're *not* all here actually," Remus said. "Now, before I call our last member, I need everyone to keep an open mind and remain calm. You can ask all the security questions you need, but keep your wands where they are. You've already spoken to Tonks and myself, so you know we are who we say we are. I'm asking you to trust us now."

Most of the Order nodded anxiously, while a few—most notably Moody—looked angry that details were clearly being left out of whatever it was that was happening.

Instinctively, Hermione reached out and clutched Ron's hand tightly, using her other hand to grip Tonks's robes.

Remus approached the fireplace, tossed in Floo powder, and shouted, "The Den!" before sticking his head into the green flames. "Come on through," he called loudly before stepping back to make room.

The green flames burned higher and brighter. When they finally died down, every wand in the room was drawn as the shocked Order members stared defensively into the grey eyes of Sirius Black.

"Some 'Welcome Home' party this is." Sirius looked pointedly at all the drawn wands. "Surely only one or two wands are necessary. What'll happen if everyone shoots a curse off at once? The whole bloody house will cave in." Catching sight of Mrs Weasley, Sirius flashed his well-remembered smile. "Molly, you're looking well."

Her jaw had dropped at the sight of him. She clutched at her husband with her wandless hand and shrieked, "You're looking *alive!*"

"And handsome as ever," Sirius said with a grin, dusting off his robes. "All right, Remus said you lot use security questions now, yeah? Let's get this over with. It's been a long time since I've had some good home cooking, and I can smell the treacle tart from here."

Mr Weasley gaped at him. "How are you alive?"

"That," Sirius said, pointing at the man, "is a terrible security question, Arthur. Try again."

"Umm, I . . . What song wouldn't you stop singing when we all spent Christmas together at Grimmauld Place?" Mr Weasley blurted out, clearly too flustered to think of a good question.

"*God Rest Ye, Merry Hippogriffs,*" Sirius answered blithely. "Good to see you, old friend. I've been told you have my bike. I'd like it back." He peered at the man warily, and Mr Weasley laughed in response, still in shock. Sirius predictably turned toward Moody, who was fuming with suspicion. "Next?"

Moody narrowed his one good eye at Sirius, while the other spun in its mechanical socket until it was facing backward as though he were waiting for another recently not-

dead person to come up on him from behind. He slowly and deliberately asked, "When we escorted Harry Potter to King's Cross, what were his last words to you before we left you behind at Grimmauld Place?"

"Trick question! I came with you, and you were really bent out of shape about it." Sirius smiled smugly, rocking back and forth on the heels of his black, pointed-toe boots. "For no good reason, might I add. I played obedient lap dog quite well."

Several members in the room chuckled at the joke.

"Fine, fine," Moody growled, looking Sirius over intently. Though he refrained from casting hexes, his wand was still in hand, moving over Sirius like a Muggle metal detector, presumably searching for Dark Magic. "Now answer Arthur's first question. How the hell are you alive, Black?"

"Magic?" Sirius offered with a wink.

"Sirius, you're pushing it." Remus cautioned his friend.

"Well, what the hell am I supposed to say? I woke up on your bloody sofa not knowing where the hell I was or why your new wife wouldn't give me a proper drink!" Sirius's focus moved to his cousin, but his stare was quickly transferred to Hermione, who was still unconsciously clinging to Tonks's robes.

The charming smile he gave her made her feel as though the entire room suddenly revolved around her. Her cheeks warmed over, and they must have turned pink because his smile turned into an amused grin.

"You mean you don't know how or why you're alive?" Mrs Weasley stepped forward, blocking Sirius's line of sight. "Were you even really dead? Where have you been?"

"Yes, really dead. Don't know where I was." Sirius leant in to give Mrs Weasley a quick kiss on the cheek. "You're as temperamental as ever, Molly. Lovely to see you."

"Sirius Black," she hissed through clenched teeth, "you cannot just Floo into my house after being dead for over a year and expect to go on like nothing happened! This is serious!" she shouted and then pointed a finger in his face as she caught him about to speak. "Don't you *dare* say it!"

Sirius smirked, bouncing on the balls of his feet, clearly having far too much fun wreaking havoc on Mrs Weasley's nerves.

Moody broke the tension by loudly clearing his throat, causing a few members to raise their wands in response. "How do we know this isn't some sort of plot by You-Know-Who?"

Sirius scoffed. "Oh, for fuck's sake!"

"It's not his fault!" Hermione broke in, and everyone's attention fell on her as she dashed to Sirius's side, her hands shaking as she twisted them together. "I did it. I found . . . I found a way to bring him back."

"And I am forever grateful, kitten." Ignoring the shocked expressions and whispers, Sirius leant forward to place a kiss on her temple, moving the warmth in her cheeks down her neck.

Hermione smiled nervously at him and then looked at the rest of the gathered crowd, most of whom looked surprised, scared, or angry—save for Fred and George, who were quietly applauding her.

"And how did you do that?" Moody quickly stepped forward, pointing an accusing finger in Hermione's direction. However, before he got too close, both Remus and Sirius barred his way, low growls emitting from their throats.

Hermione took a sharp breath, and as the two Marauders faced off against the angry Auror, she peeked around Remus to gauge everyone's reactions.

Kingsley looked relieved but curious. Mr and Mrs Weasley were obviously on edge, though it was likely regarding the potential fight rather than Sirius's appearance. The Weasley brothers—save for Ron—looked ready to jump in, all led by Bill, who was attentively watching Remus's movements as though waiting for some silent command. Ron was the only one who still stared open-mouthed at Sirius Black.

"It doesn't matter *how* it was done. It was done," Hermione said. "I found the spell while researching the mission Dumbledore gave Harry, Ron, and me. In *Dumbledore's* own books," she clarified as though *that* let the Order members know that she had not used Dark Magic. Which, technically, she hadn't. Not *all* Blood Magic was Dark Magic, though it was not all exactly legal either—which was why she was keeping as quiet as possible about the details in front of everyone.

"I was there when she did it. I saw and heard the spell, saw his body come out of the veil, watched him wake up," Remus explained, looking down at Moody. "Sirius is alive again; Hermione brought him back. Now back off from the both of them."

The timbre of his voice should have been frightening, but Hermione found herself stepping closer to him without thinking.

"I don't like this," Moody grumbled.

"Noted," Sirius replied. "So if we're all done measuring our—"

"Sirius," Remus growled.

"I'm starved. Molly?" Sirius turned his attention to Mrs Weasley. "Not to be an imposition, but I'd love some dinner. I haven't eaten a proper meal in over a year. Tonks and Remus barely know how to brew a cup of tea; I'm amazed they're surviving together without anyone to feed them."

He stepped behind Remus, who was still guarding Hermione. His gaze fell on her, and he reached a tender hand out to her, pushing a brown curl behind her ear. She smiled, feeling grateful—more than *anything*—that he had recovered so well in such a short time.

One by one, the Order members moved from the living room, following behind Sirius as he heaped food onto a large plate, leaving only Moody, Remus, Ron, and Hermione in the living room. Remus still stood in front of her as though the old Auror posed a serious threat.

Hermione reached out to place her hand softly on his arm, feeling him tense under her touch. "Remus?" she whispered, noticing that he relaxed at the sound of her voice. "Remus, it's okay. I knew this would happen. I knew there would be questions." Moody grunted, and she turned to him. "Questions I still won't be answering."

Moody glared for a few more moments before giving her a curt nod and leaving the room.

Remus turned to watch him exit before bringing his attention back to Hermione. "Is there any way I can get you to stay here when the rest of us go fetch Harry?" he asked, his green eyes glimmering with flecks of gold in the light.

Hermione shook her head. "I'm going."

Remus's nose twitched in silent affront at her words, but he dipped his head and patted her shoulder lightly. "Very well. I suppose I'll have to make sure Molly can keep Sirius here on her own then. We won't be able to keep Harry safe if he knows that Sirius is alive. He'll have to be told once he gets here."

Hermione agreed. "Ginny'll help. Go and get some food. And keep an eye on *him*," she said with a soft chuckle, looking through the open doorway and watching as Sirius

manoeuvred around the table of food. He had a plate balanced in one hand as he shoved a chicken leg in his mouth with the other. Some people were still watching him anxiously. "I'm worried he's going to make someone angry and undo all the hard work I did to get him back."

Remus laughed, leaving her to make his way through the crowd that had gathered around his best friend.

"What the bloody hell did you do?" Ron quietly said from the room's periphery.

Hermione turned to see him, still wide-eyed, staring at her. "You're supposed to be on *my* side," she reminded him.

"I *am* on your side!" he insisted as he quickly approached her. "But I didn't know you knew how to bring people back from the bloody grave!"

"Language," she scolded him. "And keep your voice down, Ronald. For your information, I don't know how to bring back just *anyone*. I can't reverse a Killing Curse. That's how I found the spell. Harry wanted me to look for a way to bring back Dumbledore. I knew it was pointless, but I wanted to maybe find a way to protect us when we go off on this mission. I stumbled onto the spell, made the connection, and asked Remus and Tonks to go with me to the Ministry because Tonks is an Auror and could get me in."

Ron exhaled and ran a hand through his hair, still shocked by what Hermione had done. "Bloody hell."

She smacked his arm. "Language!"

Ignoring the assault, he laughed. "Can you imagine the look on Harry's face when he sees him?"

"That's almost *all* I've been thinking about." Hermione smiled as the imagined image of Harry and Sirius's reunion returned to her mind. The happy feeling, however, was quickly replaced by a flood of apprehension, and she felt her eyes prick at the rise of emotion. "If we have to go on this hunt, this is it. This is the end; I can feel it. I needed to give this to Harry. He needs us, and he has us, but . . ." She wiped a tear as it fell down her cheek. "Harry needs his family. He needs to have something of his own to fight for."

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**July 27th, 1997**

"Sit and stay!" Ginny Weasley ordered, her wand trained on the wizard in front of her, a devious grin on her face.

"I'm *not* a dog." Sirius glared at her. When she snorted, he conceded, "Right *now*. I'm not a dog right *now*. And I've already said I'll be good and sit tight until everyone gets here." He angrily turned toward the kitchen where Molly stood, staring out the window. "Which they should have done by now!"

"There's a Portkey!" Molly yelled, ignoring him as she flew out the door.

Sirius moved to stand, but Ginny shook her head and levelled her wand. "No, Sirius, you promised. If something's gone wrong, we need to figure out what happened and tend to anyone who might have been hurt. Harry won't be able to focus if he sees you right off."

Her tone eerily reminded him of Lily, and Sirius was almost forced into submission by the memory of her. "Fine," he allowed, grumbling under his breath. "Go and help your mum."

Ginny eyed him suspiciously for a moment, then nodded and ran out the door.

The second she was gone, Sirius shifted into Padfoot, swiftly slipping out the open door and into the shadows of the bushes that surrounded the Burrow.

The moment Padfoot's gaze fell on Harry arriving, his chest panged. He whimpered, his paws begging him to move forward, but he knew better. It had been his recklessness that had gotten him killed last time, and he knew that not only would he hurt Harry if he did something like that again, but his impatience would demonstrate a lack of gratitude he needed to show Hermione for everything she had done for him.

So he waited, watched, and listened.

"The Death Eaters were waiting for us," Harry told Molly. "We were surrounded the moment we took off. They knew it was tonight. I don't know what happened to anyone else. Four of them chased us; it was all we could do to get away, and then Voldemort caught up with us . . ."

Padfoot growled at the mention of Voldemort, his large body shaking as he stared at his godson, the mirror image of James. Knowing that the wizard who had killed his best friend had attacked Harry this very night had his blood boiling with rage.

In the distance, another blue light flashed.

As the group turned to await their friends, Padfoot caught the scent of blood, and his eyes widened as Remus came running toward the house, carrying with him the wounded body of George Weasley. Padfoot stayed put, still on the edge of his paws, wishing that he could do something to help, but remembering everyone's precautions.

*Wait for everyone to get back, then go to Harry.*

Everyone made their way into the house, and Padfoot winced, knowing that soon Ginny and Molly would notice his absence. He listened quietly from outside as Molly tended to her son's wound; it was not life-threatening from the sound of it, though he felt a modicum of grief for the boy—a fellow Marauder—who, from the sound of things, would certainly no longer *look* like his identical twin.

"What creature sat in the corner the first time Harry Potter visited my office at Hogwarts?" Padfoot overheard Remus ask. "Answer me!"

"A grindylow in a tank, wasn't it?" Harry nervously replied.

"What was that about?" Hagrid roared.

"I'm sorry, Harry, but I had to check," Remus said tersely. "We've been betrayed. You might have been an impostor."

Outside, Padfoot looked back to the field by the Burrow, waiting for anyone else to arrive, his eyes scanning the area carefully, his ears perked up, alert for any threats. Remus said they had been betrayed. He mentally went through the list of Order members that he recalled, growling as his memory fell on Mundungus Fletcher. Remus told him it had been Fletcher's idea to use the Polyjuice, but Sirius knew Dung was not smart enough to have come up with something like that. It must have been a trap.

Padfoot continued to guard the Burrow, listening all the while to Remus scolding Harry inside the house. He was on edge at the volume and tone his best friend was taking with his godson—though he had to admit, it was for the boy's own good.

"Harry, the time for disarming is past! These people are trying to capture and kill you! At least stun if you aren't prepared to kill!"

"We were hundreds of feet up! Stan's not himself, and if I had stunned him, he would've fallen and died the same as if I'd used the Killing Curse!" Harry insisted. "Expelliarmus saved me from Voldemort two years ago."

"Yes, Harry," Remus conceded with painful restraint, "and a great number of Death Eaters witnessed that happening. Forgive me, but it was a very unusual move then, under

the imminent threat of death. Repeating it tonight in front of Death Eaters who either witnessed or heard about the first occasion was close to suicidal!"

Another blue light emanated from the field, and Padfoot caught the scent instantly, every bit of his soul urging him forward. Staying put was painful as the scent overpowered him. He struggled to fight the instinct to dash forward, and only the sight of Harry and Remus rushing out the door to meet Kingsley and Hermione finally stopped him.

He watched closely as Harry enveloped Hermione in his arms. As though she knew exactly where he was, he felt her gaze immediately upon him. She looked exhausted but grateful to be alive. Padfoot stood, moving uncertainly on all fours until she shook her head at him from over Harry's shoulder, silently requesting that he stop. He whimpered, physically aching from not being able to go to them both, but obeyed her—this time—and retreated into the shadows.

"Where's George?"

"He lost an ear," Remus said.

"Lost an ear?" Hermione repeated in a high voice.

"Snape's work."

"Snape?" Harry shouted. "You didn't say—"

"Severus lost his hood during the chase. Sectumsempra was always a speciality of his. I wish I could say I'd paid him back in kind, but it was all I could do to keep George on the broom after he was injured; he was losing so much blood."

Sirius had seen the Sectumsempra Curse in use before, and the memory caused him to shake with anger. Not only had the filthy Death Eater betrayed and killed Dumbledore, but he was now using his old favourites to attack teenagers. Unable to contain himself any longer, Padfoot growled loudly at the mention of Snape and his betrayal.

"Did you hear that?" Harry spun at the noise, pointing his wand at the shadows where Padfoot remained hidden.

"Harry, pay attention! We need to wait for Ron and the others!" Hermione tried to distract him, but Harry stepped forward, completely undeterred, his wand lit and aimed ahead.

Padfoot flinched at the sight, immediately regretting that Remus had just insisted the boy not hesitate to use offensive tactics.

"Harry!" Hermione called after him, rushing in front of her friend.

"Move, Hermione. Someone's over there!"

"Harry!" Kingsley bellowed.

The Order members who had arrived made to follow the boy, but Padfoot watched as Hermione shook her head. She turned to Remus, who seemed to understand right away, his attention drawn to Padfoot's hiding spot.

"Everyone inside then!" Molly ordered, and one by one, they all moved into the house save for Harry, Hermione, and Remus.

Hermione put her hands on Harry's chest. "Harry, stop. I can explain."

"Explain what?" Harry's green eyes flashed with panic. "Hermione, what's going on? Who's back there?"

Knowing it was inevitable now that he had fucked it all up, Sirius shifted back into his human form and slowly stepped out of the shadows, hands held up in surrender to show his godson that he was unarmed. He gave a very brief, apologetic glance to Hermione, who looked like she was undecided whether she should be sympathetic to his need to see Harry or incredibly angry over his imprudent impatience.

Sirius smiled. "Harry."

The look on his godson's face was agonising, and it broke Sirius's heart to know that his foolhardy actions had left Harry in a grief that he himself understood all too well. As he slowly moved forward, Harry shook his head and stumbled back.

"Wha . . . ? No. No . . . Sirius? But . . ."

Remus placed his hand on Harry's shoulder. "It's really him."

"No." Tears began to gather in Harry's eyes, gleaming an unnaturally emerald hue from the flickering light emanating out of the windows of the house. "No, Sirius died! I watched him die. You told me, Remus; you told me he was gone!"

Sirius took one more careful step toward him but stopped immediately when Harry's wand hand stiffened. "Ask me then. Ask me anything to identify myself. It's what the Order does now, yes?"

"I . . . I . . ." Harry quickly used his free hand to wipe his cheeks, his voice trembling as he asked, "What were the first words you ever said to me?"

Amused, Sirius said, "I assume you mean at the Shrieking Shack, in which case, I told you that I thought you would come to help your friend, as your father would have

done the same for me." He took a moment, his smile softening. "But if we want to get technical, my first words to you were, 'Merlin, look at this head of hair.'"

Harry lowered his wand. "Sirius?"

"It's really me, son."

Sirius pulled Harry into a tight hug the moment the boy rushed into his arms, patting his back and affectionately ruffling his messy black hair. He listened as Hermione sniffled but left her to be tended to by Remus.

"You did well."

"Go wait for Tonks. I'll stay with them," Hermione said kindly.

"I don't understand," Harry said as he finally broke away from Sirius, though not letting go of the grip he had on his robes, clearly worried that if he let go, Sirius would disappear. "How is this possible?"

Sirius grinned and gestured over Harry's shoulder to where Hermione stood, quietly taking in the scene in front of her. "You've got a very clever witch on your side, son."

"Hermione?" Harry spun around and looked at her. "You . . . You brought him back? How? You said that—"

"I couldn't bring back Dumbledore, but I kept researching, and I found a spell." She smiled, leaving out every single detail of exactly how she had gone about pulling Sirius from the veil.

Without words, Harry reluctantly let go of Sirius and moved to Hermione, pulling her into a warm hug and burying his face in her shoulder.

She closed her eyes and clung to her friend, hushing his incoherent mumbles of gratitude. "You've done too much already, Harry. Had too much taken away. I saw a chance, and I had to take it. To give something back to you. Especially with what we need to do next."

"I'm sorry, what do we need to do next?" Sirius questioned, interrupting them.

Harry drew away from Hermione, swiping at his eyes before turning his attention back to Sirius with a resolute smile. "We win this war."

## Chapter Five

### *Sad Sitting Sods*

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*But nothing's greater than the rush  
That comes with your embrace  
And in this world of loneliness  
I see your face*  
(Bleeding Love - Leona Lewis)

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**August 1st, 1997**

"Careful there," Hermione said as she approached Sirius, taking the seat beside him at the large round table in the back of the marquee.

The table was flanked by empty chairs, and half-empty bottles of butterbeer dotted the place settings that surrounded them. Everyone else under the tent was on their feet, dancing beneath the floating candles that lit up the room, enjoying the company, and congratulating Bill and Fleur.

Sirius eyed Hermione curiously. "Careful of what?"

"Careful, or you might bury yourself so deep in this misery you're wallowing in, that you'll come out the other side cheerful." She leant over and gently bumped his shoulder with her own, drawing a small smile out of him. Her own smile was bright and joyful, and her eyes sparkled.

He raised an amused brow at her. "How many butterbeers have you had?"

"Three, but that's beside the point."

Sirius chuckled at what a lightweight she was as he took a sip from the small glass of firewhisky on the table in front of him, letting the liquid roll over his tongue pleasantly before swallowing and cherishing the familiar heat that burned its way down his throat.

Hermione looked out at the crowd and laughed quietly, pointing out Ron uncomfortably trying to dance with Luna Lovegood, who was obviously quite content to dance by herself. The strange, twirling movements the girl was making had no need for a partner.

"I told him that he should ask her to dance. I think he's regretting listening to me."

"How come you're not out there?" Sirius asked her, eyeing her lilac-coloured dress, amused by the ridiculously uncomfortable shoes she was wearing.

"How come you're sitting here?" she countered.

He tipped his glass to her. "You first."

"Nervous." She shrugged. "But even if we weren't in the middle of a war and preparing to leave any day now, I'd still probably be sitting here. The last time I was asked to dance, I was fifteen and *that* man," she said, pointing to a large bloke with a short beard in fancy robes, "was my date." She buried a reminiscing laugh in her palm, leaning closer as she continued to speak as though she were sharing a secret. "He spoke little, made my friends angry, and couldn't even pronounce my name."

Sirius briefly narrowed his eyes at the unmistakable face of Viktor Krum, remembering exaggerated articles in *Witch Weekly* and the *Daily Prophet* about the love triangle encompassing his godson, the little witch, and the famed Bulgarian Seeker.

To hide his mild irritation, Sirius returned his attention to Hermione and smirked. "You afraid he's going to ask you to dance?"

She shook her head emphatically. "I made sure that the second he walked through the door Fred and George introduced him to Fleur's veela cousins." She pointed to two blond women batting their eyelashes at Krum. Fred and George were lingering nearby, most likely waiting for Viktor to choose a girl, thereby leaving the twins to pick up the pieces of a broken heart left behind by the Quidditch star.

"So, instead of finding someone else to dance with, you've come to keep company with the sad sod sitting in the corner?"

"Ah, but why is the . . . I am not saying that," she insisted, shaking her head. "*Why* are you sad and sitting in the corner?" She watched his movements as though she would be able to visibly discern if he were lying.

Ever since she had brought him back from the veil, Sirius noticed Hermione keeping a close watch on him. While the Weasleys were left preparing for the wedding and following orders given by their matriarch, Hermione and Harry would sneak off to Remus and Tonks's home to visit Sirius.

It was easier to make plans for the approaching year when visiting Sirius, as Molly had put a hard stop on the trio organising their Horcrux hunting trip. Harry and Hermione

now had to work on the details outside the Burrow, and because Harry absolutely refused to keep him in the dark about anything, Sirius quickly made the former trio into a quartet.

"I'm sad because I don't like weddings," he admitted. "Spent much of my childhood attending them in uncomfortable robes."

"Hence your current rebellious sartorial selection?" Hermione gestured to his leather jacket and trousers.

"Leather looks good for any occasion." Sirius winked, grinning when he saw her blush. It amused him to no end that despite being tipsy, she could still use multi-syllabic words. "To answer your question, yes, I avoid dress robes unless absolutely necessary. Not that I don't have them or look good in them. I look fan-fucking-tastic in dress robes," he said smugly, taking another sip of his drink.

"Most of the weddings were for cousins, aunts, and uncles of mine, all destined to marry one another." He chuckled as he watched Hermione flinch at the notion of the Black family's tradition of inbreeding. "Or they were married off to the worst type of people to ever exist, like the Malfoys and the Lestranges."

"I'll drink to that." Hermione reached for his glass of firewhisky, took a sip, and then proceeded to immediately choke on it.

Sirius laughed and pulled the glass away from her. He stood up and beckoned for a passing server carrying a large tray of champagne. "Here. It's not water, but it's better than choking."

"That was awful!" Hermione grimaced even after she had rinsed the taste from her mouth. "How can you drink that?"

Sirius smiled thoughtfully, old memories burning in his chest. "You get used to it. Firewhisky holds a special place in my heart." He swirled the amber beverage in his tumbler, watching the candlelight sparkle through the colour. It was his very favourite colour. Too many years had passed since he had seen a certain pair of amber eyes staring back at him.

"Well, at least my brush with death got you to smile." Hermione's voice brought Sirius back from his memories. "So, you don't like weddings."

Sirius frowned. "Only ever been to *one* good one."

"Harry's parents."

He nodded.

"Was it beautiful?"

"Of course it was. Lily was gorgeous as always. James was nervous as we expected. We kept him well plied with firewhisky just to get him down the aisle." He laughed at the memory, absentmindedly fingering a small silver chain that hung around his neck.

Hermione's eyes widened. "He had to be drunk to get married? That's awful!"

"No, he had to be drunk to be convinced that Lily wasn't going to change her mind." Sirius chuckled, recalling his best friend's ridiculous pre-wedding panic. "Spent the whole night at our—" He paused in frustration before correcting himself. "—*my* flat pacing back and forth going over a list of reasons why Lily would bolt at the last second."

Hermione put her elbows on the table, resting her head in her hands and smiling at the story. "But she didn't."

"Absolutely not. By that point, the two of them were so besotted with one another that it was hard to be around them." Sirius smiled brightly at the memory for just a moment before it faded into a melancholic frown. "And then they got married, had a wonderful honeymoon, came home, and life turned to shit."

"They had Harry," Hermione argued. "Perhaps not everything was 'shit,' as you call it."

"Harry was . . . a very good thing in a really bad time," Sirius agreed. "After James and Lily got married, we . . . I . . ." He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose in frustration.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, frowning. "I didn't mean to bring up bad memories. I actually came over here to cheer you up."

"It's all right, kitten." Sirius reached for her hand, giving it a light squeeze before letting go. "That's what you do. You try to fix everyone. Just remember that you're not always going to make everyone happy. It's not your job to fix the world. I . . ." He paused, looking down at his glass. Making a decision, he tossed the firewhisky back as he stood, holding his hand out to her. "Come on."

"Come where?" she asked, pulling away from him.

He reached for her hand again, undeterred. "Here. You, come dance."

Hermione laughed, shaking her head. "Absolutely not."

"You're adorable. You thought that was a request." He snatched her hand, yanked her to her feet, and dragged her out onto the dance floor.

Hermione struggled the entire way, nearly tripping over her high heels in the process, cursing his name as they moved. "Sirius Black, I will get you for this!"

"Oh, kitten has claws."

He grinned and pulled her up against him, close enough that he could see the various shades of brown coalescing in her eyes. From far away, they looked like chocolate, but up close like this, with the light reflecting in them, they *could* look like firewhisky if he wished hard enough. Hermione narrowed those intoxicating eyes at him as he gripped her hand in one of his, placing the other on her small waist and spinning her in his arms. Within seconds, Sirius had her laughing and slapping his chest playfully. "Well, how about that, I might like weddings."

"Ah, my devious plan worked." Hermione smiled triumphantly. "I'm glad you're smiling again, Sirius."

"Me too, kitten, me too."

Hermione eyed him. "Have I mentioned that I hate nicknames?"

"It's a *pet* name, not a nickname," he argued as he took her hand and spun her out carefully before tugging her back against him, smiling when she tilted her head back and laughed. The sound drowned out the music playing, and it lit him up from inside. "Besides, haven't you noticed I don't always do what people want me to do?"

"Sirius Black? No, I thought he was the very perfect model of obedience and consideration," she said sarcastically.

"I am *very* considerate. For instance, despite the fact that you are enjoying dancing with me so much—"

She laughed again. "*So* much."

"—I am going to part with you, even though it's obvious that you want to keep dancing with me all night," he added. "Who could blame you? I am very handsome." Despite being only a little sarcastic, she did not laugh but instead locked her gaze on him, causing him to lick his lips.

Clearing his throat and his head, Sirius manoeuvred around another couple. "I do this because I am so very considerate of the fact that I am not the only sad sod sitting alone in a corner." He gestured to Remus, who was leaning against the entrance to the marquee by himself, a glass of firewhisky in hand.

"He's not sitting *or* in a corner," Hermione argued.

"Fine." Sirius rolled his eyes. "Sad sod *standing* at the door."

"And you're leaving me to go be sad together?"

"On the contrary my dear . . . *kitten* . . ." He stressed the word with a smile that he felt brighten as her eyes narrowed. "You've put an end to my corner-sitting sodding sadness, and I wish to share the gift of your dance moves with others. Moony! Come cut in! She can't keep up with me!"

Hermione suddenly looked a perfect mixture of embarrassed and angry, and Sirius grinned, pulling her close to him as he waved Remus over. His friend raised a brow, seeming hesitant to participate in Hermione's humiliation. Sirius sent him a mischievous grin, silently communicating that if he did not intervene soon, Sirius would only go and make things worse.

Setting his glass down on a nearby table, Remus approached the dancing couple. "Having fun, Padfoot?"

Sirius took the moment to dip Hermione, drawing an unexpected laugh. He felt something in his chest tighten when her hands clung to the lapels of his leather jacket. "Best wedding I've been to in years, Remus," he said as he set Hermione upright once again. "I'm sure *yours* was fine and fancy. Then again, seeing as I wasn't invited to it—"

"You were dead at the time," Remus interjected.

"—I have decided to let you make it up to me, by occupying this young witch's dance card in my stead." Sirius took Hermione's hand and placed it in Remus's.

Sighing in resignation, Remus gently led Hermione back to the dance floor as Sirius grinned at them and walked over to join Harry and Ron. The two young men were sitting at their table and watching the scene with amused expressions, having a good-natured chuckle at Hermione's expense.

"You look weird Polyjuiced," he said to Harry, ruffling the boy's currently red hair.

Harry laughed. "You look weird in leather trousers."

Sirius snorted in amusement and gave Harry's shoulder a playful shove before taking a seat at the nearest table. "Bugger off, the two of you. Go find some pretty witches to dance with."

"I'd rather get another butterbeer," Ron said, looking awkward as Luna passed by them.

As the boys vanished into the crowd wearing smiles that warmed Sirius's heart, he turned his focus to Hermione and Remus, watching them attentively as they swayed to the music. Using his Animagus senses, Sirius concentrated on the pair, having no remorse about eavesdropping.

"How much has he had to drink?" Remus asked.

Hermione shook her head. "I don't want to know. But he didn't step on my toes during our dance, so I think he'll be okay."

"You would be surprised the number of things that man can do while properly intoxicated." Remus chuckled softly, pulling her closer. "You look lovely by the way. Lilac is a good colour on you."

"Thank you, Remus."

Even from where he was sitting, Sirius caught the sudden blush on her cheeks.

"Where's Tonks?"

"On duty. I offered to join her, but she insisted that I *enjoy* myself," he said the words as though they were a punchline to a joke.

"Happy wife, happy life."

"I try," Remus said with an amused little smile that faded slowly as it was replaced by a haunted look. "Keep them out of trouble, will you? I know you'll be leaving soon, and it's dangerous for each of you. They'll be after all of you because of Harry. They'll be after Ron for truancy, you for being Muggle-born, and Sirius because he hasn't come into the Ministry yet after everyone found out he's alive. He shouldn't even be here right now. If you four have to be out, try and keep him in his Animagus form, please?"

"I will," she promised. "I'll take care of them, Remus."

Sirius looked away from the couple, feelings of unease returning to him. He understood where Remus was coming from, but that didn't mean he wanted Hermione to feel responsible for his own actions. Then again, he would not put it past his best friend to assume he was listening in on their conversation and use this moment to drill it into his head to be especially careful considering everything they both had to lose.

"I know you will," Remus said. "But . . . please take care of *yourself*, Hermione. If something were to happen to you—"

A silver light burst into the marquee, pulling Sirius's attention away from the couple.

The Patronus landed in the shape of a lynx, and everyone turned to get a good look at the large cat. Its mouth opened wide, and it spoke in the loud, deep voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt: "*The Ministry has fallen. Scrimgeour is dead. They are coming.*"

Silence spread outward in cold ripples from the place where the Patronus had landed. Then somebody screamed, and everyone panicked, rushing toward the exit.

Sirius's first instinct was to look for Hermione, who he saw being pushed toward him by Remus. Walking steadily toward her, wand in hand, Sirius scanned the room for Harry and Ron.

Hermione pulled her own wand as she reached him, and Sirius tucked her into his side just as the crowd erupted into chaos. Guests were sprinting in all directions; many were Disapparating—the protective enchantments around the Burrow had broken.

"Harry!" Hermione screamed. "Ron!"

"Hermione!" Harry shouted, pushing his way toward them.

Shortly behind Harry, Ron appeared. "We need a safe place to hide," he pointed out as Sirius rushed them away from the panicking crowd.

"Grimmauld Place," Harry suggested.

"Don't be ridiculous, Harry! *Snape* can get in there," Hermione said.

"Ron's dad said they'd put up jinxes against him. And even if they haven't worked," he pressed on, interrupting Hermione as she opened her mouth to argue, "so what? I swear, I'd like nothing better than to meet *Snape*!"

"But—"

"Hermione, where else is there? It's the best chance we've got. *Snape*'s only one Death Eater."

Sirius nodded in agreement. "Harry's right. Apparate to the top step of number twelve. You can't be seen from the street in case they've got people watching it."

"Side-Along then," Hermione insisted. "Or else we'll end up knocking each other over once we Apparate."

Paternal instincts kicking in, Sirius automatically took Harry's arm, grateful when Hermione grabbed Ron's. He would have liked to have been able to take all three individually for safety reasons, but time was not on their side. On the count of three, the four turned on the spot, vanishing into the compressed darkness.

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Sirius stepped into the house first.

The moment that the front door closed behind them, the old-fashioned gas lamps lit up the front hallway, casting light on the spun cobwebs that draped from one wall to the other. It was eerily quiet, and the stale smell of neglect hung in the air. A thick layer of dust covered the framed artwork, the lamp fixtures, and the row of house-elf heads still hanging on the wall. It looked exactly as he had last left it. The only thing even slightly out of place was the troll leg umbrella stand lying on its side as though Tonks had just knocked it over again.

"I think somebody's been in here," Hermione whispered, pointing toward the troll leg.

"That could've happened as the Order left," Ron murmured back.

Harry frowned and studied the shadows on the walls. "So, where are these jinxes they put up against Snape?"

"Maybe they're only activated if he shows up?" Ron suggested.

Sirius moved ahead, glancing back to see the teenagers standing close together, their backs against the wide door, looking afraid to move further into the house. He did not blame them.

"Well, we can't stay here forever," Harry said, and he took a step forward, joining Sirius.

Moody's voice whispered out of the darkness. "Severus Snape?"

"Do I look like an ugly git to you?" Sirius snapped. "We're not bloody Snape!"

A few more curses and jinxes meant to trap Snape were easily averted by the four, though the thing that made the younger three jump highest was the screeching sound of Sirius's mother's portrait in the hallway.

"Mudbloods! Filth! Stains of dishonour! How dare you taint the halls of the House of Black!"

"SHUT UP!" Harry and Sirius bellowed simultaneously. With an explosion of red sparks from Harry's wand, the curtains swung shut, silencing the vociferous painting.

"I'm gone a year, and no one's thought of anything better than curtains yet?" Sirius questioned the three, who all shrugged in response. He sighed and rubbed the bridge of

his nose. "Hell, I'm just going to plaster over the old bitch when we're done with this bloody war."

Shivering slightly in the draughty room, Hermione perched on the sofa, hugging her knees to her chest.

Instinctively, Sirius made his way to her and wrapped an old blanket he had pulled out of a nearby cupboard around her quivering form.

She smiled up at him gratefully before her focus switched to Ron, who was peering through the windows.

"Can't see anyone out there," he announced.

"Harry?" Hermione asked worriedly.

Hermione's voice drew Sirius's attention to his godson. The Polyjuice had finally faded completely, which would have been a happy sight, except that Harry wincing in pain and clutching at his forehead. The image, he was certain, had taken years off of Sirius's life as the panic raised in his chest. "Harry!"

"What did you see?" Ron asked, advancing forward. "Did you see him at my place?"

"No, I just felt anger. He's really angry."

"But that could be at the Burrow," Ron said worriedly. "What else? Didn't you see anything? Was he cursing someone?"

"No, I just felt anger . . . I couldn't tell—"

"He's still connected to you?" Sirius asked with concern, pushing Ron out of Harry's face. "I thought that'd been fixed by teaching you Occlumency." He looked to Hermione, hoping for answers as Harry was still caught up in the aftershocks of the painful vision.

"He never finished his lessons," she disclosed. "Snape refused."

"That prick. Dumbledore was supposed to set him straight," Sirius growled, reminding himself that Snape was a traitor and had likely stopped the lessons on purpose to keep Harry from blocking out Voldemort. "Then we'll pick it back up. I'm not the best at it, mind you," he admitted. That was certainly an understatement. Memories of the first time he had tried Occlumency still made him slightly nauseated. "But better than ignoring it and letting that sick snake inside your head."

Harry exhaled. "Thanks, Sirius."

Hermione shrieked. The other three drew their wands in response, spinning around to see a silver Patronus soar through the drawing room window and land on the floor in

front of them, where it solidified into the weasel that spoke with Arthur's voice: *"Family safe, do not reply, we are being watched."*

The Patronus dissolved into nothingness, and Ron let out a noise between a whimper and a groan, dropping onto the sofa. Hermione joined him, gripping his arm.

Sirius walked over and patted the boy on the shoulder. "See? Takes more than the Ministry falling and a wedding being attacked by Death Eaters to take down a Weasley shindig." He chuckled, trying to ease the tension.

Ron gave a half-hearted smile in response.

"We should get some rest," Hermione insisted as she grabbed her beaded bag, reaching in and pulling out a stack of bedclothes.

Sirius smiled at the sight. "Undetectable Extension Charm?" he inquired, and she silently confirmed. "Haven't seen one of those in years."

He gratefully took the clothes offered to him, though he wondered if his bedroom upstairs had been left alone. He probably would have things to wear in there, but the idea of revisiting old times just now was not appealing. Best wait for the morning.

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### **August 2nd, 1997**

Blinking his eyes open, Padfoot glanced around the room, quietly groaning at the reminder of where he was. The arm draped over his furry body, however, was a pleasant surprise.

Not wanting to be separated, Sirius had insisted they all sleep in the drawing room for the night. Ron had a fit of gallantry and insisted that Hermione sleep on the sofa cushions. Sirius, irritated that he had not thought of that first, had shifted into Padfoot and crawled in between Ron and Hermione, settling down on the floor beside her for the night.

A narrow beam of light was visible between the gap in the heavy curtains. It was the cool, clear blue of watered ink, somewhere between night and dawn, and it was quiet save for the slow, deep breaths coming from Ron and Hermione.

Glancing up, he saw Harry stretching his arms above his head, his hair in more disarray than normal, which was truly saying something. Though it was easy to remember

that the two were separate individuals, the silhouette that Harry created against the light in the room was a painful reminder of James.

Padfoot stretched out his front paws and then back, shaking out his fur, drawing Harry's attention. He nodded toward the door, waiting for Harry to take his cue before he looked down at the sleeping girl next to him. Leaning forward, he pulled the sleeve of her fallen arm up with his teeth and set it back down on the cushions.

He glanced at Harry as he walked out of the room before making his way up the staircase, shifting back to his human form mid-step, Harry following close behind.

"What an arsehole," Sirius growled after opening his bedroom door, looking inside to see that his room had been completely torn apart. He could still smell Snape's presence there, though the greasy git had clearly vacated months ago. Grimmauld Place must have been the traitor's first stop after murdering Dumbledore.

"I take it you didn't do this?" Harry asked as he walked in behind Sirius.

"No. I'll admit to being messy, but I have respect for my own stuff," Sirius grumbled as he made his way to a stack of papers and fallen photographs, most of which were of himself, James, and Remus, with Peter's face scratched out of them.

He was glad to see that Snape had not snatched up the few photos he had left of Lily. Sirius smiled at the living memories as they danced on paper in front of his eyes, and handed them over to Harry. "Here you go. Saved them for you."

Harry hesitated before taking them. "You should keep some of these, Sirius."

"Got my own copies and then some." Sirius inclined his head toward a large locked box near the bed. He picked up his wand and waved it over the rusty container, smiling when it glowed gold for a brief moment. "Still intact. You'd need a bloody Curse-Breaker to get into that thing."

"What've you got in it other than pictures?"

"Pictures are enough. Memories keep you grounded when the rest of the world goes to shit," Sirius explained, leaving the details murky. He picked up an old copy of *A History of Magic* from the floor and tossed it on top of the locked box.

"Oh, damn." He picked up a crumpled piece of parchment, feeling heavy-hearted. "Here," he said and handed it to Harry. "It's a letter your mum wrote me."

Sirius smiled softly as he watched Harry get a little teary-eyed at Lily's words.

"We had a cat?" Harry asked with a laugh.

Sirius chuckled, unconsciously rubbing at scratch marks on his arms that had healed years ago. "I hated that fucking beast. It used to be Mi—mine." He cleared his throat, lost in emotion. "But we didn't get along so great, so I handed it off to your mum."

"Harry? Sirius?"

"Up here, love!" Sirius called. "What's happened?"

There was a clatter of footsteps outside the door, and Hermione burst inside, looking exasperated and relieved all at once. "We woke up and didn't know where you were!" she said breathlessly before turning and yelling over her shoulder, "Ron! I've found them!"

Ron's annoyed voice echoed distantly from several floors below, "Good! Tell them from me that they're both gits!"

"Harry, don't just disappear, please; we were terrified!" she exclaimed, calming down as she took a good look around the room. "Did you make all this mess or was some of it done when you got here?" She glanced suspiciously at Sirius, who narrowed his eyes back at her. "Sorry." Hermione held up both hands as a sign of surrender. "Why don't you both come down, and we'll put together some breakfast?"

The three left Sirius's room, closing the door behind them and heading back down the stairs, Sirius close on Hermione's heels with Harry lagging behind.

As they passed a door on the right, out of bitter habit, Sirius made a fist and punched the sign that hung on it as he continued down the stairs.

"Hermione, Sirius! Come back up here!" Harry said.

Hermione looked back up the stairs. "What's the matter, Harry?"

"I think I found him!"

Sirius looked back, concerned. "What's wrong? What'd you find?"

"R.A.B."

"You found . . . Oh my God! How did I not put that together?!" Hermione said excitedly as she reached the landing. She smiled and hugged Harry tightly and then reached out for Sirius as he approached the two of them, Ron coming up behind him.

"Someone want to clue me in? You found R.A.B.?" Ron asked.

"What's R.A.B.?" Sirius scanned the door carefully. Surely, they didn't mean Regulus? What the hell would these three need from his dead brother?

"The fake locket Horcrux that Dumbledore and Harry found had a note in it from one of You-Know-Who's followers," Hermione explained to him. "One who defected and stole his Horcrux intending to destroy it."

"Good for him, sticking it to old—Wait. R.A.B.? No." Sirius shook his head. "Absolutely not."

"It fits, Sirius," Harry said.

"No," Sirius growled, remembering the last time he had seen his younger brother, complete with Death Eater regalia. "Regulus was a Death Eater. He was a bloody idiot who bought into all the pureblood nonsense that my parents taught us."

"Would you recognise his handwriting?" Hermione asked, reaching into her beaded bag and pulling out the fake locket. As she popped it open, a small piece of folded parchment tumbled out.

Sirius took it quickly and opened it, immediately recognising the script. He and Regulus had been forced to go through penmanship lessons since the moment they could hold a quill. As usual, Sirius had rebelled and scribbled his way through most of his early years, only appreciating the need for proper penmanship when he began writing love letters to girls in school. It also set his notes apart from James's, which looked like a bunch of bowtruckles had gone swimming in an inkwell and then flopped around on a piece of parchment. Regulus, on the other hand, obeyed from the outset—as always—and set to prove he had the most beautiful handwriting.

"This doesn't . . . It doesn't prove a thing. Why does it matter? Regulus is dead and we have a fake locket," Sirius said brusquely.

"Would you be okay with us searching his room for the real one?" Harry asked.

"Have fun. I'll be downstairs." Sirius turned and fled the landing, making his way past the drawing room to the back door, which he popped open before pulling out the pack of cigarettes he kept in his leather jacket. Tapping one out, Sirius reached for his wand and used a small Fire-Making Spell to light it. He took a deep drag and exhaled slowly, as though this one small stick would keep him from breaking.

"Sirius?"

"I'm fine, Hermione," he answered before she bothered asking. "Did you find it?"

"Not yet. Harry and Ron are still looking," Hermione replied as she approached him.

"Good luck to them, then," he said bitterly.

She pointed at the cigarette. "That's a disgusting habit."

He grinned at her. "You might not always think that. It's helpful when you're stressed."

Pursing her lips in disapproval, she opened her mouth again to say something when a loud crash echoed from upstairs, followed by Ron shouting down, "We're fine! Everything's fine!"

Hermione sighed and shook her head, crossed her arms, and stepped closer to Sirius. "Tell me about your brother."

Sirius groaned as he blew his smoke out the side of his mouth away from her face. Why couldn't she ever just let things be? "Maybe another time, love," he demurred. The last time he opened up and talked about his brother had been a long time ago, a memory he was not ready to revisit.

She tried to reason with him. "If this is true, that means he didn't die for nothing."

"Still dead, though."

"Was there a funeral?"

Sirius sighed, giving up and flicking the cigarette through the opening of the door, closing it behind him quickly to avoid the cold. "I imagine so. I wasn't invited. I got a lovely letter from my mother telling me that my father and brother were both dead."

"That's awful."

"That was *typical*."

"So you didn't even get to say goodbye?"

"Not in the way you're thinking." He moved and sat down in the armchair, putting the pack of cigarettes back in the pocket of his jacket. "I said goodbye to them all the moment they blasted me off that tree in the other room. When Reg died, though . . ." He paused as he considered whether or not he should say anything more. "I said goodbye by drinking my way through a bottle of firewhisky with a girlfriend."

"At least you weren't alone," Hermione noted, but there was a hint of bitterness in her tone.

Sirius grinned at the way she answered him, wondering if that was jealousy he was picking up. "No, not *that* time," he continued on, not wanting to point out the brief look of anger on her face. "We got drunk, and she made up stories about my family. Said that

deep down they were all good people caught up in bad situations. Lovely fairy tales." The fragment of nostalgia that had momentarily lit up his countenance faded. "Made me feel better until I sobered up."

Hermione patted his shoulder. "Maybe they weren't fairy tales."

"We'll see."

## Chapter Six

### *No Repeating History*

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*Keep holding on  
'Cause you know we'll make it through, we'll make it through  
Just stay strong  
'Cause you know I'm here for you, I'm here for you  
(Keep Holding On - Avril Lavigne)*

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**August 2nd, 1997**

Sirius had shied away from Regulus's room at all costs, insisting that he would help by looking downstairs for the locket. In reality, he went in search of a hidden bottle of firewhisky and Remus's old stash of chocolate bars, located in a locked tin box beneath the kitchen sink inside a cauldron labelled: *Broken—Possibly Cursed—Don't Touch*.

"Idiot," Sirius had muttered to the absent werewolf, reaching inside for the wrapped sweets in triumph.

After several hours of avoiding the upstairs bedrooms—and once the alcohol had been consumed—with chocolate bars in hand, Sirius made his way to join the cause, stopping on the landing nearest Regulus's room. "Did you find the locket yet?"

"Not yet, but I have an idea," Harry said, closing the door behind him just as Hermione and Ron each appeared out of their old rooms.

Harry moved past Sirius with a determined look, descending the stairs two at a time. "Kreacher nicked loads of things from us. He had a whole stash of stuff in his cupboard in the kitchen. C'mon."

Ron and Hermione thundered down the stairs after Harry, Sirius sauntering slowly behind.

They made so much noise that they woke Walburga's portrait as they passed through the hall. "Filth! Mudbloods! Scum!"

Sirius flicked his wand at his mother's likeness, shutting the curtains—uttering a stream of profanity quietly under his breath—and then closed the kitchen door behind himself.

Harry ran the length of the room, skidding to a halt at the door to Kreacher's cupboard, and wrenched it open.

Kneeling down beside him, Sirius glanced inside the filthy cupboard. There was the nest of dirty old blankets the house-elf had once slept in, but they were no longer glittering with the trinkets Kreacher had gleaned. The only thing of worth left behind was an old copy of *Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy*.

"Damn," Harry exclaimed and pulled out the old book. "Nothing here but this book and a bunch of rubbish." He sighed as he handed over the volume to Sirius, who dusted off the cover.

"What is it?" Hermione asked as Harry and Ron continued to dig through Kreacher's cupboard.

"Old book on pureblood genealogy," Sirius answered, running his finger along the spine. "My brother and I had to have the thing memorised before we entered Hogwarts. Make sure we didn't mingle with *impure blood*." He rolled his eyes and opened the book, flipping the pages in disgust as he stood and walked around the room. "It's magically updated, so when a new child is born or someone dies, the parchment changes. A lot like the tapestry upstairs."

"You think my family's in there?" Harry wondered aloud just as Sirius landed on the page where fine ink script was written across the top:

### POTTER

Sirius glanced over the page anxiously, running his thumb over the names he recognised so well. One in particular stood out, and he touched the name affectionately with one finger before reaching up and tugging the silver chain around his neck.

"Sirius? Do you think my family's in that book?" Harry asked again.

Sirius looked up from the pages and let go of the chain. "Sorry; got lost for a bit."

He cleared his throat and met Harry's gaze over the top of the book, while his wand, which was screened by the large pages, touched the parchment. Using a non-verbal Vanishing Spell, the Potter page disappeared from the book altogether.

"Potters *used* to be in the book," he explained, "but when I ran off, my mother tore the page out. Probably burnt it." He shrugged his shoulders and looked away, not enjoying the fact that he needed to lie to his godson.

Ron sighed. "There's nothing else in here, Harry. Just a few dead rats."

"It's not over yet," Harry said, and he raised his voice and called, "Kreacher!"

Nothing happened.

"Why isn't he coming?" Hermione inquired.

"Maybe he finally died," Sirius muttered under his breath as he closed the large book, handing it over to Hermione. Suddenly, his own words reached his head, and he grinned at the idea of the old traitorous elf, dead somewhere. "Too bad he didn't leave a cake behind that we could celebrate with."

Hermione glared at him. "Sirius!"

He groaned. Not this again. He thought he was done dealing with her elf rights bullshit.

"Wait, what if you being alive makes your will invalid? What if he knows?" Harry asked, crawling back out of the cupboard and dusting off his trousers.

Sirius raised a brow. "You mean I'm still in charge of the little monster?"

"Call him and see," Harry suggested.

"Bloody hell . . ." Sirius sighed. "Kreacher!"

There was a loud crack, and the house-elf that Sirius had so hoped would *not* appear *did*, popping out of nowhere in front of the cold and empty fireplace: tiny, half human-sized, his pale skin hanging off him in folds, and with white hair sprouting copiously from his bat-like ears.

"Master has returned," Kreacher croaked in his bullfrog's voice, peering up at Sirius with a look of disdain. "Oh, my poor Mistress will be so disappointed to know that the ungrateful swine lives to bring further ruin to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. Oh, my poor Mistress will be so disappointed with Kreacher for failing to get rid of the blemish on her great and noble House."

"You did just fine, you little piece of shit!" Sirius reacted immediately and kicked the rotten little monster, punting him forward a good three feet.

"Sirius!" Hermione shrieked.

He forced himself to look ashamed as he recalled how the diminutive witch used to reprimand him for his mistreatment of Kreacher.

"He has a point, Hermione," Ron noted, clearly no love lost between himself and the elf. "Kreacher's the reason Sirius died."

"I know that!" Hermione snapped at him.

Sirius narrowed his grey eyes at her. "Then maybe show a little less consideration for that thing!"

"Out, both of you." Hermione pointed at Sirius and Ron. "Harry and I will deal with Kreacher." She looked incredibly upset and not just because of how the elf had been treated.

Sirius opened his mouth to protest, but she stepped into his personal space and narrowed her eyes at him stubbornly. "As far as I am concerned, Kreacher is a product of his environment. You treated Kreacher poorly, so Kreacher turned on you. You are both to blame. Right now, I am having a hard time dealing with either of you when there are more important things to be concerned about."

Clenching his teeth angrily, he mentally reminded himself that she might not always feel that way. He turned his anger on Kreacher, glaring down at him with pure hatred. "You stay in this room and answer every one of their questions. Got it? You are not allowed to leave this fucking room unless they tell you to!"

"Whatever Master says." Kreacher bowed low before him. "Kreacher lives to serve the Noble House of Black."

Sirius spent a moment trying actively to avoid kicking the elf again, keeping his eyes fixed on Hermione's firm stance, using her to ground himself before storming out of the kitchen. Ron followed quickly behind him.

Hermione sighed in relief as the door closed.

Harry immediately began interrogating the elf. "Two years ago, there was a big, gold locket in the drawing room upstairs. We threw it out. Did you steal it back?"

There was a brief silence, during which Kreacher straightened up to look Harry full in the face. "Yes."

"Where is it now?" came Harry's jubilant query while Hermione looked on, gleeful.

Kreacher closed his eyes as though he could not bear to see their reactions to his next word. "Gone."

"Gone?" echoed Harry, deflated. "What do you mean, it's gone?"

The elf shivered and swayed.

"Kreacher," said Harry fiercely, "I order you—"

"Mundungus Fletcher," the elf croaked, his eyes still tight shut. "Mundungus Fletcher stole it all. Miss Bella and Miss Cissy's pictures, my mistress's gloves, the Order of Merlin, the goblets with the family crest, and . . . and . . ."

Kreacher gulped for air, his hollow chest rising and falling rapidly. Then his eyes flew open and he uttered a blood-curdling scream. "And the locket—Master Regulus's locket! Kreacher did wrong! Kreacher failed in his orders!"

As Kreacher lunged for the poker standing in the grate, Harry launched himself at the elf, flattening him. Hermione's scream mingled with Kreacher's, but Harry bellowed louder than both of them, "Kreacher, I order you to stay still!"

But Kreacher continued.

"Harry, make him stop!" Hermione cried as she watched the old elf continue to try to punish himself despite Harry's attempts to prevent him.

"I'm trying!" Harry shouted.

Hermione shrieked, "Kreacher, stop!"

Kreacher stopped.

"What the hell?" Harry's jaw dropped in shock.

Hermione knelt beside the elf, worried that he had done permanent damage. "Kreacher, are you all right?"

"Yes, Mistress. Kreacher obeys Mistress," Kreacher said bitterly, narrowing his large eyes at her. Hermione's own eyes widened at the words, and she swallowed hard as the elf continued to speak. "Even if Mistress is a filthy Mudblood brought into the Noble House of Black by the ungrateful blood-traitor."

Harry gaped. "Wait, Kreacher, you obey Hermione?"

"Kreacher lives to serve the Noble House of Black."

"Harry, go tell Sirius that Mundungus took the locket," Hermione requested, panic rising in her chest.

"But—"

She turned a fierce look on him. "Harry, go! I'll deal with Kreacher. Please."

Her best friend nodded, eyeing Kreacher once again before walking out the door.

Hermione promptly turned her attention back to the elf in front of her. "Kreacher, why did you call me Mistress? Why did you obey me?"

He glared at her, shaking his head. "Kreacher can see the bond with his own eyes. Kreacher sees the Mudblood Mistress tied to his blood-traitor Master. Oh, my poor Mistress," he wailed. "To see what's become of her beloved House. Mistress would never forgive Kreacher."

"You see the bond? You see the bond between Sirius and me?" she asked him. "That doesn't make sense, Kreacher; Sirius and I are not married. I am not your Mistress."

"Kreacher sees the magic." He looked at her as though examining her for something. Clearly disgusted by whatever it was that he saw, Kreacher grimaced and looked away. "Marriage makes no difference; magic was used to make a bond. The Mistress tied herself to the Noble House of Black with her filthy blood."

Hermione swallowed again, her heart racing. "Kreacher, you will speak of this to no one, do you understand me?" She looked down at the elf, feeling wretched for giving him orders and watching as he bowed before her.

"Kreacher lives to serve the Noble House of Black."

"Kreacher, did you see Mundungus steal the locket?" she asked him, getting back on topic.

"Kreacher saw him!" The elf gasped, tears pouring over his snout. "Kreacher saw him coming out of Kreacher's cupboard with his hands full of Kreacher's treasures. Kreacher told the sneak thief to stop, but Mundungus Fletcher laughed and r-ran . . ."

"You called the locket 'Master Regulus's'. Why? Where did it come from? What did Regulus have to do with it? Kreacher, sit up and tell me everything you know about that locket and everything Regulus had to do with it."

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The wizards all sat in the upstairs drawing room, waiting for Hermione.

When Harry entered, Sirius raised a questioning brow at his godson, who shook his head, looking confused, and muttered something under his breath about Hermione and her bloody elves. Sirius could tell that Harry was hiding something, but as he himself had

vanished an entire family tree out of an ancient book just to keep it away from prying eyes, he did not feel like he had a leg to stand on in probing for Harry's secrets.

Shortly after, Hermione entered the room looking pale.

"What's happened?" Harry asked quickly.

Hermione's gaze fell on Sirius.

"What'd the elf say?" he asked.

"Volde—"

"Don't say it!" Ron shouted, and the rest of them rolled their eyes.

"You-Know-Who asked Regulus to borrow Kreacher years ago. He took him to the cave where he was keeping the locket. He made Kreacher drink the potion that Dumbledore took," she glanced back to Harry. "You-Know-Who used Kreacher to put the security measures around the locket. Then he left him there to die. But Regulus had ordered Kreacher to always return to him, so he did."

She moved to the sofa, sat down next to Sirius, reaching for his hand. "Kreacher told Regulus what he'd done, and Regulus figured out You-Know-Who had made at least one Horcrux. He had Kreacher bring him back to the cave to retrieve it. He drank the potion himself and switched the lockets. Gave the Horcrux to Kreacher and told him to destroy it."

"Regulus drank the potion?" Harry asked quietly, and Hermione nodded. "The Inferi?"

Sirius saw Hermione nod just before turning his focus down at both of her hands wrapped around one of his. Her words ran over and over in his mind, and he turned his attention to his other hand, holding a glass of firewhisky.

"Kreacher said he went beneath the water."

He could hear the tremble in her voice, and a part of him hated the pity he felt coming off of her. The rest of him wanted to bathe in her comfort. She pulled one hand away, and he looked up to see her wiping away stray tears from eyes that were now focused exclusively on him.

Unwilling to speak about his brother's death or potential redemption, Sirius avoided the subject of Regulus entirely, breaking the silence with, "So . . . where is it now?"

"Umm," Hermione stammered for a moment. She looked like she wanted to push him until he disclosed the history between his brother and himself.

He gave an expression that told her not to force the issue right now.

"Kreacher said Mundungus took it. I sent Kreacher off to find him for us."

"How do we know he'll do it?" Ron asked. "What if he vanishes and betrays us? He already betrayed Sirius once."

"I was very specific with his orders," Hermione replied.

Ron raised a brow. "And he'll obey you?"

"Of course," Hermione affirmed, receiving curious looks from each of the men. "Sirius told him to, and he cannot ignore his Master's orders. The house-elf's highest law is his Master's bidding."

Ron dipped his head in acceptance, but both Harry and Sirius stared at her suspiciously.

"Here." Hermione handed the fake locket back to Harry. "Keep this safe. I told Kreacher he could have it when he gets back. It made him very happy. Took me a bit to get him to stop crying actually."

Sirius gawked at her. "You gave the elf a present?"

"I'm putting an end to the cycle," she affirmed. "Harry's going to defeat You-Know-Who, we're going to win this war, and when that happens, I'm done watching Muggle-borns, goblins, werewolves, and house-elves being put under the heel of someone else. It doesn't mean I like him."

The distaste in her voice was shocking, and she must have read the surprise on Sirius's face because she frowned at him. "He betrayed you, and you ended up dead because of it. But you're not dead, so I'm looking to the future. And I'm ending the cycle of hatred. I expect all three of you to be nice to that rotten elf when he gets back!"

She stood up and fled the room in a huff, storming up the stairs. A moment later, the sound of a slamming door echoed through the house.

"Just keep Kreacher away from me when he gets back," Sirius grouched. "If you want, I'll give him back to you, Harry."

"We'll eventually need to leave Grimmauld Place," Harry replied, shaking his head. "We'll tell him that if we don't return at any point, he should go back to Hogwarts. At least he won't cause trouble there."

**August 4th, 1997**

They waited days for Kreacher to return, growing more and more anxious by the minute. Harry and Sirius practised duelling in the cellar, which had been emptied of everything except a large, old, iron cage that Remus had used to secure himself during the full moon before Grimmauld Place had been compromised. Meanwhile, Ron and Hermione usually kept to the drawing room, Hermione reading the book of stories that Dumbledore had given her and Ron playing with his Deluminator.

Making their way up the stairs from the cellar, Sirius could feel the tension in the room as he watched Hermione's eyes narrow in on Ron while he clicked the little instrument in his hands and watched as the lights went in and out of the nearby lamps.

Before she had a chance to completely snap and attack him, Sirius snatched the Deluminator out of Ron's hands.

"Hey!" Ron glared.

"You'll get this back when you learn to do something else with your boredom. You've got a hand fixation; go smoke," Sirius suggested, tossing his pack of cigarettes to Ron.

Ron blinked at the small box, but before he made another move, his gaze switched to Hermione, who looked absolutely murderous.

"Don't. You. Dare."

Ron flinched. Harry averted his eyes. Sirius grinned at her.

"I think I'll pass, mate," Ron said, handing the cigarettes back to Sirius, taking a step out of the room, likely trying to avoid the potential blast radius.

Hermione turned her narrowed glare on Sirius, who was not only willing but also eager to face whatever wrath she had in store for him. Before either could say a word, however, the security curses shot off in the front hallway, and everyone banded together in the drawing room, pulling their wands.

"Hold your fire. It's me, Remus!"

"Oh, thank goodness," said Hermione weakly, pointing her wand at Sirius's mother instead; with a bang, the curtains swished shut, and silence fell. Ron, too, lowered his wand, but Harry and Sirius did not.

Remus moved forward into the lamplight, hands still held high in a gesture of surrender.

"I am Remus John Lupin, werewolf, sometimes known as Moony, one of the four creators of the Marauder's Map. I am married to Nymphadora, usually known as Tonks, and I taught you how to produce a Patronus, Harry, that takes the form of a stag."

"Oh, all right." Harry lowered his wand. "But I had to be sure, didn't I?"

Remus appeared to relax.

"What the hell?" Sirius asked, continuing to hold his wand up, daring his friend to make a move. "What about *my* security measures, Moony?"

"Really?" Remus scowled at him. "Fine, during my sixteenth birthday party, you, Sirius Black, during a game of Veritaserum or Dare, publicly admitted to kissing—"

"Fine! Fine!" Sirius shouted, holding his wand up in surrender. "Fucker," he growled as Remus, looking triumphant, stepped into the room and embraced his friend.

Moving to Harry's side, he clapped the boy on the shoulder. "Speaking as your former Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, I quite agree that you had to check, Harry. Ron, Hermione, you shouldn't be so quick to lower your defences."

"What about me?" Sirius wondered.

"You gave in under the pressure of public humiliation." Remus shook his head. "Frankly, I'm embarrassed for you, Pads, and I hope you never end up being questioned under torture. The mere mention of your teen years will have you pouring out Order secrets to anyone who asks." He chuckled, and Sirius rolled his eyes, leading them into the house. "No sign of Snape, then?"

"No," Harry said. "What's going on? Is everyone all right?"

"Yes," Remus replied, "but we're all being watched. Let's go downstairs. There's loads to tell you, and I want to know what happened after you lot left the Burrow."

They descended to the large dining room where Hermione pointed her wand at the grate in the corner. A fire sprang up instantly, giving the illusion of cosiness to the stark walls; light from the flames reflected off the long wooden table.

Remus pulled a few bottles of butterbeer from beneath his travelling cloak, and they sat down.

Sirius looked at him expectantly.

"Butterbeer or nothing."

Sirius took the small bottle but grumbled about it.

"I'd have been here sooner, but I needed to shake off the Death Eater tailing me," Remus said. "So, you came straight here after the wedding?"

"Yes," Hermione confirmed. "Since all four of us couldn't Side-Along together without serious risks of splinching, this was the only semi-safe place we could think of on such short notice."

"Tell us what happened after we left; we haven't heard a thing since Ron's dad told us the family was safe," Harry begged.

"Well, Kingsley saved us," Remus said. "Thanks to his warning, most of the wedding guests were able to Disapparate before Death Eaters arrived."

"Were they actual Death Eaters or Ministry people?" Hermione interjected.

"A mixture, but for all intents and purposes, they're the same thing now," Remus answered. "There were about a dozen of them, but they didn't know you were there, Harry. Arthur heard a rumour that they tried to torture your whereabouts out of Scrimgeour before they killed him. If it's true, he didn't give you away."

"That's surprising," Harry admitted.

"The Death Eaters searched the Burrow from top to bottom," Remus went on, "and then they interrogated those of us who remained for hours. They were trying to get information on you, Harry. Of course, no one apart from the Order knew that you had been there. When that didn't work, they began asking about Sirius. Though no one outside the Order has seen you since you've returned, at least not until the wedding, rumours had reached their ears."

"What did they ask about me?" Sirius inquired, sipping his butterbeer.

"Mostly if any of us knew if you were really back, and if so, how it was possible." Remus sighed and looked to Hermione. "They were just trying to rile me up, I could tell. Didn't work, though," he said with a smile.

"Course not." Sirius grinned. "Takes more than an interrogation to break you, Moony."

"Others . . ." Remus's smile faded. "They burnt down Dedalus Diggle's house, and they used the Cruciatus Curse on Tonks's parents."

"What?!" Sirius jumped up and kicked his chair over, sending it skidding across the room, where it splintered against the wall. "They hurt 'Dromeda?!"

"She's fine," Remus assured him. "Shaken, but otherwise okay. I promise. They're my family now, too." Remus stood and grounded Sirius by placing a hand on his shoulder. "Tonks is home now, taking care of them both."

"How could they do that?" Hermione gasped. "It's illegal!"

"What you've got to realise, Hermione, is that the Death Eaters have the full support of the Ministry on their side now," Remus said. "They've got the power to perform brutal spells without fear of identification or arrest. They managed to penetrate every defensive spell we'd cast against them, and once inside, they were completely open about why they'd come. They've made Harry a fugitive, wanted for questioning over Dumbledore's death. And Hermione . . . they've begun a Muggle-born Registration Department. All Muggle-borns have to register. It's a cover for bringing them in and accusing them of stealing magic."

"That's ridiculous! You can't steal magic!" Hermione objected.

Ron began pacing, nervously chewing on the inside of his cheek. "People won't let this happen."

"It *is* happening, Ron," Remus said, his attention on the younger three, pointedly ignoring Sirius. "Muggle-borns are being rounded up as we speak. It doesn't matter. You all are on a mission, and I imagine what you need to do involves keeping under the radar regardless."

As he continued to speak, Sirius turned his attention to his friend. Something was off. He sniffed the air once and narrowed his eyes at Remus. Standing up, Sirius kicked the leg of Remus's chair lightly. "Come have a chat with me, Moony."

"I'm fine here, Padfoot."

"Now, Remus!"

After hesitating just a moment, Remus stood and made his way through the door. Sirius slammed it shut behind them. He could hear it when Ron asked, "What the bloody hell was that about?"

"What's going on?" Sirius demanded of Remus point-blank.

"I don't know what you mean," Remus denied quickly but firmly.

"Don't fuck around, Remus!" Sirius shouted, lifting his wand threateningly. "Why do you smell like . . . fear and shame? What've you done? I know you didn't tell the Ministry anything about me or Harry, so what is it?"

"I . . . I . . . I want to come with you," Remus pleaded. "I want to help."

Sirius eyed him. "That shouldn't make you shameful. What does my cousin think about you joining this little band of misfits?"

"She's with her parents."

"That's not what I asked," Sirius growled. "What are you hiding?"

His shoulders sagged, and he looked down as he whispered, "She's pregnant."

"She's . . ." Sirius lowered his wand at the unexpected announcement.

He remembered the moment that Lily had told them that she was expecting. It had been one of the happiest moments of all of their lives, an announcement that helped push them past a great deal of grief and sorrow.

Yet this moment was tense, and Remus looked so . . . guilty.

Sirius wanted to celebrate with his friend, congratulate him, but he promptly figured out why the werewolf was in no celebratory mood. Eyes wide, he slapped Remus hard over the head. "You dickhead!"

"Ow! What the hell?"

"You're leaving her? You stupid fuck!" Sirius shot red sparks out of his wand at the floor, nearly setting Remus's cloak on fire.

"She'll be safer without me!" Remus yelled back. "I can do better being with you, helping Harry! It's what James would've wanted—"

Suddenly, Sirius's wand shot back up as his blood boiled beneath his skin. The look on Remus's face said that he knew exactly how poorly his words had been chosen.

"You want to tell me again what you think James would've wanted? You are not Harry's godfather. I am. I am here to protect him, not you. I don't have a family. You do. Now get your arse out of this house and go home to them. *That's* what James would have wanted!"

"Don't you see what I've done?!" Remus's normally pale face briefly reddened in anger. "I've made her an outcast! Bellatrix tried killing her because of me! And now she's . . . And now my child . . . What if it's . . . What've I done?!"

"You still think that you're going to pass it onto your kid?" Sirius asked him incredulously, desperately wanting to hit him again. "How thick are you? You've been told for years that can't happen!"

Remus shook his head. "You don't know that."

"It's in the saliva, stupid! Mia told you that every year. And even then it's only in a bite when you're fully turned!" Sirius lowered his wand and ran frustrated fingers through his hair. "Merlin, you *know* all of this, Remus!"

"There's no conclusive evidence," Remus muttered quietly.

"No conclusive . . ." Sirius snarled, threw his wand down, and launched himself forward, sinking a balled fist into the side of Remus's jaw.

Remus stumbled backward and turned, hitting Sirius hard on the side of the head. Just as his fist connected, Sirius shifted into Padfoot and latched his jaws onto Remus's forearm tightly, growling loudly as Remus continued to shout and growl back.

"What in Merlin's name?!" Hermione screamed as she burst through the door, Harry and Ron right behind her. "*Immobulus!*"

Both instantly froze.

"Are you both mad?!" she snapped and retrieved their wands—Remus's from his hand, and Sirius's from the floor.

With a flick of her wand, Padfoot fell to the ground, growling. He quickly shifted back into human form and moved to the other side of the kitchen as Hermione unfroze Remus.

"Now, one of you tell me what happened!"

"Tonks is pregnant," Sirius said hastily.

"That's wonderful!" Hermione brightened, and she moved to hug Remus, but he shrugged her away, guilt plastered on his face. "What's wrong? Is Tonks okay?"

"No, she most certainly is not okay," Remus barked.

"Watch your tone with her, mate," Sirius growled ominously enough that both Harry and Ron stepped away from him, looks of genuine fear in their eyes as they kept drawn wands moving between the two wizards.

"What's wrong with Tonks?" Harry finally blurted out.

"The baby could be a werewolf," Remus said out loud for the first time

Sirius rolled his eyes. "He's an idiot!"

"Oh, Remus." Hermione approached him carefully, placing a gentle hand on his unwounded arm. "Come sit down, and let me fix that." She gestured to the large bite wound on his other arm where Sirius had latched on.

Remus quietly obeyed, tugging on the leg of a chair with his foot, and pulling it out far enough to drop into it. Hermione smiled at his acquiescence and then turned to Ron. "Would you go and get my bag? There's a small bottle of dittany in it; please bring it here."

"You sure?" Ron asked cautiously, his gaze wavering between Remus and Sirius as though he was preparing for them to start fighting again.

"Everything will be fine, please go," Hermione said. She returned her attention to Remus, bringing a hand to his face and tilting his chin to force him to look at her. He did but immediately looked away again, blinking aside tears. "Remus, you're going to be a wonderful father. And your child will not have lycanthropy. It's only transmittable through a bite on the full moon."

"That's what we've been telling him since Hogwarts," Sirius grumbled irritably.

Remus shook his head. "There's no proof."

Completely fed up with his friend, Sirius scoffed loudly. "You want proof? Moony, if saliva, semen, or blood transferred your furry little problem to others without a full moon, then I'd have a furry little problem of my own!"

Instantly, Harry and Hermione gaped at Sirius; Remus turned his head and looked quizzically at him. Sirius blinked a few times, trying to understand their expressions before explaining.

"Oh, uh . . . *blood*," he clarified, subconsciously scratching at his left shoulder where a scar rested beneath a pattern of tattoos. "Fifth year we did a whole . . . And then after Hogwarts, it was . . ." He groaned attempting to describe it, his gaze narrowing at Remus in the process for not helping. He gave an emphatic shake of his head, and Harry swallowed a laugh. "It was like a blood brothers thing. Like Muggles do. Not with semen. You know . . . nothing with that."

"See?" Hermione smiled, stifling her own burst of laughter as she turned back to Remus, and thanking Ron as he re-entered the kitchen with the small bottle of healing extract.

"You are going to go home to your wife," she instructed clearly as she placed drops of dittany on the bite wound. "And you are going to rub her feet and buy her ice cream and do anything she wants. And you are going to do it with a smile on your face."

"And get over yourself in the process," Sirius added.

"Well, that's not how I'd put it." Hermione frowned at Sirius. "But yes. Get over yourself. You're a good man, a good friend, a good husband, and you'll be a good father."

"I agree with Hermione," Harry said, and when Sirius cleared his throat, he added, "and Sirius."

Sirius watched as Remus said nothing, taking Hermione's hand within his own. His eyes drifted to her shoulder, left partially bare by the dark blue vest she was wearing. The corners of Remus's mouth turned up slightly in a sad little smile at the sight of her blemish-free skin. For several minutes, the room was silent while he worked through his conflict internally with nothing but Hermione's hands and the presence of friends for support. Eventually, he stood up, turned to face Sirius, and muttered, "Sorry."

"Do me a favour, Moony?" Sirius requested as he approached, placing a hand on the man's shoulder. "Stay with Tonks. Hide. Don't fight. I don't care what happens. I don't care if it comes down to the end; you stay with your family. You need to survive this." He glanced briefly at Hermione before returning his attention to his friend, whispering, "I need you to survive."

"I need to survive this," Remus repeated.

"You have a job to do," Sirius reminded him. "So you stay with your wife and child. Make yourself the bloody Secret-Keeper, and stay in the fucking house. No repeating history."

Remus nodded firmly, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. "No repeating history."

## Chapter Seven

### *Terrible Watchdog*

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*Cause without you I can't breathe  
I'm not gonna ever, ever let you leave  
You're all I've got, you're all I want  
(I Will Be - Leona Lewis)*

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**September 4th, 1997**

Harry, Ron, and Hermione successfully broke into the Ministry after Mundungus arrived at Grimmauld Place, dragged there against his will by a vengeful house-elf under direct orders from Hermione. Dung told them all about how he had lost the locket, and then pointed out the picture of its new owner in the Daily Prophet: Dolores Umbridge.

Sirius overheard Hermione and Ron talking about the scars on Harry's hand, and it took him very little effort to figure out that Umbridge had harmed his godson permanently. Coupled with the fact that she had been behind a number of terrible things at Hogwarts, the stupid anti-werewolf legislation, and now the ridiculous Muggle-born Registration Act, Sirius wanted to go after her himself. It took both Harry and Hermione pleading with him—in addition to threats of petrifying him and leaving him alone with only Kreacher as company—for him to back down.

Completely contrary to their plan, Sirius followed the trio to the Ministry of Magic. He lingered across the street in his Animagus form while they infiltrated the institution under the influence of Polyjuice Potion.

It took him less than an hour to arrive outside the entrance: a large bathroom where men and women lined up outside the stalls. Padfoot paraded around as a lost dog as he waited impatiently for the trio to return. Every once in a while, someone stopped and patted him on the head, something that made him roll his eyes. He wanted to growl and bite but knew it would cause more attention than being docile. So he held back and gritted his teeth as old ladies ran their sweaty hands over the top of his head while calling him a "good little doggy." At one point, someone glanced at him and screamed, "Grim!" before running the other way, giving Sirius a good chuckle in the process.

After what felt like an eternity, Ron, Harry, and Hermione finally exited the Ministry in a great haste. Sirius immediately caught sight of the Death Eaters on their tail; he shifted to his human form and grasped Harry's hand as Harry took hold of Hermione, who gripped tightly to Ron. It was dangerous and stupid, but they had little choice in the matter as Yaxley reached for Hermione. Mid-Disapparition, Hermione managed to shake off the Death Eater, but only after he had seen the entrance to Grimmauld Place.

Side-Along Apparition with another person was risky. Taking two people was ill-advised. Three was suicidal.

Hermione landed them in the forest where the Quidditch World Cup had been held—as Ron hastily explained to Sirius—and the men all fell to the ground, wincing as air pushed its way back into their lungs.

Harry and Ron were on their knees, bleary-eyed and dizzy. Sirius, too, had a hard time regaining his senses, but the first that came back was his sense of smell. He breathed in a faint coppery odour and knew immediately that someone had been splinched.

His head swivelled as he followed the scent, only to discover it was Hermione that was gravely injured. Sirius cradled her blood-covered form to him in order to retrieve her small beaded bag, and then he began rummaging through it. He threw the contents of the bag across the ground until he found the bottle of dittany she had used a month earlier on Remus in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place.

Sirius heard Harry gasp, watching as he pieced Hermione's back and shoulder together. A long cut slashed along her right arm, wound across the back of her shoulder blade and down beneath her blouse. He tore the garment away, revealing nothing but severed skin. He applied the dittany carefully, using his wand to close the wounds as quickly as possible.

"There's a tent; get it up," he ordered brusquely with a cold tone that told both Harry and Ron he wasn't going to stand for any hesitation.

While the tent was being pitched, Sirius moved around the boys, constantly attending to Hermione's small unconscious form, never looking either of them in the eye. The boys, in turn, did the same.

Sirius was angry; somewhere along the line they had gone and buggered it all up, and now Hermione was suffering. Each wizard took his fair share of the blame silently, though Ron and Harry were more comfortable talking with one another about it.

Once Hermione was safely inside the tent on a bed that Sirius enlarged, he pulled open a small black mediwitch kit and began pouring Pain Relief Potion and Blood Replenishing Potion down her throat.

By the time Harry and Ron dared to enter the tent, Sirius was already in his Animagus form at the foot of Hermione's bed, standing guard over her sleeping form.

And there he remained.

Quietly, the two boys discussed the Horcrux while they waited for Hermione to wake or for Sirius to change back. When it became obvious that they should each take a turn wearing the locket, Sirius stepped off the bed and inclined his head toward Harry, silently requesting the locket be placed on him.

And so the days went on.

Sirius kept vigil over Hermione's recovery, shifting into human form only when changing her bandages, feeding her potions, or waking her enough to give her the opportunity to eat—though they had little food available. On those occasions, he said as little as possible, refusing to meet her eyes though she pleaded with him to look at her. Unable to let her see him break, Sirius retreated into his Animagus form knowing that it was near impossible for her to read the expression on his face that way.

The locket, unfortunately, made everything worse.

Sirius wore it at night and would dream of Azkaban and dementors. He saw visions of James and Lily dying, of Peter's ugly, twisted sneer, and of a girl he loved vanishing into nothingness, leaving him alone in the world. He was grateful to be rid of the bloody thing each morning, but he observed with frustrated intensity as the Horcrux infected the other two wizards.

Harry withdrew into himself, and Sirius kept a watchful eye, often removing the locket early if he noticed Harry being weighed down by it too quickly. Ron complained constantly, though a warning growl from Padfoot shut him up instantly.

Despite her attempts, Sirius insisted that the piece of Voldemort's soul not touch any part of Hermione at any time.

**September 7th, 1997**

"We need to leave soon, Harry."

"I know. You think she's well enough to Apparate, though?"

Sirius could hear the boys whispering outside of the tent where they were supposed to be standing guard. Only one needed to keep watch at a time, but it was obvious to everyone that Ron wanted away from the tension inside.

"How the bloody hell should I know? Can't get anywhere near enough to see. Not when he's wearing that thing."

The tent door flapped in the breeze, and Sirius caught a glimpse of the boys standing there, huddled together as though perfectly unaware that he could hear every word.

"You go in and see if you can figure it out," Ron suggested. "Get some sleep after."

Harry must have agreed because he was inside a moment later. Sirius watched as he flicked his wand, igniting a few lamps in the corner of the room to light up the dark space.

Attention turned to a large bed in one of the corners, Harry slowly approached, hands up to show that he was not a threat. Padfoot eyed him balefully as he stepped closer, watching as Harry's eyes darted to the locket hanging around his furry neck.

"Sirius?" Harry asked quietly. "It'd be really nice if I could talk to you. I need to know how Hermione is." He gestured to the body of the girl sleeping behind him.

Her small frame was tucked carefully beneath the blankets, but the bandage over her back was still visible when Padfoot craned his neck to glance at her. Sirius knew that Harry blamed himself, of course, though each of the wizards took their turn carrying the weight of the guilt.

Padfoot lowered his head, allowing Harry to remove the Horcrux. The moment it was gone, he let out a quick breath and shifted back into human form, rubbing the sore muscle in his neck. "Is it me, or is that thing getting heavier?"

"You all right?" Harry quietly asked.

Sirius glanced at Hermione's sleeping form and sighed. "Better today."

"You going to tell me what's going on yet?"

Sirius shook his head, knowing exactly what Harry was referring to. After such an incident, it was more likely for Sirius to have been worried about his godson, even if

Hermione had been hurt. But it was obvious in the way that Sirius refused to leave her side that he was keeping secrets.

"Not my place. Just . . . She saved me. And I almost let her—"

"*We*," Harry corrected. "This is on all of us, not just you."

"It's my job to take care of you lot," Sirius tried to explain.

"It's my job to save the world." Harry shrugged his shoulders. "She's in the world, therefore it's my job. You can't take my job, Sirius. You're not the Chosen One, I am."

Sirius rolled his eyes and huffed out a weak chuckle. "Oh, stop with the bloody Chosen One nonsense."

"Can she travel?" Harry asked, ignoring him. "You know we can't stay in one place for very long. We've already been here for days."

"You still having visions?" Sirius inquired, noticing the exhausted look in Harry's eyes.

Harry shifted his gaze away as he sighed, nodding. "I want to stop, but none of us is in any shape to practise Occlumency right now. It would only make us weaker," he admitted sadly. "He's searching for a wand, and he's kidnapped Ollivander and killed Gregorovitch."

"Might be the Death Stick," Sirius suggested.

"What's that?"

From behind them, Hermione mumbled, "It's just a myth."

"Go back to sleep, love," Sirius instructed.

She ignored him, rolling up to face Harry. "It's a myth about an unbeatable wand. There's a story about it in the book Dumbledore gave me."

"That thing's all in runes. When did you have the chance to translate it?" Sirius asked her with a raised brow.

"I've been sitting here doing nothing for days," Hermione shrugged, wincing in pain as her shoulder protested the movement.

Sirius cocked an eyebrow at her. "You're supposed to be resting."

"And you're a terrible watchdog; you constantly fall asleep. When you do that, I read." Reaching for the book that she kept beneath her pillow, Hermione brushed off Sirius's hands when he tried to help her get comfortable.

"In the story, it talks about three brothers who are able to evade Death, as though Death were a real person. Death offers them each a gift. One brother asks for a wand powerful enough to defeat any wizard. I assume that this is the same fairy tale wand that's known as the Death Stick or the Wand of Destiny. Professor Binns mentioned it a few times in History of Magic," she said, frowning down at the book in her hands.

"So do you think it's real?" Harry asked.

Sirius shrugged. "Maybe."

"Of course not," Hermione said at the same time. "Sirius, it's ridiculous to even think that something like that could exist."

"Oh yeah? Tell Harry what the other two brothers asked for in the story." He gestured as if allowing her to take the stage.

Hermione glared at him. "Fine. The second brother received a stone that could bring back the dead. The third brother asked for a Cloak of Invisibility."

"So a Cloak of Invisibility . . . But not just *any* cloak, a cloak that never loses its charm, never breaks or tears, and is impervious to jinxes and hexes." Sirius grinned smugly as though he had already won the argument. He tapped his index finger against his bottom lip, ignoring the dark look that Hermione was directing at him. "I wonder where we could find such an object."

"Even if the cloak exists, the other two are preposterous," she protested.

"Yes, it's preposterous to think that people could come back from the dead," Harry said sarcastically and turned to Sirius for backup. Sirius dipped his head solemnly; he figured that his expression would have appeared almost genuine if not for the glint of mischief he knew was in his eye.

"Harry, Horcruxes," Hermione admonished when he chuckled in amusement. "What we need to be concerned with is how to find a way to destroy the locket and then find the others." She reached for her bag. "Now, I've been researching—"

Sirius growled. "When the hell have you been resting?"

"When Ron's in here," she answered as she eyed Sirius and Harry. "*You two* won't leave me alone. Now, there're only two known ways to destroy a Horcrux: basilisk venom and Fiendfyre."

"Do you know how to cast Fiendfyre, Sirius?" Harry asked.

"Cast? Yes," Sirius confirmed. "*Control* it? Well, it's complicated. It's a last resort kind of option. If it needs to happen, I can do it. But we're talking about Apparating to a deserted island, placing the Horcruxes on that island, casting the fire, and then getting the hell out before it consumes us with it. Might even want to learn a spell that can sink an island."

"Last resort, got it. I'm going to go and tell Ron that we'll be able to move today." Harry smiled at Hermione. "It's good to see you looking yourself again."

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### October 17th, 1997

"I thought you knew what you were doing!" Ron shouted at Harry as Sirius entered the tent. "I thought Dumbledore had told you what to do. I thought you had a *real* plan!"

Sirius turned a dour gaze on the teen for daring to raise his voice to his godson, but he was not one—these days—to jump into a fight without proper provocation. He looked to Harry and Hermione for an explanation. "Did I miss something important?"

"We think we found a way to destroy the Horcruxes," Hermione enthused. "Harry used the Sword of Gryffindor to kill the basilisk our second year, and the sword is goblin-made and therefore—"

"Only takes in that which strengthens it," Sirius finished her sentence. "Bloody hell, that's . . . *inspired*." He laughed and scratched his chin in thought. "So what now?"

"Nothing now." Ron glared daggers at the rest of them. "Because the bloody thing's been stolen from Hogwarts, so even if we *were* able to sneak back into the castle—which we can't because it's being run by bloody Death Eaters—it's not even there for us to take!"

Sirius growled at him, not liking his attitude one bit, nor the way he was staring at Harry and Hermione. "Watch the tone there, boy."

"It's because of the locket," Hermione said, frowning. "Ron, take it off. You wouldn't be talking like this if you hadn't been wearing it all day."

Harry glowered at Ron. "Yeah, he would. He's been doing nothing but complaining this whole time! He's *starving*. As if the rest of us aren't. You complain more than any of us, and Hermione got splinched and almost died!"

Ron narrowed his eyes. "Piss off, Potter!"

"Why are you even still here?" Harry asked Ron.

The redhead threw his hands up. "Search me."

"Go home then!" Harry snapped.

"Yeah, maybe I will!" Ron shouted and took several steps toward Harry, who did not back away.

"Ron, take off the locket!" Hermione begged.

Sirius's fingers twitched around his wand, watching and listening, desperate to put an end to the boy's childish outburst—even if he only used a Silencing Charm. However, Hermione and Harry stood between him and Ron, and the boy's temper was unpredictable, especially with the Horcrux hanging around his neck. Sirius felt that Hermione was right, but that did nothing to mollify the nervous anger he felt when the redhead glared at both of his friends with such malice.

Harry stared icily at Ron, both boys ignoring Hermione's pleas for peace. "Just go home to your family, and let your mum make you a big dinner and wipe your face for you. That's what you want anyway."

Ron bellowed back at Harry, "What I want is to make sure my family is alive! It's all right for you, isn't it? With your parents safely out of the way—"

"Uh-oh," Hermione groaned. Before she could act, Sirius grasped Ron's collar and lifted him high into the air.

Sirius felt his countenance turn dark, reminiscent of his first meeting with the redhead in the Shrieking Shack as he stared grimly at Ron. "Too far," he said with a frightening amount of control in his voice.

"Sirius," Hermione pleaded, "put him down."

Harry glared at Ron. "Yeah, put him down so he can leave."

"Fine." Sirius slowly lowered Ron's shaking form back to solid ground, holding his stare the entire time. Not letting go of the boy's collar, he used his other hand to tear the locket from Ron's neck and then released him with a shove for good measure. "You *ever* speak to either of them like that again, boy, I'll transfigure what's left of you so no one will even know where to look," he threatened, his tone low and menacing.

Ron, impulsive as usual, responded by drawing his wand.

Sirius was much faster, of course, but before either could get a spell off their lips, a shield erupted between them. It expanded across the tent, separating Ron from the other three, visibly showing how the ties of friendship had been severed.

Glancing to the side, Sirius saw Hermione concentrating on the shield with her wand drawn.

"You're *really* staying here, Hermione?" Ron asked and then cast his eyes balefully at Sirius. "Who am I kidding? *Of course* you're staying here."

"We promised Harry!" Hermione cried, her wand still up—holding the weight of the shield.

"Bullshit, Hermione." Ron scowled at her. "You're not here for Harry. You're here for *him*," he said, pointing his wand at Sirius, who only growled in response. "Whatever you did to bring him back changed you. He should have stayed dead."

Just as when Ron had brought up Harry's parents, causing Sirius to snap, Hermione, apparently, had her own line to never cross. Sirius was not remotely surprised when she yelled, "Get out!" and pushed her shield toward Ron, forcing him magically toward the tent flap. "You don't belong here! Go away, grow up, and when this war is over and you've finally matured a bit, come and apologise to us. But we are done here!"

"Damn right I am." Ron glared at her and then left.

Silence filled the tent as though Ron had taken all the noise with him. Hermione looked up when Harry sniffed and wiped the sleeve of his shirt across his face. Sirius clenched and unclenched his fists as he slowly calmed down.

Harry eventually took a breath, running a hand through his messy black hair in frustration. He reached for the Horcrux. "I'll take first watch."

Sirius placed a hand on his godson's shoulder. "You sure?"

"Yeah, I need time to think, anyway. You two get some rest." Harry gave Hermione a small smile, and she returned it briefly as he left the tent. When her gaze connected with Sirius's, Hermione broke away immediately.

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An hour later, when she could not stop thinking long enough to rest, Hermione sat up and sighed. She looked at Sirius and frowned when she caught him staring at her,

bringing an uncomfortable warmth to her face. She felt like she had been caught doing something wrong. Walking to the tent door, she peered outside to find Harry leaning up against the trunk of a tree, staring intently down at his wand as though it would tell him what they should do next.

"You ever think maybe he's right?" Sirius asked.

"Don't."

Hermione shook her head as she made her way back toward the bed. The same bed that she had been unthinkingly sharing with Sirius since she had been splinched, though never in his human form. Somehow, she had overlooked the fact that the dog was still, in fact, a fully-grown wizard. She would snuggle beneath the covers, and he would crawl beside her, turning once in a circle before tucking his snout against his front paws. Absent-mindedly, Hermione would reach over and stroke his fur as though he were some old, beloved family pet and not Harry's godfather—a man who she had used Blood Magic to bring back to life, thus tying herself to him forever through ancient magic. But here, now— with him standing in front of her, his grey eyes trained on her face—Hermione shivered under the intensity of his gaze.

"Maybe I should have stayed—"

"Don't!" Hermione snapped at him. "The *locket* made him say those things. If you weren't here, he'd have found something else to yell about. Don't you *dare* say that you should have stayed dead."

"He's not entirely wrong," Sirius reasoned calmly as he approached her. "You're *not* just here for Harry." He closed the distance between them until he was inches away from her, the heat from their bodies colliding. "Neither am I," he admitted, his voice husky as he spoke.

That voice did things to her that she was not ready to acknowledge, at least not aloud.

"Don't do this, Sirius," she pleaded, glancing up at him and then instantly back down, unable to hold her own against his stare. Sirius, however, forced the issue by placing a finger beneath her chin and lifted her face to meet his. Hermione closed her eyes to avoid looking up at him, tears trickling out of the corners.

"Can't avoid it forever, kitten. The boy was right about another thing. Whatever you did to bring me back changed something," he said softly, running the pad of his thumb against the line of her jaw. "You're not the only one who's good at magic, Hermione."

He leant in close, pressing his stubble-covered cheek against her smooth one, brushing his lips against her ear.

Hermione's breath hitched in her throat at the contact.

"I know the life debt ritual," he whispered before pulling away.

Her eyes shot open wide. "You . . . You know? You knew? This whole time?"

"About the bond?" Sirius inclined his head in affirmation. "It's not Dark Magic, but what you did *was* Blood Magic which, in some families, means the same thing. The House of Black is no exception." He sat down in the large armchair facing her bed, kicking his foot up to rest on the opposite knee. "We eventually have to talk about it."

Hermione looked away from him. "I don't even know what *it* means."

"By the end of this war, we'll have a lot of talking to do. Let's make a date of it, shall we?" Sirius grinned at her, and she turned her attention back to him with narrowed eyes. "Your birthday," he suggested easily as if the weight of the world no longer rested on their shoulders.

"My birthday? Why my birthday?"

"Fine, the day after your birthday," he said with a smirk. "Gives us almost a year to finish this war, and if we're lucky, a little recovery time after what might go down in Wizarding history as the night everyone was smashed."

Hermione frowned. "Or mourn."

"No." Sirius shook his head. "I'm done mourning. Had too much grief in my life, and I'll spend the rest of this war making sure I never have to mourn again," he vowed, his tone once again firm and fierce. The sound of it made Hermione shiver and blush. Sirius took immediate notice and chuckled, causing Hermione to avert her gaze once more.

He stood up and reached for his jacket. "One day you won't do that anymore."

"Do what?" Hermione asked quietly as he made his way to the tent door.

"Be embarrassed about how I make you feel," he clarified, fixing a serious gaze upon her. Hermione let out a shaky breath as he broke their stare and ducked out of the tent, jacket and pack of cigarettes in hand.

---

"Do I want to know?" Harry asked as Sirius approached him from behind.

A lit cigarette hung from Sirius's lips as he slipped his leather jacket on. He took the stick in hand and exhaled, letting the smoke drift off with the wind. "Nice charm," he commented, noticing how the rain poured around them, never touching the dry circle Harry had created. Sirius smiled in reminiscence. "Your mum was always good at charms like this."

"Avoiding the question, Padfoot," Harry countered, using Sirius's Marauder name in a tone of voice that made him sound exactly like James.

Sirius laughed softly at the game, taking another drag from his cigarette. "I know what you're doing, you know. You figured me and Remus out easy. You've figured out that when you want information, calling us Moony and Padfoot in that voice makes us think of your dad, which it does," he affirmed, "and when you want to impose your opinion, you make eye contact to remind us of Lily."

Harry cocked his head to the side and folded his arms across his chest, an amused grin on his jaw. "I guess Mum had a way of being convincing?"

"Your grandmother Dorea would have *loved* you." Sirius let out a quiet laugh. "She and Charlus—your grandfather—almost made a game of hiding information when they wanted to. She'd always win. Drove your dad and me mental."

Harry grew quiet for a moment, his focus far away until he brought his attention back to Sirius. The amused boy was gone once again, replaced by the burdened soldier of war. "I think I want to go to Godric's Hollow."

There was a beat of silence as Sirius thought about it for a moment, knowing that Harry was likely to go on his own regardless of what anyone else said about the matter. Eventually, he sighed in resignation. "Consider it done."

## Chapter Eight

### *Ain't a Real Dog*

---

*I'm all out of faith  
This is how I feel  
I'm cold and I'm ashamed  
Bound and broken on the floor  
You're a little late, I'm already torn  
(Torn - Natalie Imbruglia)*

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**December 26th, 1997**

"Happy Christmas, Sirius." With a sad smile, Hermione entered the room from the tent's kitchen. The wizard was currently resting on the large bed with a bandage wrapped around his arm.

Sirius scowled at her. "Christmas was yesterday."

"Yes, but you were *unconscious* yesterday," Hermione explained, holding a small cup out to him. "And I brought you tea. Consider it my gift." She smiled as he took it, bringing the liquid to his lips, pausing only briefly to look up at her. She rolled her eyes, trying to look offended. "It's not laced with anything."

He narrowed his. "Can you understand my hesitance?"

"I maintain that I was doing the right thing slipping that Sleeping Draught in your tea." Hermione crossed her arms firmly against her chest. "You were exhausted and refusing to take care of yourself."

Sirius winked at her. "And it's your job to take care of me?"

"Stop that. Drink your bloody tea."

"She swears now," he said with a grin. "I'm starting to think I'm a bad influence on you."

"Drink the bloody tea, Sirius." Hermione scowled but dropped her anger a notch when she saw him obey.

Sirius held the now-empty cup out to her, going so far as to open his mouth like a child to prove that he had swallowed every drop.

"Feel better?"

He stared up at her with a knowing look and smirked. "Yes, but you could have just asked me to take a Pain Relief Potion. You're a shit liar, love."

Hermione flushed at the implied accusation. "Well, I never know when you're going to fight with me over something." She fell into the armchair, perturbed. "You always want to argue with me."

"That's because riling you up is fun."

She frowned. "I don't like fighting with you."

"You will." He smiled and caught her look of annoyance. Before she could counter, he cut her off. "Harry doing all right?"

"Yes. He's got my wand," she said. "He's been out there for a few hours."

"Still can't believe we lost two wands in that fight. One bloody snake."

The trip to Godric's Hollow had been less than successful. A trap. They had figured there would be a trap, but a snake hidden inside an old woman? That they had not seen coming.

*Sirius, of course, knew right away that something was off and pleaded with Harry and Hermione to leave. When they both refused, he insisted, taking hold of each of them and threatening to Disapparate out. After visiting the cemetery, and it was clear that Sirius was serious about his threats, Harry and Hermione agreed, and only then did the snake attack, right there in the middle of the street.*

*Death Eaters Apparated in, and a duel broke out: Sirius squaring off against Dolohov and Rowle while Hermione faced Macnair. Harry, by himself, was left with the snake. It slithered around the street, striking at him nimbly and repeatedly.*

*Hermione easily bested Macnair, stunning him to the ground. She rushed to help Sirius, who looked like he was taking particular pleasure in landing curses on Dolohov. As she did so, Rowle stepped into her path.*

*The Death Eaters attacked the two fiercely, and when they were both distracted by a shout from Harry, Dolohov aimed his wand at Hermione. That was apparently enough to snap what little restraint Sirius had left, and a bright green light burst from the end of his wand, hitting Dolohov in the chest and dropping him to the ground, still and silent forever. Despite the horror of the scene, Hermione could not help but feel that justice had been served. After all, this was the Death Eater responsible for almost killing her in the Department of Mysteries.*

*"He's coming!" Harry screamed, and Sirius and Hermione rushed to him.*

*Sirius took hold of Harry's arm and pulled him quickly to his feet, throwing curse after curse at the snake. Nagini, however, dodged and deflected every spell with precision and speed that none of them were prepared for.*

*"More are coming!" Hermione shrieked as Death Eaters began Apparating around them.*

*Harry let out a loud yell, grasping at the scar on his forehead. A newly arrived Death Eater used the diversion to disarm Sirius.*

*"Shit!" he yelled at the same time that Harry let out a loud yelp of pain, his body falling rigid into Sirius's arms. "Hermione! We have to get out of here!"*

*"Hold on!" she shouted, grabbing them both, and Disapparated away just in time. Unfortunately, the landing was less than graceful, and Harry pitched forward, snapping his wand into pieces, thus leaving one working wand between the three of them.*

"At least *you* can do wandless magic." Hermione sighed as she looked over at Sirius sitting on the bed, still recovering from the splinching that had marred him during their last escape.

She had felt terrible, of course; thankfully, it was not as bad as her splinching had been. She and Sirius argued passionately over whether or not he should be treating the wound himself, but in the end, he gave up, though only *after* Hermione threatened to stun him into submission.

"It's not that hard when you have the right focus," Sirius insisted.

"How'd you get so good at it? It's not something they teach much at Hogwarts." She pulled her knees to her chest and cuddled back into the chair, pulling a blanket over herself, wishing that she had her wand to cast a Warming Charm on the tent.

"I had a friend at school who taught me." Sirius smiled. "Very powerful witch."

Hermione chuckled. "Why am I not surprised that it was a girl?"

"Because I'm so devastatingly handsome?" Sirius grinned.

She shook her head, not taking the bait. "I'm not stroking your ego."

"Well, if not my ego, then would you like to—?"

"Don't finish that sentence!"

Sirius let out a barking laugh. "It's so easy to get you riled up. Very endearing."

"Hermione! Sirius!" Harry called as he entered the tent, soaking wet and shivering.

Hermione stood up quickly and rushed to him. "Harry! What happened?" She reclaimed her wand from him to perform a Drying Spell before shoving him into the

nearest chair. Then she grabbed a blanket and hastily draped it over him. "Are you all right? Where have you been? You were supposed to have been keeping watch."

"It's okay; everything's fine. More than fine, I'm great. There's someone here."

"What do you mean? Who?" Hermione looked up and watched as Ron walked into the tent, standing there holding a sword and dripping onto the threadbare carpet.

"You!" she growled, throwing her wand onto a nearby chair. She fisted her hands tightly and ran at him, punching every inch of him she could reach. "You are a complete arse, Ronald Weasley!"

"I know, I know, I'm sorry!" he shouted, trying to protect himself from her punches.

"Oh, you're sorry, are you?!"

"Yes," Ron said calmly. "I . . . I was a right git. You were right; it was that bloody locket. I'm sorry for what I said." He looked up and caught sight of Sirius sitting on the edge of the large bed in the corner. "I'm sorry," he said to Sirius, who had narrowed his gaze.

After a long moment, the man nodded.

"Apology *not* accepted!" Hermione yelled and reached for her wand.

"Hermione," Harry said, drawing her attention and sighing. "He just saved my life."

"What?" Sirius stood up. "Why did he *need* to? Were the wards breached?"

"No, I . . . I saw something."

"What did you see?" Sirius inquired, stepping forward and taking possession of Hermione's wand before she ended up cursing Ron with something permanent.

"A Patronus," Harry explained. "A doe."

Sirius's face paled. "What did you say?"

"A doe," Harry repeated. "It led me to a small frozen pond. I lit Hermione's wand and looked down and saw it." Harry gestured to the sword in Ron's hand and grinned. "We've got it. We can destroy more Horcruxes now."

"More?" Hermione asked, her temper finally calming.

Ron beamed at her apparent cool-down. He held up the locket, broken and black.

She snatched it from him and turned it over for a careful examination. "And you're sure it's gone?"

"Pretty damn." Harry chuckled, nervously running his fingers through his newly dried hair. "It fought back when I opened it. Ron stabbed it with the sword."

"Good redemption," Sirius commented, glancing between Ron and Hermione carefully. "How'd it fight back?"

Ron looked down shamefully. "I'd rather not talk about it."

"Wait, how'd you get the sword? You said it was in a frozen pond?" Hermione asked. When Harry flushed and avoided her gaze, her mouth fell open. "Oh no, Harry, you didn't."

"I did. Stupid, I know. Especially since the locket was still around my neck. It tried to drown me."

Sirius rounded on Harry. "What?!"

"Ron saved me. Dove in after me, pulled me out, and went back down for the sword. So . . . can we all just move on now?" Harry asked, exhaustion dimming his eyes.

Sirius gave a curt nod, but Hermione was still eyeing Ron distrustfully.

"Please, Hermione."

"Fine," she agreed, glaring at the redhead, contemplating the exact movements of Ginny's Bat-Bogey Hex just in case he said or did something else to rile her. "But I want to know how you found us to begin with."

Ron pulled out the Deluminator. "With this."

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### **March 27th, 1998**

The group had spent months continually moving from campsite to campsite, stopping for only a day or two before moving again. Sirius helped considerably with the locations, as he had spent a year on the run with Buckbeak before Voldemort's return.

It took several weeks of constant apologising, but Ron mended his friendships with Harry and Hermione—though the latter kept him at arm's length, spending most of her time researching with Harry or training with Sirius, expanding her skill at wandless magic.

Ron had also provided them with more than just the Sword of Gryffindor. Apparently, during his escape from the campsite many months before, he had been picked up by a group of Snatchers and was able to disarm one of them, thus furnishing Harry with

a used wand. Sirius declined to take it for himself, asserting that whatever magic he needed he could do wandlessly—though it was admittedly less powerful.

It made no difference, however, when toward the end of March, one of their group accidentally set off the Taboo on Voldemort's name, and a large group of Snatchers surrounded and disarmed them.

Hermione had been smart enough to throw a Stinging Hex at Harry's face, thus obscuring his well-known scar. Sirius was too easily recognised, so he shifted into Padfoot before anyone caught sight of him. Hopes of escaping were put to rest due to the fact that he could not possibly leave any of them behind, especially Harry and Hermione, so while the Snatchers bound the two young wizards and the witch to another kid and a wounded goblin, Padfoot was tackled and tied down by Fenrir Greyback.

"Scabior! This ain't a real dog," Greyback insisted. "I can smell the magic—*familiar* magic—on him."

"Then bring it along; we'll figure it out at the manor," Scabior responded, grinning as he held up a copy of the *Daily Prophet* that showed Hermione's face. *Hermione Granger*, it read, *known to be travelling with Harry Potter*. A second look at Harry, swollen face or not, and Scabior looked like he had just struck gold.

The group Disapparated into the darkness, and when they reappeared, Sirius grimaced at the all-too-familiar sight of Malfoy Manor. The last time he had been there had been for Lucius and Narcissa's wedding, something he had not even been invited to. It had been a last-ditch effort to help save his cousin from a loveless and dangerous marriage arrangement, but Narcissa, as usual, had cowered at the thought of her husband and had Sirius thrown from the premises.

Now he was back, in the shape of a black dog, tied and thrown over the shoulder of the very same werewolf who had infected his best friend.

One of the Snatchers strode to the gates and shook them.

"How do we get in? They're locked, Greyback!"

He whipped his hands away in fright. The iron was contorting, twisting itself out of its abstract curls and coils into a frightening face that spoke in a clanging, echoing voice: "*State your purpose!*"

"We've got Potter!" Greyback roared triumphantly. "We've captured Harry Potter!"

The gates swung open.

"Come on!" Greyback ordered his men, shifting Padfoot against his shoulder and shoving the tied prisoners forward roughly.

The moment they entered the large manor, Sirius heard a familiar voice.

"Follow me," Narcissa directed, leading the way across the hall. "My son Draco is home for Easter holidays. If that boy really *is* Harry Potter, he will know."

The drawing room dazzled after the darkness outside. A crystal chandelier dangled from the ceiling, and portraits hung against the dark purple walls. Two figures rose from chairs in front of an ornate marble fireplace as the prisoners were forced into the room by the Snatchers.

"What is this?"

The dreadfully familiar, drawling voice of Lucius Malfoy fell on their ears. At the sound, Sirius let out a low and dangerous growl.

"Take that beast back outside," Lucius demanded.

"I don't think it's really a dog," Greyback explained. "I've smelled this magic before."

"An Animagus?" Lucius eyed Padfoot warily. "Take him in the other room, and force him to transform back."

Greyback begrudgingly obeyed, taking Padfoot into the next room where he threw him to the floor with a loud thud and cracked his neck eagerly, preparing to enjoy this interrogation. He leant down to grip the dog by the scruff, and Padfoot turned, viciously barking and snapping his jaws at the werewolf. Greyback responded by squeezing Sirius's throat tightly until he whimpered, gasping for breath.

"What's this noise?!"

Padfoot's eyes went wide at the voice, and he began thrashing violently against Greyback's hold. He craned his neck when Greyback adjusted his grip, and his blurry eyes caught a glimpse of Bellatrix in the doorway.

"Found this mutt with the Potter kid and his friends," Greyback responded. "Malfoy wanted me to get it to transform."

"You idiot half-breed!" Bellatrix used her wand to fling the werewolf backward into a large marble column, knocking him unconscious. "Well, well, well," Bella sneered down at him. "You're looking quite alive, *cousin*."

Though still bound, Padfoot snapped his jaws at Bellatrix who only laughed at him, swishing her wand in the air to constrict the ropes that bound his body even more tightly. He whined loudly as pain crushed in on his ribs.

"Oh, the Dark Lord will be so pleased! If the brat in the other room really is Potter, I will have such fun letting you watch him die in front of you. Or perhaps I should kill you in front of him? Again." She grinned and levitated Padfoot's body, floating him after her into the other room where Draco and Lucius were inspecting the prisoners, a look of fear on the younger wizard's face.

"Is it him, Draco?" Bellatrix demanded.

Draco flinched at the sound of her voice. "I can't be sure," he whispered.

"But surely," she inquired quietly, "this is the Mudblood girl? This is Granger?"

"Yes, yes, it's Granger!" Lucius insisted. "There beside her is Potter, we think! Potter and his friends, caught at last!"

"Of course it's them," Bellatrix said. "And I've just caught myself a wayward blood-traitor." She gestured to Padfoot, suspended in mid-air behind her. "Sirius Black, back from the dead."

Narcissa studied him with wide blue eyes. "Sirius?" she whispered, staring at him, fear and pity in her gaze.

Bellatrix dragged back her left sleeve: they all saw the Dark Mark burnt into the flesh of her arm and knew that she was about to touch it, to summon her beloved master.

"I was about to call him!" Lucius claimed, and his hand actually closed upon Bellatrix's wrist, preventing her from touching the Mark. "I shall summon him, Bella. Potter has been brought to *my* house, and it is therefore upon my authority."

"*Your* authority?!" she sneered, attempting to wrench her hand from his grasp. "You lost your authority when you lost your wand, Lucius! How dare you! Take your hands off me!" She stopped struggling when her dark eyes fixed upon something in the corner where the remaining Snatchers stood, presumably waiting for payment.

Jubilant expression on his face, Lucius threw her hand from him and ripped up his own sleeve.

"STOP!" Bellatrix shrieked "Do not touch it. We shall all perish if the Dark Lord comes now!"

Lucius froze, his index finger hovering over his own Mark.

"What is that?" Bellatrix snapped.

"Sword," a Snatcher grunted.

"Give it to me."

"It's not yours, missus; it's mine, reckon. I found it."

There was a bang and a flash of red light, and Scabior drew his wand to a roar of anger from his fellows. "What d'you think you're playing at, woman?"

"*Expelliarmus! Stupefy!*" she screamed, disarming Scabior and stunning the rest of his group. She moved in on Scabior and threw him to the floor. "Where did you find this sword? Snape sent it to my vault in Gringotts!"

"It was in their tent," Scabior rasped.

"Draco, move this scum outside," Bellatrix ordered, indicating the unconscious men. "If you haven't got the guts to finish them, then leave them in the courtyard for me."

"Don't you dare speak to Draco like—" Narcissa began furiously.

Bellatrix screamed, "Be quiet! The situation is graver than you can possibly imagine, Cissy! We have a very serious problem!"

She stood, panting slightly, looking down at the sword, examining its hilt. Then she turned to look at the silent prisoners. "Put them in the cellar while I think of what to do! Take them down, Wormtail."

At the mention of the name, Padfoot growled and barked viciously, thrashing in the air as he tried to break free of his bindings, struggling to reach just an inch of flesh so he could tear it from the body of the traitorous rat.

"Wait," Bellatrix ordered sharply, "all except for the Mudblood and Sirius." She gestured first to Hermione and then to him. "Keep the blood-traitor away from Potter," she directed, likely figuring that keeping the two separate would cause them the most pain. Wormtail ushered the prisoners to the cellar, flinching when Padfoot barked viciously at him.

Hermione cowered against a nearby pillar as Bellatrix descended upon her, wand raised. "Where did you get that sword?" she asked the girl with a menacing look in her eyes.

Before Hermione could even answer the question, Padfoot began kicking in mid-air, paws lashing out against his restraints, barking madly and growling as loudly as possible. His barks echoed off of the marble floors and walls, nearly drowning out the screams of Hermione's name that came from the cellar.

"Shut up, you blood-traitor!" Bellatrix snapped. "Cissa, take him to the other room while I deal with the girl. Can't get an answer out of her with him making all that racket!"

"Bella, the girl . . ."

"Narcissa, go!" Lucius roared at his wife, his eyes narrowed. "Draco, go with your mother!"

Draco huffed but took his mother's hand in his and swept into the next room, flicking his wand upward and levitating Padfoot to follow.

Once the door to the drawing room closed behind them, Sirius shifted into his human form, still tightly bound. He looked up into his cousin's blue eyes and into the grey ones—like his own—of her son. He had never before seen such a resemblance to the Black side of the family in Draco. Then again, the young wizard was a near mirror image of his father.

"Cissa, let me go," Sirius pleaded with her. "You know this is wrong!"

"Sirius, please be quiet." She turned away from him. "You don't know how dangerous this is. What you've brought into my house."

"What *I've* brought? Cissa! We were captured and brought here against our will. You know Bella; you know what she's going to do! You're just going to let her—"

But his sentence was cut off by Hermione's screams. Sirius's eyes widened, and he felt himself pale as the blood drained from his face in rage and fear. "No. No! Hermione! Cissa, she's torturing her!"

"I know," Narcissa whispered.

"Let me go!" Sirius shouted. "Cissa, do the right thing. For once in your life, do the right thing!"

She looked down at her cousin with tears in her eyes. "I can't, Sirius; we're dead if I let you go."

"You're dead already!" Sirius countered. "You're trapped under the heel of a dictator, your husband is wandless, and your son has been sacrificed!" He eyed the boy who turned away, consciously covering his left forearm. "Cissa, let me go, and I will help you."

Narcissa shook her head. "There's no helping me."

"Mother, maybe . . ." Draco began hesitantly but stopped mid-sentence, as the screams coming from the other room grew louder.

"I'm sorry, Sirius," Narcissa said regretfully.

"So am I, cousin." Sirius stared up into her terrified face. "*Invocato Vita Debitum!*"

Narcissa's eyes widened dramatically, and she stumbled as though someone was pressing down on her shoulders, attempting to force her to kneel. "What are you doing?"

"You owe me a life debt, and I will call it in now with or without your consent," he threatened.

Her voice broke as she whispered, "Sirius . . ."

"What's he talking about?" Draco demanded.

Sirius gave her a dangerous look that said he was at the end of what little patience he had.

"Let him go," Narcissa ordered her son quickly. Draco pulled out his wand and set loose the bindings that trapped Sirius. "Cousin, please, can you save us?"

Sirius stood up, shook off the ropes, and moved to the door. "Stay here," he ordered them both, and then shifted back into his Animagus form. He was still unarmed, and despite his power, he was no match against Bellatrix without his wand.

Silently slipping back into the drawing room, Padfoot flinched at the smell of blood invading his nostrils, and his eyes widened as he saw Hermione lying on the ground, tears streaming from her eyes, her arm extended and marred by the familiar scars carved into her otherwise perfect flesh.

*No*, he thought. *Not this. Not here. Not now.*

Fury fuelled him as he crept forward in a silent frenzy. At the last second, he let out a soft growl and watched as Bellatrix turned to see his dark frame. Padfoot launched himself forward, landing on her body, pinning it to the ground, and knocking her wand from her hand. She actually looked afraid for a split second, and he imagined how wonderful it would feel to watch the bitch get carted off to Azkaban again. But then Remus's words to Harry months earlier echoed in his mind:

*"Harry, the time for disarming is past!"*

And so was the time for mercy.

One glance to the side where Hermione's still body was sprawled on the floor sent him teetering over the edge. He turned and bared his sharp teeth at his cousin, opening his jaws wide enough to sink his wicked fangs into the flesh of her neck.

Bellatrix tried to scream, but the sound died as Padfoot tightened his grip on her throat and violently tugged backward, tearing it from her body.

"*Crucio!*" he heard briefly behind him, and sharp pain racked his entire body. Padfoot fell to the ground, whimpering as the sensation of a thousand knives carved into his flesh.

Looking up, he saw Lucius Malfoy staring down at him with scorn, Hermione's stolen wand in hand, and a hint of joy in his face at the position he was in now. Padfoot snarled between whimpers of pain as his gaze met Lucius's. He recalled a time long ago when the same Death Eater had had a wand trained on him just like this. A small scar to the left of Lucius's nose was a reminder of how that last encounter had ended.

"Narcissa! I think it's time to reaffirm your loyalties and vows, my love," Lucius said coldly. "Your blood-traitor cousin just murdered your sister. While there is no love lost between myself and Bellatrix, the Dark Lord will not be pleased."

"Bella," Narcissa whispered, bringing a hand to cover her mouth.

Draco stood beside her protectively, blanching at the sight of his aunt soaking in a puddle of her own blood, throat ripped from her body.

"Kill the beast," Lucius ordered his wife, pointing at Padfoot.

Narcissa shook her head defiantly. "Lucius—"

"Do it yourself *willingly*," Lucius said with a sneer, "or I will *make* you do it."

"No." Narcissa stood firm. "You've been using the Imperius on me for twenty years, and I'm done being your little puppet."

"You insolent . . ." Lucius hissed as he raised his wand to his wife. "*Avada—*"

"*Sectumsempra!*"

The scream came from behind Lucius, and the elder Death Eater turned with wide, cold eyes to his attacker, and toward the wand pointed aggressively in his direction. The wand in Lucius's own hand fell from his grip as blood seeped through his finely pressed shirt. As his body fell forward, Padfoot traced his gaze along the hawthorn wand gripped in white-knuckled fingers, to blemished arm, and then to Draco, who stood tall and firm, staring with hard, cold, grey eyes at his fallen father's back.

## Chapter Nine

### *Break the Rest*

---

*Raise your voice, sticks and stones may break my bones  
I'm talking loud not saying much  
I'm bulletproof, nothing to lose  
Fire away, fire away  
(Titanium - David Guetta)*

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**March 27th, 1998**

"Hermione? Love?"

Sirius had transformed and was wiping the blood from his mouth, ignoring the pain still pulsing in his bones. He crawled up next to the witch, cradling her head gently in his hand, combing his fingers through her messy chestnut locks. Her eyes fluttered open, and he smiled, running his thumb along her cheek affectionately.

"Hermione? Can you say something?" he asked, needing to gauge her mental clarity.

She winced, the pain from the lingering Cruciatuſ Curse clearly still doing its damage. "Sirius? What happened?"

He followed her gaze around the room, to the bodies, the blood, and the faces of Narcissa and Draco Malfoy staring down at them. "You're safe," was all he was able to say in reply to her question as he exhaled shakily.

"Is she going to be all right?" Draco asked.

Sirius let out a resounding sigh of relief at the comical way her eyes widened in shock, likely over Draco's concerned tone of voice. "She'll be fine. She just needs rest and time to heal."

"You need to get her and the others out of here," Draco urged. "Quickly. I need to call the Dark Lord." He lifted the sleeve of his shirt, revealing the Dark Mark, but not touching it just yet.

Sirius looked up at the teen and growled. "Excuse me?"

"It's not what you think." Draco held up a hand to Sirius before he acted on the pent-up rage that his killing of Bellatrix had not released. "I'm on your side."

Sirius narrowed his eyes. "Bullshit."

"I've got Veritaserum in a safe if you want to test me," Draco offered.

Sirius stared at the boy for a long minute until he felt Hermione grasp his shirt tightly as another wave of pain washed over her body. He peered down at her with worry and then back up at the boy and Narcissa.

"Go," he said shortly, wondering if he had made the right call.

"Where are Harry and Ron?" Hermione rasped, throat clearly tender from screaming. "And did I hear right? Malfoy's on our side?"

"Possibly." Sirius rested her head back on the floor. "I'd pick you up, love, but you'll just be in more pain with every move. You need to stay there until it's safe to leave. Then we'll go somewhere you can heal properly." His eyes flickered to the word carved into her arm, and he growled.

"That won't heal, will it?" She blinked away a few straggling tears.

Sirius shook his head. "No, it'll scar. Her blade was cursed. I'm sorry."

"So am I," Narcissa whispered, kneeling down beside Hermione with a pillow in her hands, eyeing the girl curiously.

She looked at Sirius as she moved, showing that she was not going to touch the young witch without his permission. Apparently, she understood how protective he was over Hermione.

Sirius lifted Hermione's head to help Narcissa make her more comfortable.

"What do we do, Sirius?"

He turned his attention to his cousin. "Apparently, we wait for your son. Is he telling the truth?"

"I don't know," Narcissa confessed. "I was never allowed in the meetings. Draco always attended with Lucius. He's different around his father and the others. At home, here with just me, he's always been a kind boy. I was heartbroken when Lucius dragged him into the inner circle, branding him like that." A few tears escaped from her eyes. "I should have listened to you all those years ago."

"I've got it," Draco said as he entered the room once again.

Before he had a chance to reach Sirius, a voice shouted from behind him, "*Expelliarmus!*"

The wand flew out of Draco's grip, and he turned, scowling at Harry, who stood beside Ron. They both had wands in their hands aimed at the young blond, who held his hands up as a sign of surrender.

"You're making a mistake, Potter. Ask your godfather."

"Sirius?" Harry eyed him, keeping his wand trained on Draco. Sirius saw the moment Harry noticed Hermione on the floor, and he winced at the look of fear crossing the boy's face. Harry dropped his attention from his wandless rival and rushed to his friend's side. "Hermione!"

"It's okay, Harry. Listen to Sirius," she insisted.

"What's going on?"

Sirius clapped him on the back. "First, where's Wormtail?"

"Dead," Ron answered from behind them, his wand still aimed at Draco's face. "Tried to kill Harry until we reminded him of the life debt he owed. When Harry let him go, Pettigrew's silver hand turned, and he strangled himself to death."

Sirius did not know how to process the information. A man whom he had once considered a friend, a brother, was dead. But that same man was the reason for so much pain and evil: James and Lily's deaths, his twelve years lost to Azkaban, and Voldemort's return in the first place. No, Sirius would not mourn Wormtail.

"That's good, actually," Draco observed. "It'll help the story I need to create."

"What's he talking about?" Harry asked.

"If you'd tell your pet weasel to point his wand elsewhere, I'd be thrilled to inform you, Potter," Draco sniped. "This is Veritaserum. Pass it to Granger if you don't believe me; she can spot it, I'm sure."

Ron snatched the phial from Draco's grip and tossed it to Sirius, who handed it over to Hermione. The witch looked at it carefully, uncorking the top and sniffing it. "There's no smell."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Of course not, Granger. It has no smell."

"It's a trick." Ron scowled. "It's poison."

"Someone tell the weasel why that's moronic," Draco jeered.

"Because the Veritaserum isn't for us," Sirius explained. "It's for *him*."

"I'll take it, and you can wait and see if I die. Then one of you can take it to test and make sure I'm not lying," Draco offered, his jaw set tight, his eyes glaring at Ron. "Agreed? Honestly, we shouldn't be dawdling here."

"Give it to him," Harry said and watched as Sirius stood to hand the phial over.

Draco unstopped the container and used the accompanying eyedropper to place a drop on his tongue. He clearly knew better than to use more. He might have been willing to prove his allegiance but it would be stupid to let the truth serum stay in his system long enough for his former rivals to take advantage of the situation.

"Only Black can ask questions," he insisted, handing the phial back.

"Now, one of us . . ." Harry muttered, snatching the phial from Sirius.

Hermione took it away from him and scowled at her friend. "Are you out of your mind? You're worth too much to risk."

Before anyone could stop her, Hermione placed one drop of the potion on her tongue. Sirius gaped at her, angry about the risk she had taken.

She waited a few seconds and then nodded. "All right, is someone going to ask me something?"

"What happened second year when you messed up the Polyjuice Potion?" Ron asked before anyone had a chance to think of a question to verify the potion.

Hermione turned and gave him the most heinous glare possible.

Harry immediately averted his gaze as he awaited the answer.

"The potion wasn't messed up," she said, the words flying out of her mouth against her will. All too familiar with the effects of Veritaserum, Sirius did not envy her. "But I accidentally took a cat hair instead of a human hair and ended up turning myself into a cat. You're dead to me, Ronald Weasley!"

"She turned into a cat?" Sirius chuckled, looking at Harry, who bobbed his head as he stifled his own laughter.

Ron snorted in amusement. "Well, it's really Veritaserum. She wouldn't willingly repeat *that* story to anyone outside the two of us."

"Why were you three brewing Polyjuice Potion in second year?" Draco asked, seeming eager to take what little advantage of the situation he could, knowing that Hermione was still under the influence of the Truth Serum.

"Because we thought that you either were or knew who the heir of Slytherin was, so Harry and Ron Polyjuiced themselves into Crabbe and Goyle and sneaked into the Slytherin common room to question you," Hermione blurted out and then immediately covered her mouth, eyes wide.

"And *I'm* the untrustworthy one?" Draco scoffed. "All right, Black, let's get this over with before it wears off. But at the end of this war, I've got some bloody questions of my own," he said, pointing to Hermione and Harry, purposely ignoring Ron who still kept his wand trained on him.

"All right, who holds your loyalty?" Sirius asked Draco.

"My mother," Draco said at once.

"Not Death Eaters?"

"No," Draco insisted.

"Are *you* a Death Eater?"

"Technically," he said through clenched teeth.

"You said you were on our side. How so?"

"At the end of fourth year, I was recruited as a spy because it was assumed that I would be pulled into the Death Eater ranks because of my father. Therefore, I was deemed a valuable asset," Draco explained. "I've been watching, passing information, and helping the Order ever since."

"Who recruited you?" Sirius asked.

"Severus Snape."

"Let me hex him!" Ron shouted angrily.

"Severus Snape is a bloody traitor!" Sirius growled. "He murdered Dumbledore!"

"No." Draco shook his head. "I don't know all the details, but I was told that Snape and Dumbledore had some arrangement. After I was instructed to kill Dumbledore myself, Snape took me aside and told me to fulfil the mission as completely as possible with the exception of actually killing Dumbledore. I was to disarm him and wait for Snape to show up. I didn't know he was going to kill him."

"He's telling the truth," Hermione said.

"Even if Snape *did* betray your precious Order, I haven't," Draco insisted.

"Prove it," Ron demanded.

"Prove it? I'm under Veritaserum, you fucking idiot."

"What have you done that can be counted as proof that your loyalty is still with the Order?" Harry asked.

Draco took a deep breath before turning his gaze on Hermione. "Your parents made it to Australia," he disclosed with a smug look on his face. Hermione gasped in response, her eyes widening; the wizards surrounding her glowered at Draco. "They weren't supposed to, for the record. Are we done now?"

"Let him go," Hermione ordered.

Ron scowled. "Hermione, you can't be serious!"

"Do it!" she snapped.

"What's the plan?" Harry asked.

"You lot take yourselves and my mother out of here. I'll grab Greyback from the other room and bring him in here," Draco said, pointing to Bellatrix's body. "She was mauled. The Dark Lord doesn't need to know by what or whom. I'll summon him once you're gone and tell him that Greyback and Scabior turned on us when Bellatrix refused to pay them. We fought, Snatchers died, but Potter escaped because Wormtail betrayed us." He looked to Sirius. "See? Works in our favour."

"And he'll believe you?" Hermione asked.

"I'm an excellent Occlumens," Draco boasted. "Which is why you're taking Mother with you. She's not."

"I'm not leaving without you," Narcissa insisted.

"I'm not *asking*," Draco glared at her. "You're a blood-traitor now, so you stay hidden no matter what." He turned to Sirius. "Keep her safe."

Sirius looked at the other body on the ground. "And your father?"

"Potter killed him," Draco explained. "He's already known to be quite effective at using *Sectumsempra*." Harry glared daggers at him in response, but Draco ignored him. "Take all the wands. Mother, give me yours."

"Why can't you just take back your own?" Harry asked, holding the wand in his own hand.

"*Priori Incantatem*," Draco explained. "If the Dark Lord suspects me at all, he'll check my wand and see that I was the one who killed Lucius. It's better if you disarmed me, killed my father, and I took my mother's wand as she escaped. Speaking of escaping, take Ollivander, the goblin, and the other two."

Ron and Harry shared a look.

"What?" Draco pressed.

"They're already gone," Ron said.

"Gone? How?"

"Dobby Disapparated them out," Harry revealed. "House-elves can Apparate in places where wizards can't."

"Dobby is pleased to help Harry Potter," a small voice called from above.

The group turned their collective gaze upward and spotted the elf hanging on the large chandelier. He smiled down, glancing briefly at the body of his former Master, and shook for a moment, his large ears flapping.

"Dobby? Can you Apparate this many people out of here?" Harry asked.

Dobby nodded, disappearing from the chandelier and reappearing on the floor in front of them all. He looked at Draco for a moment as if assessing the character of the boy before smiling at the result and reaching out for Harry's hand.

One by one, the group reached out for one another, physically connecting, leaving Narcissa to say a short goodbye to Draco.

Sirius lifted Hermione into his arms, ignoring the look of protest on her face. After an adjustment that was only difficult thanks to aching joints courtesy of Azkaban, he tucked one hand beneath her to grasp Harry's arm.

"I'll send a Patronus if I hear of any movement," Draco promised.

"*You* can make a Patronus?" Ron mocked. "What is it? A ferret?"

"Get out," Draco growled, and before Ron could say another word, Dobby Disapparated them all away from Malfoy Manor.

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### **April 4th, 1998**

The large group had been staying with Bill and Fleur for a week, and the small cottage was overly crowded. Three guest rooms had been set aside for the wounded:

Griphook, Ollivander, and Hermione, who insisted that her room be shared with Luna. Dean, Ron, and Harry took refuge on the couch and floor of the sitting room.

Sirius had escorted Narcissa to Andromeda's house after sending a Patronus to Remus and Tonks, who he knew were living with her.

Being the Secret-Keeper for both Andromeda's home and his own, Remus had met Sirius outside the wards in order to allow them all inside. He had been reluctant to shelter Narcissa, but Sirius gave his word that his cousin would behave properly.

The two sisters were able to reconnect, though not before a good screaming match that made Sirius groan over his promise to keep Cissa in line. It was not until they each discovered the common trait of recently becoming widows that they fell into a puddle of tears in one another's arms. Andromeda had loved her husband, and she had been shunned by her entire family because of him, but he had been worth it to her. Narcissa had feared her husband, and she had lost her entire sense of self-worth because of him. However, for her, he had been worth it all just because of Draco.

Sirius put up a set of incredibly complicated wards around Andromeda's house to protect his cousins, enlisting Bill's help as a Curse-Breaker to test them just in case. Despite her incredibly distended midsection, Tonks took a turn at testing the wards since, as an Auror, she felt very qualified.

The women all took refuge in the kitchen to drink tea afterward, while Remus and Sirius vacated to the basement to share some firewhisky and update one another about the war.

"How are they?" Remus asked, setting his small glass down on a folding table that sat between the two crates he and Sirius were using as makeshift chairs.

Sirius looked up, exhausted. "You mean how is *she*?"

"I have a large enough heart to be concerned about the entirety of our side, Sirius."

"You knew, didn't you?" Sirius accused. "Malfoy Manor. Bellatrix."

Remus inclined his head.

"And you never told me." Sirius stood and began pacing around the room. "I could have stopped it. I was there. If I'd have known when and where we were going and what would have happened—"

"You couldn't have done anything more than you've already done!" Remus snapped in a harsher tone than he had intended, frowning when Sirius petulantly retook his seat.

"She showed me in a Pensieve. When I noticed the scars, I confronted her. That's when she told me everything. We've talked about this before, Pads. She swore me to only reveal it all to you when the time was right, which she insisted wouldn't be for at least a decade. I took an Unbreakable Vow."

Sirius growled and knocked his glass to the floor with a violent sweep of his arm. "Why the fuck would she do that?"

"Because she protects those she loves. If she had stopped it from happening to her, then Bellatrix would have tortured you, or Harry, or Ron instead."

"I should have known," Sirius berated himself. "This whole time, my own fucking cousin." He growled again and put his head into his hands. "You remember what I told you happened at Narcissa's wedding? I've never seen her so—"

"Unhinged?" Remus offered.

Sirius almost laughed. Almost. "That's putting it lightly."

"Her hatred of Bellatrix wasn't about *this* moment you know. It had almost nothing to do with what happened to her at Malfoy Manor. Nothing to do with the curse or her arm. It was horrible, of course, don't misunderstand me," Remus said, putting up a defensive hand as Sirius glared at him. "She hated Bellatrix because of *you*. Because of the Department of Mysteries."

"She's started having nightmares," Sirius whispered, ignoring the guilt that continued to build in his chest. He did not want to know that she was always thinking about him instead of worrying about herself.

"She's always had nightmares," Remus countered.

"No." Sirius shook his head. "Hermione *started* having nightmares. This is the source. This is the beginning of them."

"Maybe that's why she swore me to secrecy."

"How's that?"

"She took care of us constantly," Remus said. "Always hovering over me, making sure I was healed and never alone. But she was always vulnerable at night. That gave *us* a chance to take care of *her*. You can't deny how that bonded us all together."

He reached down and picked up Sirius's fallen glass, setting it back on the table and reaching for the bottle of firewhisky to top off his friend's drink. He slid the glass across the small table and offered a consoling smile.

Sirius looked up, genuine anxiety in his eyes. "What happens if I can't keep her alive? Any of them?"

"That's the thing about time," Remus reflected, a faraway expression on his face. "It's a loop, you see. Every moment has already happened, we're just reliving it. The very fact that we still remember everything from years ago—that we remember *her*—means that she made it through this. The fact that she wasn't entirely broken must mean that it all turns out right in the end."

Sirius glared at him, annoyed. "I miss the pessimistic and stressed out Moony. How are you this calm with a pregnant wife ready to pop any second and a full moon in a week?"

Remus smirked, tilting his head to the side as he looked at Sirius. "The dosage of Calming Draught I've been on the past three months would put a normal wizard in a coma."

Sirius openly gaped at him, finally noticing Remus's eyes were hooded, and beneath the lids, his pupils were dilated. "You're high?"

Remus grinned and raised his glass to toast. "Cheers to werewolf metabolism, Pads."

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### **April 13th, 1998**

"So, what do you want to do with the rest?" Hermione asked, holding a bundle of wands in her hand. Her own had been returned to her, and she almost hated to hold it now, knowing that Lucius Malfoy had used it to cast the Cruciatu s Curse on Sirius and nearly killed his own wife with it. But it was hers, and she forced herself to hold it affectionately, determined to use it to bring about enough good to counter the evil it had briefly caused.

Harry considered the bundle before nodding decisively. "Break them," he said and then barely dodged a hex thrown at him by Sirius, who was sparring with him in front of Shell Cottage.

"You sure you don't want to pick one from the bunch?" Ron asked Harry.

A small crowd had gathered on the front porch to watch as Harry continued trying to disarm Sirius. Draco's reasonably springy hawthorn wand obeyed him with ease as though it were his own. Sirius had lucked into finding his original wand among the others they had brought back with them from Malfoy Manor; it had likely been picked up by Snatchers picking through Godric's Hollow after Christmas.

"No, I need *this* wand," Harry insisted as he threw up a shield to block a Binding Curse that Sirius sent his way. "Ollivander said it's mine, at least for right now. Its allegiance changed the moment I disarmed Malfoy. The wand chooses the wizard. I can't explain it—Ow!" He grimaced at Sirius, who had grazed his leg with a mild Stinging Hex. "For the time being, I need this wand."

"And break the rest?" Hermione double-checked Harry's instructions.

"Yes, Hermione. Those wands belonged to Death Eaters and Snatchers. Break them and be done with it all."

"Gladly." Hermione handed the bundle to Ron, keeping one wand in her hands.

With a vengeful flutter in her chest, she snapped Bellatrix Lestrange's wand clean in half and then used her own wand to set the pieces on fire. Feeling a bit more reinvigorated, Hermione grabbed back for the bundle of wands and held it out to Dean and Luna, offering them each the opportunity to select one as their own, since their wands had been stolen and possibly destroyed upon their capture. Once they had chosen, she moved to snap the remaining wands all in one go.

"Wait!" Harry shouted. "Sirius! Pause! I have a better idea. Dobby!"

The small elf appeared with a loud crack, looking up at Harry Potter with a bright smile. "The Great Harry Potter calls for Dobby?" His tennis ball-sized eyes glanced around at the gathered crowd, giving them each a smile, his ears flapping as a soft breeze blew across the front porch.

"Dobby, I would like you to break these wands," Harry said, snatching the bundle from Hermione and handing it to the elf.

"Harry Potter wants . . ." Dobby's eyes doubled in size. He immediately began shaking his head. "No, no, no . . . elves are not to touch the wands of wizards. Mustn't, mustn't." He looked around the porch, nervously wringing his hands.

"Dobby, don't you dare hurt yourself," Harry cautioned the elf who began to shake. "Dobby, these wands did not belong to wizards. They belonged to weak men who abused

magic. They weren't fit to be wizards. These wands are tainted with Dark Magic. They've hurt many people and creatures. They were used to capture and enslave. I think it only right that a free elf be the one to break them and put those evil deeds to rest."

Hermione smiled brightly, ignoring Sirius who was rolling his eyes behind his godson. Next to Hermione, Ron mirrored Sirius's actions. Luna looked pleased with the idea, while Dean, Bill, and Fleur all grinned, encouraging the little elf with their smiles.

"Come on, Dobby," Hermione urged. "You're better than those wizards."

"If Harry Potter insists," Dobby said, taking an extremely hesitant step toward the proffered bundle of finely carved wands, each with a different colour and core, but all with a history of violence and death. Very slowly, the little elf reached for one wand, a black wand made of elm that Hermione recognised as Scabior's, the Snatcher who had brought them to Malfoy Manor.

With initial reluctance, Dobby held the wand between his two small hands and clenched his eyes tightly shut, looking as though he was waiting for someone to hit him. When no one made a move, Dobby snapped the wand in half and opened eyes that now shone brightly in the setting sun. A smile crossed his face, and he let out a loud laugh of pure glee, jumping in the air and throwing the broken wand to the ground before stomping on it vigorously.

As though it were his new favourite game in the entire world, the elf eagerly reached back into the bundle of wands, snapping each one with enthusiasm, laughing and jumping as each one fell to the ground in an ever-growing pile. Hermione grinned delightedly at the scene, and once the bundle was gone, Dobby looked around eagerly as if he could find more if he just tried.

Harry laughed and held a hand out to him. "Thank you, Dobby. You've taken a great burden off my shoulders."

The elf beamed, taking Harry's hand. "Dobby is always happy to serve Harry Potter, sir."

## Chapter Ten

### *Not a Killer*

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*Another head hangs lowly,  
Child is slowly taken.  
And the violence caused such silence.  
Who are we mistaken?  
(Zombie - The Cranberries)*

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**April 30th, 1998**

"It has to be there," Hermione insisted. "She was adamant that we'd broken into her vault."

They had circled around this argument before. Bellatrix's behaviour at Malfoy Manor the month prior had implied that something important was housed in the Lestrangle vault and not just an imitation of the Sword of Gryffindor. Unfortunately, there was no way to get inside. Ron suggested Polyjuice Potion, but without a piece of Bellatrix to use, that was impossible. Harry wanted to return to the manor to see if he could *find* something to use, but Sirius refused to allow any of them to risk themselves on a suicidal mission.

Hermione wanted to ask Narcissa for help—she was Bellatrix's sister, after all—but Sirius explained that since the Horcrux would be hidden in the Lestrangle vault, Narcissa had no claim to it despite being a blood relation to Bellatrix; not while Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrangle remained alive. It was Ron who then proposed hunting down the Lestrangle brothers and killing them, after which everyone in the room proceeded to ignore him.

Harry suggested asking Griphook for help, which Sirius shot down quickly. He insisted Griphook would turn on the lot of them faster than Kreacher had betrayed him.

They had nearly given up hope when they were handed the Horcrux on a silver platter.

That silver platter arrived in the form of a dragon Patronus that burst into the kitchen at Shell Cottage late one night. All occupants save for Harry, Hermione, Sirius, and Ron were asleep. Hermione admired the intricate beauty of the Patronus as it hovered for a few moments before opening its mouth and speaking with Draco Malfoy's voice.

*"Potter, I have information you might be interested in. The Dark Lord wants me to go to Gringotts with Rodolphus in order to fetch an item of great importance. He was enraged to find out that not only was Bellatrix killed but that the Sword of Gryffindor might be missing from her vault. We're headed to Diagon Alley tomorrow. If you find this information helpful, I'll expect to be accosted outside Gringotts. Let Granger or Black be the one to engage us. Weasel might hurt himself."*

Ron glared as the dragon vanished. "Prick."

Hermione ignored him, practically vibrating with excitement. "Did you hear what he said?"

Ron glowered. "Yeah, I heard the ferret."

"It wasn't a ferret; it was a dragon," Hermione corrected him, annoyed that he was focusing on childhood rivalries instead of the amazing gift they had just been handed.

"How come *he* gets a dragon?" Harry asked, looking deflated.

Hermione observed the wizards sitting around the table, each looking put out by the appearance of the Patronus, Sirius included. She narrowed her gaze at each of them. "Are you joking? Malfoy is offering to deliver us a *Horcrux*, and you have decided, instead of celebrating, to have a pity party over the fact that his Patronus is a dragon?"

Ron frowned. "Mine's just a stupid dog."

"Hey!" Sirius barked. "I take offence to that. Mine's a dog too."

"Well, of course *yours* is a dog; *you're* a dog!" Ron countered.

"Mine's a stag like my dad's," Harry added, clearly trying to make himself feel better.

"Well, then how come *I* got a dog?" Ron whinged. "It's nothing to do with me!"

Hermione smacked the back of Ron's head. "Oh, for crying out loud, you think my otter has anything to do with me?"

Sirius's eyebrows raised, and he looked at her with a confused expression. "Your Patronus is an otter?"

Hermione put her hands on her hips. "Yes. Got something to say about it?" she asked, daring him to poke fun at her otter.

There was a heavy knock on the front door, and everyone's head turned. Bill came running out of his bedroom, concern splashed across his face, pointing his wand at the door; Harry, Ron, Sirius, and Hermione did the same.

"Who is it?" Bill demanded.

"It's me, Remus Lupin!" came a voice over the howling wind. "I am a werewolf, married to Nymphadora Tonks, and you, the Secret-Keeper of Shell Cottage, told me the address and said to come in an emergency!"

Remus fell over the threshold when Bill wrenched the door open. He was white-faced, wrapped in a travelling cloak, his greying hair windswept. He straightened up, looked around the room, making sure of who was there, then bellowed, "It's a boy! We've named him after Dora's father! Edward Remus Lupin!"

Hermione shrieked, "Congratulations, Remus!" and rushed to him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

He hugged her back with enthusiasm and kissed the top of her head.

Sirius grinned brightly. "Tonks had the baby?"

"Yes, yes, she's had the baby!"

All around the room came cries of delight and sighs of relief at the news.

"Congratulations!" Fleur squealed.

"Blimey, a baby!" Ron said as if he had never heard of such a thing before.

"Yes, yes, a baby boy," Remus repeated, looking dazed by his own happiness. He strode around the table and hugged Sirius, then Harry; the scene in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place might never have happened. "You'll be godfather?" he asked as he released Harry, his eyes lingering on Hermione's smiling face for a moment as though he wanted to say something to her but held back.

"Me?"

"You, yes, of course. Dora agrees; no one better!"

"Hey!" Sirius protested, his brows furrowing as he sat back down. "I'll have you know *I'm* the only one here who's actually experienced in the act of godfathering."

"Poor Sirius." Hermione smirked and walked up behind him to place a kiss on the top of his head and pat his shoulder consolingly. Realising what she had done, she stood up straight and cleared her throat before crossing the room and kissing Harry's cheek while muttering, "Congratulations, Harry."

Her surprising act of affection silenced Sirius, though he kept his arms crossed over his chest in mute protest, and she could hear him grumbling under his breath, "It's not like I'm your best friend or anything."

Bill hurried to fetch wine, and Fleur persuaded Remus to join them for a drink.

"I can't stay long. I must get back." Remus, looking years younger than Hermione had ever seen him, beamed around at them all. "Thank you, thank you, Bill."

Bill had soon filled all of their goblets; they stood and raised them high in a toast.

"To Edward Remus Lupin. 'Teddy,'" Remus saluted joyfully. "A great wizard in the making!"

"A *wizard*?" Hermione questioned him knowingly, emphasising the word to make a point.

Remus grinned at her brightly. "Yes, a wizard," he replied and kissed her cheek. "Thank you, Hermione."

"Who does he look like?" Fleur inquired.

"I think he favours Dora, but she thinks he looks like me."

"Poor lad." Sirius snickered, and Hermione glared at him, but Remus just laughed.

"Not much hair. It looked black when he was born, but I swear it turned ginger in the hour since. Probably blond by the time I get back. Andromeda says Dora's hair started changing colour the day that she was born." Remus drained his goblet in one large swallow. "Oh, go on then, just one more," he said, beaming, as Bill made to fill it again. "So, have I missed anything important over here?"

Hermione, Harry, Ron, and Sirius all shared a look before Sirius finally spoke. "Nothing you need to worry about, Moony. You've got a wife and kid to take care of. In fact, since you've hurt my very soul by not making me the godfather of your firstborn, I'll accept your apology in the form of you staying inside a locked and warded house with your family."

Remus rolled his eyes. "Until when?"

"Until I send you a Patronus!" Sirius retorted, his tone darkening. "I'm not joking, Remus. The only reason you or Tonks step foot out your door is if Hermione or I tell you to."

Shocked to have been included, Hermione looked back and forth between the friends, having expected Remus to be as confused as her or for Sirius to take back his words. When neither did as she assumed they would, she glanced at Harry and Ron to silently ask them, but both boys were deep in their goblets.

"Fine, fine. I'll occupy my time with late night feedings and dirty nappies," Remus said, chuckling. "Now, I really must get back." He declined another goblet of wine as he

got to his feet, pulling his travelling cloak back around himself. "I'll try and send some pictures in a few days' time. Everyone at home will be so glad to know that I've seen you."

After fastening his cloak, Remus made his farewells, hugging the women and clasping hands with the men. Then, still beaming, he returned into the wild night.

"Godfather Harry." Bill grinned and patted Harry on the back.

"Yeah." Harry smiled, still clearly dazed by the request. "Sirius, what does a godfather even do?"

"I'm not exactly an expert." Sirius shrugged, looking sadly down into his goblet of wine. "You just . . . take care of him. He's your family now. As good as yours. Keep him safe. The first couple years are relatively simple," he counselled, looking as though he was trying to sweep away the sadness that had suddenly clouded the conversation. "Spoil the hell out of him."

With a loud sigh, he set his cup down on the table and cleared his throat. "All right, enough of this sappy nonsense. We've got a Malfoy to mug tomorrow!"

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### **May 1st, 1998**

The plan was simple.

Sirius Apparated to a back street, just off Knockturn Alley, immediately shifting into Padfoot and making his way to the end of the road where his focus could be glued to the entrance of Gringotts. Ron had been transfigured and was now sporting black, messy hair that fell past his ears and a long goatee. He looked like a displaced Death Eater from Durmstrang, more Igor Karkaroff than Weasley. It was the best any of them could come up with on such short notice. Harry and Hermione were hidden beneath the Invisibility Cloak, eagerly awaiting Sirius's signal.

The plan had been to stake out the bank and wait for Draco and Lestrage to pass by, and then attack them when they exited, hopefully with Horcrux in hand. Ron was supposed to stand guard while Harry and Hermione attacked, at which point Sirius would rush in and snatch up the package, and the four of them would Apparate back to Shell Cottage.

It should have been simple, all things considered.

What they had not planned on was Voldemort's loss of trust in Draco. Whatever happened at Malfoy Manor after their escape remained unknown to them, but the morning before the plan to convene in front of Gringotts was set to go, Harry had a vision.

Despite helping Harry with his Occlumency, Sirius could do nothing when Voldemort's experiences bled through the connection while Harry was sleeping.

*Sirius heard the screaming and pulled Harry into his arms, holding him as he thrashed for several minutes. When Harry eventually opened his eyes, gasping for breath, he informed everyone that had gathered around due to his screams that Draco had been attacked with Legilimency.*

*"I saw everything," Harry said, panting. "He kept up the lie, but Rodolphus told You-Know-Who that Malfoy might have been involved in Bellatrix's death. So they got to him while he was sleeping. This isn't new. It's been happening since we escaped. They've been torturing Malfoy trying to see if he'll eventually break and tell the truth."*

*Hermione visibly flinched, and everyone, Sirius included, saw the way she wrapped her arms around herself when Harry brought up Draco being tortured. Sirius, himself, felt a deep rage over what was being done to his young cousin, but his priorities needed to remain the same.*

*"We stick to the plan."*

*"It could be a trap," Ron said cautiously.*

*"If it is, then Malfoy's bait," Harry said, wiping sweat from his brow and prying himself out of Sirius's grip. "I don't like the prat, but I won't let him be another casualty in this war. Even if it's a trap, we have to go. We need the Horcrux."*

*"If we rescue Malfoy in the process, all the better," Hermione added.*

Sirius was annoyed, but not entirely surprised when Draco was not only incredibly late—arriving at the bank just before it closed—but Rodolphus was no longer the only one to escort the young wizard inside Gringotts.

As the doors to the bank opened, Sirius's eyes widened at the sight of not only Rodolphus but also Rabastan Lestrangle flanking Draco, along with Travers, the elder Crabbe, and Goyle Sr following behind.

Draco looked on edge as he descended the stairs outside the bank, glancing suspiciously around Diagon Alley, his lips curled into a scowl. There was a package in his hands—hands that appeared to be covered in very recent burns.

Sirius immediately recognised the results of what had to have been a Flagrante Curse, which was taught to the Black children early on in life when they were caught snooping through their parents' belongings. It was cruel and harsh, though he could not help but think that it would be a perfect trap to set inside a vault.

Scanning the alley once more, Padfoot nodded his head knowingly when he made eye contact with Draco. Visibly breathing deep, Draco took his mother's wand in hand, quickly ducking down whilst throwing up a nonverbal protection shield around his body that was purposely evident to anyone actually paying attention. The Death Eaters, thankfully, were not so observant.

Sirius shifted form and sent a pair of Stunning Spells toward the small crowd, hitting Crabbe first, then Goyle directly after.

From the other side of the street, Harry and Hermione jumped out from under the cloak that hid them, shooting spells, hexes, and jinxes at the gathered Death Eaters. Draco Disillusioned himself and slipped into the background with the package in hand. Spell after spell flew. Sirius took on Rodolphus, Ron fought Travers, and Harry and Hermione faced Rabastan.

"*Stupefy!*" Harry shouted, but Rabastan evaded the spell.

"We have to end this quickly! We're drawing attention!" Hermione yelled.

"Push them together!" Sirius ordered.

Ron called out, "*Impedimenta!*" The jinx hit Travers square in the chest, knocking him down between the bodies of Crabbe and Goyle. He then went to Sirius's side to help him fight the elder Lestrangle brother.

"I know it was you, Black!" Rodolphus screamed. "I knew the Malfoy boy was a blood-traitor, and that my Bella wouldn't have been overpowered by a bloody werewolf!"

Sirius laughed. "No? But she was overpowered so easily by a mere dog."

"You'll pay for what you did!" Rodolphus bellowed and aimed his wand. "*Avada Ked—*"

Hermione screamed, "*Confundo Maxima!*" from behind Harry. Her Confundus Spell hit Rodolphus Lestrangle before he had a chance to finish his curse, and the man tumbled backward against the steps.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" Ron shouted, binding the Death Eater's body.

"A little help here!" Harry yelled as Rabastan descended upon himself and Hermione. Lestrangle cast curse after curse at the two. Ron stood guard over the bodies of the stunned and bound Death Eaters while keeping eyes peeled for any potential backup.

"*Crucio!*" Rabastan's curse missed Hermione by mere centimetres.

Hearing the curse, Sirius spun to attack, but before he had a chance to retaliate—and before Rabastan could cast another Unforgivable in Hermione's direction—a voice from behind him called out, "*Avada Kedavra!*" and Rabastan's body fell forward, pale and lifeless.

Hermione gasped at the sight and looked up in time to see Draco Malfoy drop his Disillusionment Charm.

"What the hell, Malfoy!?" Ron screamed and stormed forward. "You tricked us!"

"Didn't I say *not* to let him do anything?" Draco scowled at Harry. "Here, get this away from me. It's given me nothing but trouble." He handed over the package roughly, shoving it into Harry's hands before turning his gaze on Ron. "If you couldn't tell, Weasel, I wasn't a part of this welcome wagon for you! Being on your fucking side has given me nothing but problems!"

Ron scoffed. "Oh, poor you."

"Granger, get your boyfriend out of my face before I set him on fire!" Draco threatened.

Sirius ignored the squabbling. Instead, he used his energy to check everyone for injuries since they seemed to be too busy to bother with such trivial things. Malfoy's tone, however, was grating on his last nerve.

"Ron, back off!" Hermione directed. "And he's not my boyfriend."

"Like I really give a shit about the specifics. Well, is that it?" he asked Harry who was staring at a fine, golden cup in his hands.

"This is it," Harry confirmed. "Let's get back to Shell Cottage."

"Not yet. You want them to follow you?" Draco pointed to the unconscious and bound Death Eaters behind them.

"They need to be arrested," Hermione insisted.

"Oh, I'll just go call the Aurors then, Granger." Draco's eye roll was accompanied by a long-suffering sigh. "Except if you haven't noticed, they're all working for the Dark Lord!" Shaking his head, his attention turned to Sirius who was walking up the steps.

"Look away if you can't do it yourself," Sirius mumbled under his breath, aiming his wand at the bound Rodolphus Lestrange who glared up at him with a viciousness that Sirius had rarely seen outside of his own family.

"Sirius . . ." Hermione whimpered.

Draco aimed his wand and sent a Killing Curse at an unconscious Travers. "This is war, Granger," he said, his voice cold.

"Sirius, please," Hermione begged. "I know this is war, but I think there's a very big difference between defending yourself in battle and killing an unarmed enemy."

Sirius tightened his jaw, struggling to reach a decision. Shockingly, he remembered a time when *he* was the reasonable one, as far-fetched as that was. He normally would not have given it another thought, but the look in her eyes was causing him pain, and he could not help but lower his wand a fraction of an inch.

"Bloody Gryffindors." Draco scowled and stalked over past Sirius, aiming his wand and shouting, "*Avada Kedavra!*" killing the last son of the House of Lestrange. Draco then turned and aimed at Crabbe but hesitated.

Sirius, immediately aware of the boy's change in demeanour, approached and put a hand on his shoulder. "It's too much. You can't take lives without consequences. Don't end up like him," he said, and though he did not mention a specific name, understanding flashed in Draco's eyes. "You're not a killer. C'mon, let's go see your mum, yeah?"

Draco merely nodded.

The moment was cut by a loud scream as Harry gripped his head and collapsed to the ground. "Harry!" multiple people yelled as they ran to his side, Hermione reaching quickly for the Horcrux before Harry dropped it.

"What is it?" Sirius asked, gripping his godson by the arms. "What did you see?"

Draco rolled his eyes at the theatrics and incredulously asked, "Potter's a *Seer* now?"

"He's . . . He's . . ." Harry forced the words out of his mouth. "He's coming."

"Hurry, we need to Apparate back to the cottage," Ron urged.

"Don't be stupid, Weasel," Draco hissed. "He's got the Aurors on his side!"

"What the hell does that have to do with anything!?"

"They can track Apparition now!"

Everyone stared at the blond, wide-eyed in shock. That was certainly new.

"What do we do?" Hermione eventually asked.

"We leave a trail too difficult to follow," Sirius improvised. "We'll split up for the time being. Ron, Side-Along with Draco back to the forest where you returned to us," he directed. "Harry and Hermione will go somewhere Muggle, I'll Apparate to the cave where I stayed when I was on the run. Then we'll need to Apparate somewhere else and meet up."

"Malfoy Manor," Draco offered.

Ron paled. "What?!"

"If the Dark Lord is on his way here, that means he won't be there! The Floo in my sitting room connects directly to the headmaster's office at Hogwarts. It's how Snape and I have been communicating throughout this."

Sirius growled at the name, and Draco groaned. "Look, I know you've got a problem with him, but he's on your side! And we're wasting time!"

"We need to get to Hogwarts anyway, Sirius," Harry pointed out, his gaze unfocused as he slumped against Hermione. "It's where the next one will be. I saw it in his mind. I saw him trying to figure out where to go next."

"I still don't think we should trust—" Ron began, but Harry cut him off.

"We need to get going," he said firmly. "Can you imagine what he's going to do once he realises the ring and the locket are gone? What if he moves the Hogwarts Horcrux, decides it isn't safe enough?"

"That thing's a fucking Horcrux?!" The colour drained from Draco's face as he stared at the cup in Hermione's hand. He looked up at Harry. "What did you mean by ring and locket?"

"He's got more than one; we've been destroying them," Harry explained.

"Fuck." Draco grimaced, his face finally showing fear.

Sirius growled. "Everyone go. Now!"

Turning on the spot, they each vanished into the crushing darkness.

---

Sirius landed on the small road on the outskirts of Hogsmeade that led to the cave where he had hidden years ago while he had been on the run with Buckbeak. He had

thought about Apparating directly into the cave, but he knew that if he aimed wrong, he would end up on the edge of a cliff.

Before he could take a single step, the air was rent by a loud scream that sent chills up his arms, and his hands flew to his ears.

"Caterwauling Charm, just fucking great," he groaned and made to Disapparate away only to find that Anti-Disapparition Charms had been cast over the village. He scowled and shifted into Padfoot, quickly moving around the outskirts of Hogsmeade, taking back alleys and side streets when possible.

Death Eaters roamed the hamlet in droves, wands at the ready as they searched high and low for whoever had set off the charm. "Look everywhere! Potter's got an Invisibility Cloak, so check every corner even if you don't see anything!"

"What about the dementors?" called another Death Eater. "Let 'em have free rein, and they'll find him quick enough!"

"The Dark Lord wants Potter dead at his own hands."

"Dementors won't kill him! The Dark Lord wants Potter's life, not his soul. He'll be easier to kill if he's been Kissed first!" the other Death Eater argued.

Padfoot flinched at the sight of the few dementors moving in and out of the streets. He swallowed hard, refusing to make eye contact, silently hoping that none of them recognised him in this form. If Sirius could sneak out of Azkaban from a cramped cell in the midst of at least one hundred dementors, he could manage this handful of them. It was difficult, however, as he pushed closer and closer to the creatures and felt all the happiness evaporating from his body. Terrible memories pricked at his mind the closer he got to the monsters, and he cringed as voices from the past echoed inside of his head.

*"Sirius don't leave, don't leave . . . Please! Sirius, don't leave me!"*

Shaking his head and trying to breathe, he focused as hard as possible and continued forward past the dementors, clinging to what little hope he had left.

Finally reaching the street that led up to Hogwarts, Padfoot ducked from sight, slipping into the back door of Honeydukes. The shop was closed, and it didn't look like it was just for the day. Death Eaters had completely taken over the sweet little town that had filled his youth with joy. It left a bitter taste in his mouth to see it so empty and lifeless, the joy literally sucked out of it.

He sneaked stealthily into the basement passage that he knew led to the statue of the one-eyed witch, and he ran the length of it as quickly as he could. When he reached the end, he spotted a figure. Padfoot skulked forward, low to the ground, taking in the familiar face, though she had aged twenty plus years.

Alecto Carrow stood at the end of the long passage, mumbling bitterly to herself about Snape and his high-handed ways.

"Check the bloody passages, Alecto," she said in a mocking tone. "Search the seventh-floor corridor, Alecto. Guard the Ravenclaw Tower, Alecto. Like he bloody does anything himself."

Padfoot rolled his eyes and made his way out into the open, whimpering softly and limping on his front right leg as though injured.

"Who's there?!" She aimed her wand before letting her gaze focus on him.

Padfoot stopped moving, blinking wide puppy eyes up at her and letting out a soft whining noise.

"Oi, get lost, mutt." She scowled and lowered her wand.

*Fucking idiot.*

Alecto's dying scream echoed in the passageway as Sirius crawled out from behind the one-eyed witch statue, wand drawn and searching for signs of life. Lamenting that he had not thought to take the Marauder's Map from Harry, he turned back into Padfoot, knowing that it would cause less of a disturbance than his human self. Only a handful of people knew he was an Animagus.

The halls were silent and empty save for a few prefects, all Slytherins, patrolling the corridors here and there in a desultory fashion. Padfoot ducked into dark alcoves and behind curtains, waiting for them to pass before he quickly moved on, making his way toward the headmaster's office in the hopes that Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Draco were already at Hogwarts, and not waiting for him at Malfoy Manor.

When he was almost to the gargoyle, he suddenly realised he had no way of getting inside. Dumbledore's office was often easy to sneak into; with Remus as a friend, Sirius knew every sweet ever made and in alphabetical order. But Dumbledore was gone, and his murderer now occupied his post. To his surprise, the same murderer was now descending the spiralling staircase from behind the gargoyle, his black robes billowing behind him.

Sirius shifted back to human form and pointed his wand directly at Snape's throat. "Snivellus."

"Black," Snape's voice dripped with scorn, not looking surprised to see Sirius. "I'd heard rumours of your unfortunate return from the grave. Not that you were actually buried, of course. Tell me, were you even dead, or was it another poorly planned escape of yours?"

Sirius growled menacingly. "Get back up the stairs."

Snape sneered at him in reply, black eyes narrowing. "I advise you to get your wand out of my throat, *dog*. I stopped taking your threats earnestly years ago."

"You really shouldn't have. Get up the stairs now, Snape. I happen to have need of your Floo."

Snape's black eyes met Sirius's steely stare, neither man willing to back down. "And why would I possibly grant access to you?"

"Because your only hope of surviving another encounter with me hangs on the fact that a certain young, blond Death Eater has vouched for you, and I need that fucking Floo to speak to him." Sirius waited for a reply, staring coldly at his lifelong rival.

If Snape was surprised by the revelation, he did not let Sirius know it. "And how do I know that young Malfoy is, in fact, with you?"

"Because unlike you piece of shit Death Eaters," Sirius snarled, "*I* don't kill children."

Snape moved only slightly as he turned to the statue. "Speaking of children, I can only assume by your lack of emotional breakdown that Potter still lives? Dumbledore," he said, and the gargoyle slid aside, revealing once again the large spiral staircase.

"*Dumbledore* is your password? You're sick."

"And you are as dense as you ever were, Black," Snape said as he climbed the staircase. "If, in fact, Mr Malfoy has informed you of my allegiances, then you should know the headmaster's death was, in truth—"

"I don't want to hear it," Sirius snapped. "Just get me to the bloody Floo!"

Snape glowered as they entered his office. "Very well."

"Ah, see? I knew my worthless great-great-grandson wasn't really dead. Hiding out was he, Severus?" the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black remarked, staring daggers down at Sirius.

"He has not admitted such," Snape muttered. "Yet."

"The Floo, Snivellus!" Sirius barked.

Snape folded his arms across his chest, burying his hands within the sleeves of his robes. "Very well, it's open for your use. Though it only connects to one place, and I can't imagine you'll be welcome company."

"I bloody well know where it goes!" Sirius glared at him. "And you're coming with me."

"Absolutely not," Snape said impassively.

"*He's* coming to Hogwarts," Sirius said, his voice low and threatening. "Now."

If Snape betrayed any hint of emotion, it was minuscule, but he did silently stalk toward the Floo as if Sirius's words had sparked something inside him. "Do I want to know who's on the other end of this?"

"Not enemies."

"How very vague; thank you." Snape rolled his eyes, threw powder into the fireplace, and spoke aloud, "Malfoy Manor."

"After you." Sirius gestured and watched Snape enter the flames, following him moments later.

On the other end of the Floo, they exited a large fireplace and entered the sitting room at Malfoy Manor cautiously.

The room was lit brightly with beautiful lanterns. Per Narcissa's style, every piece of furniture matched, all priceless antiques in pristine condition. The floors were well-polished, exquisite art hung on the walls, and a large chandelier graced the middle of the room. The very opposite of what the atmosphere of the drawing room had been a month earlier.

It was not the lovely furniture, the gorgeous art, or the polished floors that drew Sirius's focus, though. His attention was drawn to the centre of the room where Harry and Ron had their wands aimed at the Slytherin; Draco, in turn, had his wand aimed back at Ron. Hermione stood to the side, screaming at the lot of them, the impatient and frustrated expression on her face rivalling the likes of Molly Weasley.

Snape glowered, crossing his arms and letting out an impatient sigh. "Oh good, our world is saved."

"What the hell's going on here!?" Sirius demanded.

"Sirius!" Hermione turned to him, relief on her face as she rushed into his arms, wrapping hers tightly around his waist. "I thought . . . Merlin, when you didn't show up—"

"I'm fine, kitten," Sirius assured her, gently tugging on one of her curls. "What'd Malfoy do?"

He caught Snape observing their interaction with a slightly raised eyebrow. His expression instantly shifted into a sneer when Sirius glared at him threateningly.

Hermione paid Snape no attention. "I don't know. Harry and I arrived, and Ron and Malfoy were screaming at one another. They drew wands, Harry jumped in, and other than insults, I haven't been able to get a word out of any of them!"

"Oi!" Sirius yelled, and the three young wizards looked at him.

Harry grinned. "Sirius!"

"What'd *he* do?" Sirius asked Ron.

"He bloody splinched me!" Ron bellowed, his wand hand shaking.

Draco scoffed. "Barely. Has he ever even done Side-Along-Apparition? Honestly, Granger, I thought you'd have him better trained by now."

"Look!" Ron held up his left hand where two fingernails were missing.

Both Sirius and Hermione stared at him incredulously. Before Sirius had a chance to scold the boy for whinging over a couple of lost fingernails in the middle of a *war*, Hermione went into a frenzy, rushing forward and smacking Ron hard in the head, snatching his wand from his grip in the process.

"Are you mad!?" she shrieked. "That's barely a splinch! *Sirius* was splinched! *I* was splinched! Get over yourself, and get into that Floo right this minute, Ronald Bilius Weasley!" She pointed to the fireplace where she spotted Snape for the first time; her eyes widened, and she raised her own wand.

"You!" Harry shouted, his wand pointed accusingly at Snape.

Sirius put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Not now. Bigger fish to fry, better wizards to fight. But believe me, Death Eater or Order member," he said, his focus turning to Snape, "you and I *will* have words."

Snape rolled his eyes and reached for the Floo powder on top of the mantle. "I look forward to it."

## Chapter Eleven

### *Closer Than Ever*

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*I'm going under  
Drowning in you  
I'm falling forever  
I've got to break through  
I'm going under  
(Going Under - Evanescence)*

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**May 1st, 1998**

"The Dark Lord is coming?" Snape asked once everyone had arrived at his office. He had thrown up a carefully placed Silencing Charm, somehow cutting off all of the portraits in the room. Most of them glared at him for doing so, but none more so than Phineas Nigellus Black, who glowered at Snape and Sirius in turn.

Harry stared at Snape for a long moment, his gaze accusing and hands shaking with rage. Only Sirius's hand on his shoulder kept him from attacking. "Yes. Not like you didn't know!"

"Harry, not now," Hermione admonished.

Snape's focus flew to Draco. "Does he have the snake with him?"

The young Death Eater paled at the mention of Nagini, but he gave a brief nod and turned to close the Floo behind him, making sure they could not be followed.

"Closer than ever," he disclosed. "Happened after he found Bellatrix dead. He won't let the thing out of his sight."

Snape's black eyes narrowed, and he turned around to face a large Pensieve on his desk. Looking extremely perturbed, he moved quickly to a large cabinet, opening it to reveal cupboards of phials, mostly potions, but some easily recognisable as memories. Retrieving an empty bottle, Snape unstopped it and brought his wand to his head.

"What's he doing?" Ron asked loudly.

"Trying to concentrate, Mr Weasley, and your silence would be indispensable if it can be managed." Snape glared at the redhead before closing his eyes, concentrating hard, and letting his wand pull silvery strings from the side of his head, eventually twirling them

around and pushing them into the large phial in his hand. Securing it with the top, he held the phial out to Harry. "Take it."

"What is it?" Harry asked.

"Those are memories. *This*—" Snape gestured to the large rune-covered stone basin on the desk. "—is a Pensieve. If I remember correctly from your abysmal attempt at Occlumency, you're acquainted with their use."

"I know what they *are*; what're they for?" Harry snapped.

"Answers on the occasion of my unfortunate demise," Snape replied, and both Ron and Sirius snorted at the use of the word *unfortunate*. "A death that is certain to be unavoidable as you've apparently brought the Dark Lord to the doorstep of this institution. Now, if the rest of you plan on surviving the night, I advise the Gryffindors to head toward the seventh-floor corridor."

"I knew it!" Draco scowled. "I knew that's where they've all been hiding. Couldn't get in myself when I tried, though."

Harry stared between Snape and Draco, concern written on his face at the mention of his Housemates. When neither said anything more on the matter, he demanded, "What's going on?"

"Students have been going missing all year. They're in the Room of Hidden Things. They had to have left someone in there at all times to keep Slytherins out. Smart," Draco admitted. "Must have been a Ravenclaw," he added with a sneer, and all Gryffindors in the room glared at him.

"Speaking of Ravenclaws," Snape interjected. "Potter, you'll want to head to the West Tower on the fifth floor."

Harry stared icily at his former professor. "And why would I go where you tell me to?"

"Because Death Eaters in the school were alerted by the Dark Lord that you would return to Hogwarts and you were to be kept from Ravenclaw Tower. I assume you're looking for something?" Snape queried, eyeing Harry. Both Hermione and Ron avoided his stare. "I'd wager that whatever you're looking for will be found there."

Snape turned to Draco. "As for you, return to the Slytherin common room, and keep them occupied if you're able."

"Easy." Malfoy bowed his head in acquiescence before making his way for the door, quickly disappearing down the spiral staircase.

"And you?" Sirius finally asked.

"I'll be making my grand escape, coward that I am," Snape said sarcastically. "I've been found out after all. I still have orders to follow. You remember those, Black? It's been a few years, I'll give you that, but if you recall, you had *orders* to remain within the confines of Grimmauld Place and not to go gallivanting about the Ministry and getting yourself killed."

"Don't." A wand was raised and pointed in Snape's direction.

Sirius smiled wryly as Hermione's brown eyes flashed in the flickering light as she glared daggers at her former professor.

"Just as I thought." Snape almost grinned. "Touchy subject, Miss Granger? Or is it Miss Po—" Snape slowly began, his gaze drifting to Sirius who cut him off with a low snarl.

"We are leaving now!" Sirius interrupted, his eyes narrowing dangerously.

Snape stared at Sirius for a long moment. Sirius broke eye contact first, turning and ushering Harry, Ron, and Hermione out the door.

Once the trio started down the stairs, he spun on Snape viciously. "What're you playing at?"

"I've had a feeling for several years but thought it was impossible. I almost didn't place her," Snape drawled. "But the way the girl *dots* upon you and comes to your defence, raising her wand in threat even." He sneered at Sirius and scoffed loudly. "For Potter? Perhaps. But *you*? I imagine if the wolf was here she'd be raising her fists, the violent little—"

"Aren't you supposed to be making your grand escape?" Sirius snapped, storming out of the room and flicking his wand to slam the door violently behind him before Snape could say another word.

"What was that about?" Harry asked immediately as Sirius re-joined them.

"Nothing. Snape's an arse," Sirius replied as he moved toward the grand staircase.

"He seemed to know something about Hermione—" Harry began again, but Sirius stopped him, mid-thought.

"Harry, I'm sorry, but now is not the time to be questioning the words of Severus Snape. We've got jobs to do, right, son?" He put his hands on Harry's shoulders, trying to get him to focus. "Now, Ravenclaw Tower?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't even know what I'm looking for. I know it'll be something small like the rest, and it'll probably have belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw. I say let's go to the Room of Requirement and maybe see if there's a Ravenclaw who could help."

"Might be the diadem," Sirius suggested offhandedly as they walked.

"What's a diadem?" Ron wondered.

"It's like a tiara," Hermione explained. "But wait, how do *you* know about the diadem?" she asked Sirius. "I only heard about it because Luna's a Ravenclaw, and she was mumbling about it on the train one year."

"We all went looking for the thing fourth year," Sirius disclosed with a shrug. "James, Remus, Wormtail, and . . ." He stopped, changing his train of thought. "And I."

"Did you four ever study?" Hermione demanded in exasperation.

Sirius laughed in reply and winked at her. "If we make it through this, I'll tell you all about how I got nine O.W.L.s."

"Nine!?" Hermione screeched, her eyes wide. "That's impossible! I got eleven, and I nearly killed myself doing it!" She stormed ahead of him in a huff, her curls—which had recently loosened into soft ringlets that fell gently down her back—frizzed up, sparking at the ends with agitation as she moved. Sirius, Ron, and Harry snickered from behind her.

Once they reached the seventh floor, Harry rushed to the entrance of the Room of Requirement while the other three remained behind, watching silently as Harry paced back and forth in front of the empty wall across from the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy. As though the room had been waiting for Harry's arrival, a door appeared on the wall in front of him.

Slowly, he reached for the handle and opened the door, stepping inside; the other three followed him in.

The room was enormous and looked rather like the interior of a particularly sumptuous tree house or perhaps a gigantic ship's cabin. Multicoloured hammocks were strung from the ceiling and from the balcony that ran around the dark wood-panelled and windowless walls, which were covered in bright tapestry hangings.

They saw the gold Gryffindor lion emblazoned on scarlet, the black badger of Hufflepuff set against yellow, and the bronze eagle of Ravenclaw on blue. The silver and green of Slytherin were noticeably absent. There were bulging bookcases, a few broomsticks propped against the walls, and in the corner, a large wireless in a wooden case.

"Harry?" a voice called from below the steps that led into the room.

Sirius looked down to see Neville, Alice and Frank's boy, looking up at Harry with shock and elation, one eye swollen yellow and purple, visible gouge marks on his face.

"Harry!" he yelled and rushed up, taking his friend into a tight embrace.

At Neville's shouts, more followed.

"HARRY!"

"It's Potter; it's POTTER!"

"Ron!"

"Hermione!"

"Is that Sirius Black?"

"I thought he was dead."

"Neville, what is this place?" Harry asked, eyes wide as he took in the giant room.

"Room of Requirement, of course!" Neville exclaimed. "Surpassed itself, hasn't it? The Carrows were chasing me, and I knew I had just one chance for a hideout. I managed to get through the door, and this is what I found! Well, it wasn't exactly like this when I arrived: it was a lot smaller, and there was only one hammock and just Gryffindor hangings, but it's expanded as more and more of the D.A. have arrived."

"And the Carrows can't get in?" Harry wondered aloud, looking around for the door.

"Only need to worry about one now, anyway," Sirius breezily commented.

Harry turned to look at him. "What's that?"

"What? The Carrows? Yeah, I spotted old Alecto on my way in. She's allergic to dogs," Sirius said with a devious grin.

Hermione frowned at him. "Do I even want to know?"

"She pulled a wand on me," Sirius said hastily. "It was all in defence, love, I promise. I didn't even have a wand in my hand."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "Did you *have* hands?"

"Trust me, Hermione, if you knew the Alecto Carrow that I knew growing up, you wouldn't give her memory a passing thought. Or her brother either. In fact, I'm looking forward to a little reunion with Amycus."

"Can you just . . . I don't know, try to avoid trouble?" she pleaded with him, a stern look on her face. "Is that even possible?"

"You act like I purposely walk into fights," Sirius said accusingly. "If you haven't noticed, I've been pretty adept at not dying this year, and the only fights I get into are when I'm being attacked."

Hermione folded her arms across her chest. "You could be a little less enthusiastic about it."

"I have very few outlets for my energy," Sirius contended, his jaw tight. "At least this way I'm bloody helpful."

"Are they always like this?" Neville whispered to Harry who merely rolled his eyes, dipped his head in confirmation, and walked away from his feuding godfather and best friend.

Hermione clearly heard the comment because she glowered at Harry, watching as he moved into the crowd to be welcomed by old friends and acquaintances.

"I need to speak to any Ravenclaws," Harry declared.

Luna's blond hair stood out as she made her way through the crowd. They had only seen her a day earlier at Shell Cottage and had no idea that she had planned on returning to Hogwarts.

"Luna, is there anything in Ravenclaw Tower that might have belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw? Might be small? Maybe have an eagle on it?" Harry asked.

Luna stared off into space. "Well, there's her lost diadem."

Sirius chuckled. "Told you."

"Told who what?" someone said from behind Sirius.

As they all turned to look, Ginny climbed through a hole in the wall, closely followed by Fred, George, and another boy. Ginny gave Harry a radiant smile, and Sirius grinned at the blush that washed over his godson's face.

"I knew there was something still there," Sirius commented to Hermione.

"Of course there is. He only ended things with her to keep her safe." Hermione smiled as Ginny approached Harry and pulled him into a tight hug.

"He's like James that way." Sirius frowned. "Always tried to keep Lily safe."

"He's like *you* that way." Hermione beamed up at him. "You keep us safe. You've kept *me* safe."

Sirius scowled, his tone low and sombre as he said, "I let you be tortured."

"She's gone. I can't have that day . . . or moment back, but she's not out there looking to finish the job." Hermione took a slow deep breath as if trying to remind herself of the very facts that she was so eager to use to calm Sirius down. "I owe that to you."

"Thought you said you don't like me fighting." Sirius scoffed lightly, hoping to break the tension of the sober moment.

"I don't like you in harm's way. There's a difference. I'll admit it's a fine line . . ." She looked up, and Sirius grinned at her. "A *very* fine line," she added, narrowing her gaze at him. "Reckless and brave are very different things, Sirius."

"Good thing I'm a Gryffindor then, huh? We're very well known for our bravery."

"Weren't you almost put in Slytherin?" she teased, laughing when he glared at her in reply.

"I'm going to Ravenclaw Tower," Harry announced as he approached Hermione and Sirius, a look of determination on his face. "Luna's going with me so I can get inside. It's a shot in the dark, but I think the diadem is something he'd use, you know?"

"We're coming with you," Hermione said.

"No, stay here. Fred said he contacted the Order to let them know what was happening. They should show up, and when that happens, I need you here to fill in the blanks. *He's* on his way, and we need to act fast. While I'm gone . . ." Harry whispered, "deal with the cup."

"Okay." Hermione hugged Harry tightly. "Please stay safe."

"We'll see you soon, love." Sirius moved for the door only to be stopped by Harry's hand on his forearm.

"No, Sirius, you stay here."

Sirius almost growled, his eyes wide. "I'm not letting you out of my sight."

"Yes, you are," Harry insisted. "I need you to stay with them, especially Hermione." He leant in and sighed. "When Ron destroyed the locket, it . . . fought back in a way that almost overpowered him. Got inside his head and showed him ugly lies, preying on his insecurities and weaknesses. When I destroyed the diary, it nearly killed me. I need someone here with her."

They both looked back to Hermione, who was digging in her beaded bag, more than likely looking for the Sword of Gryffindor and the cup.

"Sirius, I trust you to take care of her."

"Fine," Sirius begrudgingly agreed. "But you get right back here," he said in what little fatherly voice he could summon up. He thought he could imitate what he imagined James would have sounded like in this situation but failed miserably. He should have imitated Lily. That girl's temper would have stopped a rampaging chimaera.

"I promise." Harry smiled and then disappeared through the door after Luna.

"Ron!" Hermione approached the redhead. "Sirius and I are going to go take care of the cup."

"I'm coming with you," Ron declared.

"No, someone needs to be here when the Order shows up. You need to get them all up to date. We all have jobs now; yours is to help Neville rally the troops." Hermione glanced back at the gathered students and let out a nervous sigh. "Maybe figure out how to get some of them out of here. The younger students shouldn't be fighting a war."

Ron frowned. "None of us should be fighting a war, 'Mione."

"No, I suppose not." She lowered her gaze to the cup in her hand. "All right, let's get going. Stay safe, Ron." She smiled and hugged him tightly before turning on her heel and stepping toward Sirius.

As he opened the door for her, Sirius cast a look back at Ron who was joined by Neville. He gave the boys a nod, hoping that his silent support would be properly conveyed.

"Where to, kitten?" he asked as they moved down the corridor.

Hermione clutched the cup tightly, passing the Sword of Gryffindor over to him as it was too heavy for her to carry and still move as swiftly as she needed to. "I'm . . . I'm not sure. I don't know where in the castle would be safe. Under normal circumstances, I would have suggested the Room of Requirement." She began to wear her bottom lip between her teeth anxiously. "Why didn't I think to ask Harry for the map?"

"You are forgetting one very important resource you have at your disposal, Miss Granger." Sirius grinned, puffing out his chest. "The person who made the map in the first place. There isn't a passage in this castle that I don't know about. Speaking of which, there's a perfectly secluded one on the fourth floor behind a mirror."

"Nope." Hermione shook her head. "Caved in years ago. You're forgetting that Harry, Ron, and I used the map to navigate all those secret passages you're so proud of," she said with a bit more snark in her voice than she generally let out.

The tone made Sirius chuckle deep in his throat. "I *know* it's caved in, but I haven't seen it in years. Is it completely caved in, or just blocked on the other end?"

"It's just blocked." She paused and then let out a frustrated sigh, evidently upset that he had arrived at the conclusion before she had. "Which essentially makes it a private, secluded room with only one entrance." Her eyes widened as she realised the implication. "You're brilliant!"

"Glad you're starting to see things my way, kitten." Sirius beamed and followed her as they made their way down the shifting staircases to the fourth floor. He turned heading down a long hallway that came to a dead end where a large mirror hung on the wall.

He reached out, pushing the mirror aside, and muttered, "*Aparecium*."

Just as he spoke, a doorway opened behind the mirror. Hermione smiled and they both entered.

"*Lumos*," Sirius whispered, dimly lighting the end of his wand and looking around.

Hermione was right; the back end of the passageway had caved in, completely blocking any chance of a secondary exit. He could not help but remember the last time he had used this passage.

As the door shut tight behind them, the room fell into utter darkness save for the soft glow from Sirius's wand.

"This will make things easier," Hermione said, reaching into her beaded bag and retrieving a glass jar.

At her wandless, silent spell, a bluebell fire erupted from Hermione's fingertips, and she immediately caught it in the jar as though the flickering flames were nothing more than harmless fireflies. She grinned up at Sirius and sealed the jar, setting it down on the floor to allow the fire to light up the passageway.

After setting the Horcrux on the ground in front of her, Hermione reached an empty hand out to him, silently requesting the sword.

Sirius hesitated for a moment, remembering Harry's words to him. *The Horcruxes fight back*. His heart thudded in his chest in anticipation of whatever fight the little goblet would serve up, but he relented and handed the sword to Hermione.

"Be careful, love," he whispered as he nervously watched her move closer to the cup.

She slowly approached, taking small, deliberate steps toward it. The sword looked heavy in her hands, but Sirius knew she could still lift it with ease. She was a Gryffindor, after all, and the sword was meant to be wielded solely by the hands of true Gryffindors. One step closer to the cup and the Horcrux began to shake as though anticipating the oncoming attack. As she took yet another step forward, a cold, high voice rang out.

Hermione looked prepared for the attack.

But Sirius was not.

*"Sirius Black . . ."* the voice hissed, stopping both Hermione and Sirius in their steps. *"I can see your fears . . ."*

Sirius's attention quickly fell on Hermione's form, silently willing her forward to stab the bloody thing before it got a little too chatty.

*"I can see your heart. The past is your weakness."*

Sirius growled. "No shit."

*"And so is the girl."*

"It's doing something," Hermione said, staring down at the cup that appeared to be filling with liquid and eventually overflowing onto the ground. "Please be water."

It *was* water. Rapidly flowing water. Before either of them knew it, they were standing in a foot of it, the cup submerged beneath the surface.

Hermione moved toward the Horcrux, but the closer she brought the sword, the faster the water rose, making it harder to move. Soon she found herself standing waist deep in the swiftly filling room.

"Kill that fucking thing, Hermione!"

"Sirius, I can't reach it!"

Behind her, Sirius aimed spell after spell trying to dam the flow of the liquid that was rising up the walls around them. Nothing was working.

"Shit!" he shouted, reaching for her, but as soon as his fingers touched her skin, the water around them began sloshing about in a circular motion like a whirlpool.

Hermione screamed and slipped, the waves dragging her beneath the surface.

Sirius lunged for her but missed, losing his wand in the process. "Hermione!"

The jar of bluebell flames floated beneath the surface, light bobbing through the water and against the walls as it whirled around in the depths of the waves.

"Hermione!" he called again, but there was no answer.

When the jar of fire moved closer to him, Sirius caught it and held it above his head, desperately searching but not finding her within reach. His attention turned downward as the water reached his neck, and his gaze focused on a large shadow in the depths below and the glimmer of something shiny and gold. He took a deep breath just before the water came up and over his head, sealing them in as it touched the roof above.

Lighting his way with the jar, Sirius swam down in search of Hermione, fighting against the current that tried to carry him away. His eye caught another glimmer, but instead of the determination he had felt when he spotted the cup at the bottom of this watery tomb, the sight of the Sword of Gryffindor made his heart sink. He had last seen it in Hermione's grip.

Panic flooded him, and he instinctively reached for the hilt of the sword, gripping it tightly. A *nearly* overwhelming part of him wanted to find Hermione, to save her, but the very small logical part of his brain fought back with a vengeance. The Horcrux was to blame, and even if he found her, he could not hope to save her while still being drowned by a bloody goblet.

Sirius swam, moving swiftly despite the fight the Horcrux was putting up, as well as the awkward length of the sword in his hands. He caught sight of the cup and—even though the water pushed in against his chest, forcing what little oxygen was left from his lungs—he brought the tip of the blade up and thrust it down, stabbing through the centre of the object.

The cup began to shake violently as a black liquid seeped out, swirling into the water around it.

Sirius propelled himself backward to avoid the dark liquid. He struggled against the water around him, trying to kick his way to the surface of the sinking water level, catching only a brief glimmer of hope in the form of the broken rubble at the passage's exit where cracks in the cave allowed the water to swiftly escape.

When his head finally broke the surface, he let out a loud gasp, taking in air as deeply and quickly as possible, and coughing up water that had forced its way down his throat during the struggle.

Catching his balance as his feet hit the ground, the water finally having drained enough to allow him to touch the floor, Sirius scanned the room, searching for Hermione.

The jar that enclosed the flames clinked against the hard floor and spun across the ground as the water all but evaporated from the room.

He finally saw the silhouette of the small witch crumpled in the corner of the room.

"Hermione!"

Her name was a mournful cry as he rushed to her, pulled her against himself, and tilted her head back. Face pale, body lifeless, eyes closed, and skin ice cold.

"*Rennervate!*" he yelled, but nothing happened. He focused, his entire torso tight with desperation. "*Rennervate!*"

His entire world threatened to close in on him as her body remained limp in his arms.

## Chapter Twelve

### *How Firewhisky Felt*

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*Now that I know what I'm without  
You can't just leave me  
Breathe into me and make me real  
Bring me to life  
(Bring Me to Life - Evanescence)*

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**May 1st, 1998**

"Hermione, please wake up," Sirius cried, cradling her to his chest desperately.

For the first time in what felt like decades, tears formed in his eyes and fell swiftly down his cheeks, still wet from the Horcrux-created flood that had tried to kill him only moments ago.

"Mia," he whispered. "Please, wake up." His lips brushed gently against her forehead, and he shut his eyes so tightly that he saw stars behind his eyelids. His heart threatened to break inside his chest as he willed his own warmth to permeate her body, to bring her back to him. As though he could will his own breath to . . .

He gasped as a memory surfaced. "Lily."

Sirius cursed under his breath, hoping that he had paid enough attention the first time around. He moved Hermione's body gently down to the stone floor and did a rapid visual survey, determined to remember something from many years ago.

"Bloody hell. How did Mia do this?" He lifted Hermione's chin with his fingers, tilted her head backward, and pinched her small nose with his large, callused fingers before adjusting her chin to part her lips.

Leaning close, Sirius inhaled, his hands shaking as he lowered his lips over hers. Had it been any other moment in his life, had he not been trying to save her, had she not been so cold beneath his touch, he would have relished the feel of her lips against his. He would have groaned into her, devoured the feel of her mouth, lost himself in the sweetness of her breath with hunger and longing.

But she had no breath.

So he gave her his.

Breath after breath, he pushed the air into her, stopping only to press his hands between her breasts, forcefully compressing down multiple times, repeating the process over and over, silently praying to Merlin and Circe and Morgana and Godric and hell, even Salazar fucking Slytherin, if it brought the girl back to him.

Just as the light from the jar containing the bluebell flames finally died out, submerging them into utter darkness, he felt her body tremble beneath his hands.

Suddenly, Hermione convulsed upward, coughing and choking up the water that had tried to pull her from this world. She gasped loudly and cried out, and he pulled her against him, quietly sobbing into her mess of thick, wet curls.

"Sirius?" Hermione whispered, her voice breaking as her hands clung to his wet shirt.

"It's gone," Sirius muttered his assurances, lips pressed to her brow. "Merlin, don't ever die on me again."

He kissed her forehead, again and again, not caring that he could not see a thing, or that somewhere above them in the castle, loud, banging noises reverberated. She was alive. He drew in breath after breath, each one reminding his racing heart: *She's alive.*

He could hear her whimper as she threw her arms around his shoulders, stifling her cries in the crook of his neck. Desperate to comfort her, Sirius ran his fingers up and down her spine, leaving behind soothing trails with his tender strokes.

She let out a loud sob against his skin, and the sound broke him anew. He held her tight, reassuring himself that she was, in fact, still alive. As if his soul refused to believe it, he was forced to check again.

Reaching for her face, Sirius cupped her cheeks in his hands and pulled her away from his shoulder. Though he could not see her, he could feel her breath gently gliding across the skin of his jaw.

"You're alive." He said the words like they were a prayer, and he could feel Hermione nodding her head in his hands.

"I'm alive."

The sweet words roughly rasped from her recently breathless lips shattered what little resolve he had left. Remus had insisted that she *would* survive this. Sirius believed him, perhaps, but he had almost lost her, and now, more than ever, he felt the finality of war

and death, and he could not let one more moment escape without loving her the way he was meant to, the way he was made to, the way magic wanted him to.

Without a second thought to the very damning consequences, Sirius pressed his lips against hers, revelling in the warmth that graced them once again. He waited for her to push away from him, expecting a solid slap across the face, but a sweet-tasting sigh escaped up her throat and vibrated against his lips. Surprised but elated, he captured the noise gratefully, swallowing it as his lips moved worshipfully over hers.

With little restraint, the ache in his body demanded that he taste her.

He feathered the tips of his fingers against her arms, trailing down until they grazed along her ribs, and she gasped in response. Her lips parted, and he took immediate advantage of the unconscious invitation, sliding his tongue into the wet warmth of her mouth and growling in appreciation when she pushed her own tongue forward to gently touch his. He groaned deep in his throat as an old, familiar thought came to the forefront of his mind:

*She tasted how firewhisky felt.*

He thought he had forgotten, worried he had imagined it all, but this was real. She was alive and in his arms, giving him as much as she was taking, and he sank into the feel of her. So overcome by the assault on his senses, Sirius almost missed the familiar tug of something deep inside of him that made him think: *Do you feel that, too? Please feel it, too.*

He dug his free hand into the tangle of messy, chestnut curls at the nape of her neck, holding her tightly against him as the hungry beast within his chest growled for more. She made sweet little mewling sounds against his lips, and he drank in every last one of them, promising to coax more out of her as though it was the sole purpose of his existence. Maybe it *was*.

Her soft whimpers and moans fuelled a fire within him that had not burned in almost nineteen years, and he suddenly felt as though she had never left him. No death, no war, no Peter, no Voldemort, no betrayal, no loss, no bloody Azkaban, and certainly no veil. There was just her. Only ever her. Just this moment in the darkness, nibbling fervently at her lower lip and licking at the mark immediately afterward.

She whispered his name, and Sirius moved his hands to her hips, pulling her into his lap and against his hard body on instinct. She winced at the movement, bringing a hand between her breasts, inhaling slowly. He realised that he must have hurt her with the

compressions earlier. A part of him thought to release her, but then he felt the pressure of her hands on his chest. Expecting to be pushed away, he was startled when she began to explore him instead.

Sirius keened at the touch, slanting his mouth over hers and stroking his tongue inside of her mouth in a desperate attempt to silently communicate all the thoughts in his head and his heart. He wanted her to know everything, to know the truth, and he worried that he would be dead before the right moment came for her to learn it all.

Magic plucked at his soul like a guitar string, vibrating between the two of them, a shared melody that formed itself into a song and repeated in both of their minds with only one lyric: *Mine*.

Hermione smoothed her hands up the column of his throat, burying her fingers in his long black locks and groaning against him, tightening the grip she had on his hair. The darkness made it easier. Gave her a confidence she did not know she had. She wanted to vocalise everything she was feeling but did not have the ability to properly form coherent thoughts, let alone voice them aloud.

She wanted to tell him that this kiss was *everything* to her.

Upon opening her eyes, she had felt the lingering tingle on her lips that told her *how* he had saved her life, and a part of the sob she had cried into his shoulder was over the fact that the tingles were fading, and she did not even remember what he had felt like.

She wanted to tell him that she felt those tingles now. They spread like Fiendfyre against the skin of her neck, flooding down her chest and burying themselves into a pool in her belly. She wanted to tell him that he tasted like Sugar Quills and how when she was deep in study mode, she sucked on the candy eagerly—a thought that put erotic and inappropriate fantasies in her mind, causing her to push further against him, trying to melt into the feel of his hands on her thighs.

She wanted to tell him many things but hide other secrets deep down. She wanted to hide her anxiety and worries. She wanted to hide the fact that she was terrified that it was the unspoken magical bond she had created with Blood Magic that was driving him to touch her, tease her, and plunder her mouth with such vigour. She wanted to hide her inexperience and the fact that though she had dreamt of a kiss like this for years, she had never experienced one like it. Or one at all.

Viktor had been nothing but a gentleman when he had escorted her to the Yule Ball fourth year, and despite what Ginny had told Ron, he had left Hogwarts with a mere kiss to Hermione's knuckles in farewell, nothing more. Cormac McLaggen had gotten close, going so far as to attempt to trap her beneath charmed mistletoe at Slughorn's Christmas party, but Hermione had escaped without ever touching his lips—though his hands had gravitated toward her arse more than she would care to admit. Everyone had assumed that she and Ron would end up together, but seeing what happened last year with Lavender put him in a new light, and whatever mild childish feelings she had formed for the redhead had turned familial all too quickly.

Her previous fancies and suitors had all been boys, save for the embarrassing infatuation she had once held for Gilderoy Lockhart—as well as a more secretive crush on a *different* Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher her third year. But this . . . this *man* in her arms was just that. A man. He did not fumble with his movements and did not touch her with hesitation. His affections were not clumsy or rushed; he was precise without being predictable—surprising considering how reckless and impulsive he often could be. His ministrations lit a fire in her belly. As his fingers grazed the side of her breast, her head fell back, and she let out a soft cry. A shiver descended her spine like cool water on the hottest day of summer.

Something fluid burned inside of her like liquid fire. It felt like it was flowing out of her and into him, returning to her body and bringing something with it that sparked with energy. The sparks went off in time like morse code, tap tap tapping between them, spelling out: *Mine*.

Sirius forced himself to pull away from her; the pulsating tone he felt more than heard inside of him was too reminiscent of moments from his past, and he needed to remind himself that this was still *Hermione* in his arms, and she was not ready to know everything that he knew.

He could hear her panting in the darkness, gasping for air, and a part of him felt guilty for depriving her of oxygen, considering the lack of such had literally almost killed her minutes ago. Though their lips no longer connected, he felt incapable of releasing her, knowing that the moment he did, she would leave his arms forever.

He had kissed her. He had just kissed *Hermione*, the eighteen-year-old best friend of his godson. And he had not just *kissed* the girl, he had properly and thoroughly *snogged* her.

Half of him wished that the moment would not end so that he would never have to face the consequences of his actions. The other half of him was desperate for light, so he could see the dishevelled state he knew she was in. He wanted to witness for himself her wild curls, her flushed cheeks, and her swollen lips.

But darkness and silence continued, broken only by the sound of their breathing.

"Hermione . . ." he finally spoke, but his voice was immediately silenced by another. A high, cold voice that permeated the air around them. There was no telling from where it came.

*"I know that you are preparing to fight. Your efforts are futile. You cannot fight me. I do not want to kill you. I have great respect for the teachers of Hogwarts. I do not want to spill magical blood. Give me Harry Potter, and none shall be harmed. Give me Harry Potter, and I shall leave the school untouched. Give me Harry Potter, and you will be rewarded. You have until midnight."*

The silence once again swallowed them, and this time both were holding their breath.

Hermione was first to break away, both vocally and physically as she climbed out of Sirius's lap. "We have to go. We have to help Harry."

Without another word about what had just transpired, Sirius nodded and stood.

Searching in the dark, he whispered, "*Lumos*," when he found his wand. He looked down on the ground at the destroyed Horcrux and handed it to Hermione, who swiftly tucked it into her beaded bag. Then, he reached for Gryffindor's sword and made his way to the exit.

As the two made their way out of the corridor, a flurry of activity was taking place both above and below them. Something was attacking the castle, and the damage to the wards was causing the very ground to shake beneath them. Students and faculty appeared to move as one below, and they spotted Neville, who was following Professor Sprout with a half dozen other students, carrying what looked like silenced mandrakes.

Sirius gave a throaty chuckle and rubbed the pad of his thumb over his wand, adjusting his grip in preparation. "Looks like we almost missed out on all the fun."

"Room of Requirement," she blurted out, ducking her head down as she moved as though she were trying to hide the blush that he could so clearly see.

"We have to see if the Order arrived." She spoke quickly and moved faster, darting up the staircase and making her way to the seventh floor.

When they turned the corner, their eyes widened at the sight of Harry and Draco sitting against the wall, breathing heavily, with what looked like ash smudging their faces. Harry's glasses were partially fogged over, and Draco's normally white blond hair was stained grey. The unconscious bodies of Crabbe and Goyle were piled into a heap nearby; both boys had clearly been stunned and bound.

"What the hell happened to you two?" Sirius demanded.

"Malfoy . . ." Harry said in between breaths, ". . . saved me."

Hermione gaped. "*You saved Harry?*"

"Where do I collect my Order of Merlin?" Draco quipped, panting.

"Found it." Harry tossed a broken and blackened tiara at Hermione's feet. "How'd you lot do?" he asked, a chuckle slipping from his throat, followed by several loud coughs, clearing smoke from his lungs.

"Destroyed," Hermione said vaguely. "How'd you get rid of yours without the sword? And why are the two of you covered in . . . soot?"

"I remembered seeing the diadem last year when you made me get rid of the Potions book," Harry said, a remnant of bitterness colouring his voice. "I went in to get it and found myself face to face with Malfoy and those two." He gestured to Crabbe and Goyle.

"They tried to Avada Potter," Draco muttered, shaking his head in obvious disapproval. "Even if I wasn't on your side, that's a stupid move. Everyone knows the Dark Lord wants him for himself. I stunned them before they got him."

"Not before one of them cast Fiendfyre in the Room of Hidden Things," Harry blurted out.

"Fiendfyre?" Hermione shrieked. "How did you escape?"

"Take it down an octave, Granger." Draco scowled. "You are looking at the two best Seekers this school has ever seen. *We flew.*" He gestured to the two singed brooms resting against the opposite wall.

Sirius glared at the unconscious Slytherins, and he must have been growling under his breath, because Draco stepped into his line of vision and said, "They're just like me, but they didn't get a way out in time."

"They tried to kill my godson."

"And they'll go to trial for that. You know what trials are, don't you, cousin?" Draco asked pointedly. "If I was informed correctly, *you* never got one. You wouldn't let me

murder their fathers. You told me I wasn't a killer." He stood and came face to face with Sirius. "Don't be a hypocrite."

It was shocking for Sirius to see the family resemblance in the boy. Draco's dirty hair helped to disguise the fact that he was often thought the spitting image of his father; in this light, he could see the Black blood in him, especially his grey eyes which Sirius knew matched his own almost perfectly. Silently acknowledging their shared family trait, he took a step backward, refusing to admit defeat but instead calling a truce.

"Get them out of my sight," he ordered Draco.

Abruptly, Hermione let out a loud gasp, and all three wizards turned to face her with intense expressions and drawn wands. She covered her mouth and gave Harry and Sirius a guilty look. "Sorry," she whispered. "I just realised. Harry, the snake is all that's left!"

Before they had a chance to respond to her, the ground shook, and an explosion resounded at the other end of the corridor, followed by distinct shouts and the sound of spells ricocheting off stone surfaces. The four ran toward the commotion to find three redheads amongst a large heap of rubble.

"Ron!" Harry shouted.

Ron groaned and pushed large stones off his body. "M' alright." Fred and Percy stood protectively over him, each duelling a Death Eater. "Bloody Death Eaters are blowing up the bloody castle now!" he growled as Harry jumped over to help him to his feet. "What's new with you?" His blue eyes held a look of mirth as Fred and Percy grinned while shooting Stunning Spells and destructive curses at their opponents.

Harry laughed. "Oh, you know, fought a few fires, destroyed a couple of Horcruxes, made some new friends."

"We are *not* friends, Potter." Draco glared, and Harry laughed harder.

"Enough!" Hermione scowled at the scene. "Harry, it's time to end this. We need to find the snake," she insisted, reaching forward to grab his spectacles, running a gentle Scouring Charm over the lenses before handing them back to him. "You need to find out where Voldemort is because he'll have the snake with him, won't he? Do it, Harry. Look inside him!"

As Draco turned to help Fred, Ron, and Percy fight off their attackers, Sirius remained on the other side to make sure they were not attacked from behind. He kept an eye on Harry as he closed his eyes, Hermione watching carefully as she knelt next to him.

With a gasp, Harry pulled back and opened his eyes. "He's in the Shrieking Shack," Harry blurted out. "The snake's with him; it's got some sort of magical protection around it. He's there with Snape."

"Voldemort's sitting in the Shrieking Shack?" Hermione asked, outraged. "He's not . . . He's not even fighting?"

"He doesn't think he needs to fight," Harry said. "He thinks I'm going to go to him."

Hermione gaped. "But why?"

"He knows I'm after the Horcruxes; he's keeping Nagini close. Obviously, I'm going to have to go to him to get near the thing."

Sirius noticed that Harry was fumbling with the phial of memories that Snape had given him hours earlier.

"Right," Ron said, squaring his shoulders. "So you can't go. That's what he wants, what he's expecting. You stay here and look after Hermione, and I'll go and get it—"

Harry cut through Ron's words. "You two stay here, I'll go under the Cloak, and I'll be back as soon as I—"

"What cloak?" Draco chimed in.

"He's got an Invisibility Cloak," Ron answered.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Of *course* he does."

"No," Hermione said, "it makes much more sense if *I* take the Cloak and—"

"Potter," Draco muttered.

Sirius snarled, "Over my dead body!"

"Don't even think about it!" Ron shouted at the same time.

Draco raised his voice. "Potter!"

"I am just as capable as the rest of you!" Hermione snapped.

"POTTER!" Draco screamed, and everyone turned to look at him. "Grab your bloody cloak, and head to the shack. Take Black with you. Weasel will stay here with the other Weasels to keep the Death Eaters at bay while Granger and I cover you."

Ron glowered. "What gives you the right to hand out orders?"

"The fact that no one else is fucking doing it!" Draco barked, and before the two wizards collided, Hermione stepped between them, wand raised.

"Go, Harry. Put an end to all of this," she pleaded and then rushed forward, pulling her best friend into a hug and kissing his cheek. Harry smiled at her and turned to leave, gesturing at Sirius to follow, but Sirius paused, looking down at Hermione.

He realised that the two of them had not properly made eye contact since leaving the dark, caved-in passageway. Not that they had done much with their eyes down there in the first place.

"Go," she whispered and hugged Sirius close to her. "Come back safe, both of you."

Sirius smiled and kissed her forehead before turning on the heels of his dragonhide boots and following Harry.

Hermione watched, longingly, as Sirius disappeared around the corner.

"Come on, Granger," Draco ordered.

Ron gripped Draco's robes tightly and glared at him. "She's not going with you."

"We don't have time for this!" Hermione shouted and turned away from them both to go after Harry and Sirius. If Ron let Draco follow her then so be it, but she was not sticking around to watch another pissing match between the two while her best friend and her . . . and her . . . and Sirius risked their lives.

Hermione ran down the next staircase and found herself in the middle of several vicious duels. The portraits on either side of the fighters were crammed with figures screaming advice and encouragement, while Death Eaters, both masked and unmasked, duelled students and teachers.

Dean, with his stolen Snatcher's wand, faced off with Amycus Carrow, Parvati against Avery, and Seamus with Jugson.

It was at that point that Draco caught up with her, though he appeared to have a new bruise marring the sharp angles of his jaw. Hermione raised a brow. Draco lifted his right hand showing bloody knuckles.

"The other guy looks worse, trust me," he said with a smug grin, and she glared at him.

The two surveyed the onslaught before them, scanning the crowd for Harry or Sirius but could find neither. They stood braced, waiting for the opportunity to act, but before they could, there came a great "Wheeeeeee!"

Looking up, Hermione saw Peeves zooming over them, dropping snargaluff pods down onto the Death Eaters, whose heads were suddenly engulfed in wriggling green tubers that looked like fat worms. A fistful of tubers had hit something up ahead; the damp green roots were suspended improbably in mid-air.

"Someone's invisible there!" a masked Death Eater shouted, pointing at what Hermione knew to be Sirius and Harry beneath the cloak.

"*Wingardium Leviosa!*" Hermione called out, and the masked Death Eater rose into the air, his limbs flailing around as he screamed in rage. She gave a sigh of relief as she saw a large black dog dash from beneath the cloak and make a run for the Whomping Willow, followed closely by a flapping, green-soaked cloak.

"Really, Granger?" Draco eyed her incredulously. "A *first* year spell?"

Hermione held Draco's stare with an emotionless look. With the slightest flick of her wand, the floating Death Eater was flung into a castle wall with a loud crunch and fell to the ground in an unconscious heap.

He smiled scornfully. "I'll deny it if you ever tell anyone, but . . . that was mildly impressive."

The moment was short-lived, however, when a group of Death Eaters attacked them from the other direction.

Hermione ducked behind a large stone pillar to avoid a Stunning Spell.

Draco's face changed immediately, looking very like the frightened boy he used to be, throwing up his arms in surrender. "I'm Draco Malfoy!" he shouted as if pleading with the masked invaders. "I'm Draco. I'm on your side!"

"Malfoy?" They gaped at him. "Where the bloody hell you been, boy?"

"*Everte Statum!*" Suddenly all three Death Eaters flew backward, landing on their backsides. Draco followed up the attack by disarming all three. He grinned, twirling his wand. "Idiots."

"You're dead, you little blood-traitor!"

"*Incarcerous,*" Hermione said and watched as ropes flew out of her wand, binding the Death Eaters. "*Epoximise,*" she added, and the ropes drew themselves downward, sticking to the stone floor beneath the new prisoners.

Malfoy sneered. "Showing off, Granger?"

"Not yet." Hermione chuckled and swished her wand. "*Aviz.*" One by one, a tiny flock of canaries burst from the tip.

"Still at war here," Draco muttered impatiently.

She grinned, a hint of mischief in her eyes. "*Oppugno.*"

The canaries descended and began viciously attacking the Death Eaters, who began to scream and thrash against their bindings to no avail.

Draco, against his better judgement, looked amused by the sight, and Hermione beamed in response.

"Careful there, Granger." He gave her his famous smirk. "People might think you're flirting with me, and something tells me that you're already spoken for." He winked at her, and her face heated. Waving his wand, Draco strode fluidly through the Great Hall, expelling Death Eaters through its glass windows with every step.

"What do you know?" Hermione demanded as she caught up with him.

Draco laughed. "I know that I'm not as stupid as everyone else. I know that Black called in a life debt from my mother back at the manor, and when she hesitated, he threatened to use a very old, very powerful spell. Did you know, Granger, that life debts, when called in properly, can even bring back the dead?" He turned and grinned at her, a gleam in his eye as he watched her reaction.

"It's not Dark Magic!" she defended.

"No, it's *Blood* Magic." Draco's grin spread across his face. "It's *Binding* Magic."

"Malfoy, I swear if you say anything, I'll—"

"Oh, I'll keep your little secret, *Hermione*," he used her first name and laughed when she grimaced at the sound of it coming out of his mouth. "After all, we're practically family now."

Before she could say another word, silence fell over the castle.

Everyone stopped in their tracks, and the Death Eaters made a hasty retreat as if silently commanded to do so. Before anyone could ask what had happened, the walls echoed once again with the high, cold voice that Hermione knew to be Voldemort. Her eyes narrowed, and she turned to Malfoy for an explanation, but the blond wizard—who looked fearless in the face of multiple Death Eaters—shrank against the sound of the Dark Lord.

*"You have fought valiantly. Lord Voldemort knows how to value bravery. Yet you have sustained heavy losses. If you continue to resist me, you will all die, one by one. I do not wish this to happen. Every drop of magical blood spilt is a loss and a waste. Lord Voldemort is merciful. I command my forces to retreat immediately. You have one hour. Dispose of your dead with dignity. Treat your injured.*

*"I speak now, Harry Potter, directly to you. You have permitted your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself. I shall wait for one hour in the Forbidden Forest. If, at the end of that hour, you have not come to me, have not given yourself up, then battle recommences. This time, I shall enter the fray myself, Harry Potter, and I shall find you, and I shall punish every last man, woman, and child who has tried to conceal you from me. One hour."*

Hermione looked up, terrified at the thought that Harry and Sirius had not made it to the Shrieking Shack if Voldemort was still alive. But he had called for Harry specifically, which meant that Harry must still be alive.

She scanned the Great Hall where the wounded were being carried in by the droves. A glance at Draco, who was recovering from the announcement, made her think that he was trying to decide whether or not he had picked the winning side.

## Chapter Thirteen

### *This is My Job*

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*For the life of me, I cannot remember  
What made us think that we were wise, and we'd never compromise  
For the life of me, I cannot believe  
We'd ever die for these sins  
We were merely freshmen  
(Freshmen - The Verve Pipe)*

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**May 2nd, 1998**

The entire room fell silent when Harry and Sirius entered the Great Hall.

The large room had been set up as a temporary medical treatment centre. House tables were pushed together and the coloured banners that used to run the length of them were tossed aside or cut up for bandages. No longer did these banners symbolise the separation of Houses, but instead, the unity of the students, professors, and adults in the battle against Voldemort. The uninjured huddled together, providing support to one another while the injured queued around the Head Table, waiting to be examined by Madam Pomfrey and her aides.

Along the south wall, Draco was guarding the few captured Death Eaters, ensuring their bindings were tight and that they remained unconscious and wandless. Without any remorse in his eyes, he moved to snap each of their wands. If they made it to trial and were found innocent—which was highly unlikely—they could always purchase new ones.

Fred Weasley was brought into the Great Hall with deep, bleeding gouges across his face. While his poor mother paled at his appearance, Fred appeared to be in high spirits, gladly telling George at his side that he now resembled Bill more than his own twin. Fleur took Molly's arm and followed behind the levitating stretcher as it carried Fred into a private area where Madam Pomfrey was waiting.

Hermione was tending to the wounded with Luna and Ginny. The redhead sat beside a boy at the Ravenclaw table. He looked dazed as she splinted his broken arm. Next to him, and squeezing his hand in pain was Dean Thomas, who Sirius remembered from their stay at Shell Cottage. He was being tended to by Luna, who carefully wrapped a large cut on his calf.

Before Hermione had a chance to take a breath at the sight of Sirius standing in the entrance, Ginny rushed toward Harry, wrapping her arms tightly around him and squeezing as though he would disappear if she let him go.

Sirius caught Hermione's gaze and they shared a sad little smile at the sight. He noted her stance, nervous, clenching her hands together at the sight of him. Without further hesitation, he walked to her, enveloping her in his arms and breathing out a deep sigh of relief.

"What happened?"

"Snape's dead," he replied, trying not to let his emotional turmoil show.

He still did not quite understand how he felt about the demise of his long-time nemesis. It was not more than a day ago that he had wanted to end the man's life personally, but watching as Voldemort cornered the bloke and very nearly fed him to his giant snake was nothing short of horrifying. Sirius could not help but think of Lily and wonder what she would have thought about her childhood friend's ultimate demise.

"How?" Hermione wondered aloud.

"Nagini," Sirius said. "We went in after Voldemort left. Nothing could be done. Snape said that Harry has to go view the memories he gave him. No clue what's been sitting in that git's head all these years." He scowled, sighing as Hermione frowned at him. Ignoring her reproachful stare, he tucked a loose curl behind her ear. "Yeah, yeah, don't talk ill about the dead. Are you all right here?"

She looked down at her hands and leant into his touch. "We've just been treating the wounded. Percy and Neville are outside fetching the . . . the bodies."

Sirius only nodded. "I'm going up with Harry into the Pensieve."

"I'll come too." Hermione made to move, but Sirius stopped her.

"No, you stay here. You're useful *here*. Remus and Tonks both told me that you're brilliant with Healing Spells." He smiled proudly. "As if you'd be anything else." His smile widened when he watched Hermione blush at his praise. "We shouldn't be long. Nothing dangerous up there except the past, right?"

"Keep an eye on him," Hermione cautioned Sirius. She glanced at Harry, who had already made a beeline for the headmaster's office, turning back to wait for Sirius. "He has a bad habit of trying to save everyone at risk to himself."

"I will, love." Sirius kissed her forehead quickly before following after his godson.

The truth was, Sirius was not certain what he and Harry were going to find in Snape's memories, and if the greasy git had included *certain* ones, it was dangerous for *Harry* to see them, let alone Hermione. Sirius was only accompanying Harry in order to preserve the past—or future, as it were.

"Password?" the stone gargoyle asked as they approached.

"Dumbledore," Sirius muttered, and Harry turned around to look at his godfather with wide eyes. "I know. Twisted."

Harry glanced hopelessly up at Dumbledore's deserted frame, which hung directly behind the headmaster's chair, then turned his back on it. The stone Pensieve was in a cabinet, and Harry seemed to know exactly how to access it. He heaved it onto the desk and poured the memories into the wide basin with its runic markings around the edge. One right after the other, they descended into Snape's memories, feeling overly anxious about what they were about to witness.

They fell headlong into sunlight, their feet landing on the warm ground. When Sirius straightened up, he saw that he was in a nearly deserted playground, a single huge chimney dominating the distant skyline.

*Two girls swung back and forward, and a skinny boy watched them from behind a clump of bushes. His black hair was long and his clothes were so mismatched that it looked deliberate: too-short jeans, a shabby, overly large coat that might have belonged to a grown man, an odd smock-like shirt.*

"Snape?" Harry cocked a brow.

Sirius inclined his head, staring at the familiar face from his past. It was hard to hate the man in that moment, looking at him as a child. Sirius, too, had only been a child when their rivalry began. He felt little remorse thinking back on his actions—save for a few that he certainly deserved to be guilty about—but looking at the child Snape with Sirius's adult eyes, he could not but help to feel pity for the boy.

Harry moved closer to Snape.

*There was undisguised greed on the boy's thin face as he watched the younger of the two girls swinging higher and higher than her sister.*

"Mum," Harry whispered, and Sirius frowned, putting a hand on his shoulder.

*"Lily, don't do it!" the elder of the two girls shrieked.*

*But Lily let go of the swing at the very height of its arc and flew into the air, quite literally flew, launching herself skyward with a great shout of laughter that brought tears to Sirius's eyes. Instead of*

*crumpling on the playground asphalt, Lily soared like a trapeze artist through the air, staying up far too long, landing far too lightly.*

They continued watching the memory play out, Sirius forcing himself not to look at Snape interacting with the young Lily. Despite the pity he felt for the boy, Sirius still remembered the man who did not deserve to know Lily. Not after what he had called her. Not after joining Voldemort. Sirius could not force himself to acknowledge that this small child was the cause of so much hurt to a girl he had thought of as family.

*"Does it make a difference, being Muggle-born?" Lily asked.*

*Snape visibly hesitated. "No. It doesn't make any difference."*

*"Good," Lily said, relaxing.*

"Fucking hypocrite," Sirius snapped, turning away from the scene.

"Sirius, stop," Harry scolded him.

For once, Sirius listened.

As the scene re-formed, Sirius looked around. They were on platform nine and three-quarters.

*Snape stood, slightly hunched, next to a thin, sallow-faced, sour-looking woman who greatly resembled him. Snape was staring at a family of four a short distance away; the two girls slightly apart from their parents. Lily appeared to be pleading with her sister.*

*"I'm not a freak," Lily said. "That's a horrible thing to say."*

*"That's where you're going," Petunia said with relish. "A special school for freaks. You and that Snape boy . . . weirdos, that's what you two are. It's good you're being separated from normal people. It's for our safety."*

Before Sirius could look around the platform in search of other faces from the past, the scene changed again.

*"This is it! We're off to Hogwarts!" Snape said brightly, trying to cheer Lily up as they took their seats in an empty compartment.*

Sirius grinned at the sight of himself and a young James Potter entering the same compartment. "Ah, now look at these handsome faces."

*"You'd better be in Slytherin," Snape said.*

*"Slytherin?" James said. "Who wants to be in Slytherin? I think I'd leave, wouldn't you?"*

*"My whole family have been in Slytherin," the younger Sirius said.*

*"Blimey," James said, "and I thought you seemed all right!"*

*Young Sirius grinned.*

The older Sirius let out a barking laugh.

*"Maybe I'll break the tradition. Where are you heading, if you've got the choice?"*

*James lifted an invisible sword. "Gryffindor, where dwell the brave at heart! Like my dad."*

*Snape made a small, disparaging noise. James turned on him. "Got a problem with that?"*

*"No," Snape said, though his slight sneer told otherwise. "If you'd rather be brawny than brainy."*

*"Where're you hoping to go, seeing as you're neither?" young Sirius interjected.*

*James roared with laughter.*

*Lily sat up, rather flushed, and looked from James to Sirius in dislike. "Come on, Severus, let's find another compartment."*

*"Oooooo . . ." James and Sirius imitated her lofty voice; James tried to trip Snape as he passed.*

*"See ya, Snivellus!"*

"See?" Sirius pointed out as the memory followed Snape and Lily out of the compartment. "He's always been a git."

Sirius's scowl vanished as he looked up, eyes wide. The image ahead of them stunned him into silence. Instinctively, he turned Harry by the shoulders. "Are you sure you want to see the rest of this? We don't know what he was planning when he wanted you to see this, Harry."

It was a distraction, simple as that. Harry's green eyes focused on him, while behind him the scene played on in Sirius's view.

*"Move!" Snape shouted, pushing his way past a short, bushy-haired girl who fell into a lanky, pale-looking boy.*

*Lily, following swiftly behind him, called out his name. "Sev, wait up!"*

"I'm fine, Sirius," Harry said, brushing off his grip and turning in the direction that Snape and Lily had gone.

Though the memory followed Snape, Sirius could hear a familiar voice call out behind them from the open compartment door:

*"Jamie, what did you do?"*

Thankfully, the scene dissolved once again.

Harry and Sirius were standing right behind Snape as they faced the candlelit House tables, lined with rapt faces.

*"Evans, Lily!"*

*The little redhead walked forward on trembling legs and sat down on the rickety stool. Professor McGonagall dropped the Sorting Hat onto her head, and barely a second after it had touched the dark red hair, the hat cried, "Gryffindor!"*

*Snape let out a tiny groan. Lily took off the hat, handed it back to Professor McGonagall, then hurried toward the cheering Gryffindors. As she walked, she glanced back at Snape, and there was a sad little smile on her face. Young Sirius moved up the bench to make room for her. She took one look at him, clearly recognised him from the train, folded her arms, and firmly turned her back on him.*

Harry moved through the memory, drawn to his mother's small figure at the Gryffindor table, which was perfectly fine as Sirius's attention was drawn elsewhere.

*James stood side by side with the familiar bushy-haired girl, Snape eavesdropping behind them. "Care to wager how long it takes the hat to stick me in Gryffindor?"*

*The girl laughed sweetly. "Something tells me it'll be instantaneous."*

Sirius's heart clenched but he fought to keep his expression impassive in case Harry looked back around.

*James grinned smugly. "Bloody right."*

*Professor McGonagall called James's name and the boy moved toward the stool. The hat barely touched his head before it yelled out, "Gryffindor!" and James grinned.*

Harry made his way back to Sirius's side, while Sirius blocked his view yet again.

*"Of course," Snape said.*

*"There's nothing wrong with Gryffindor."*

*Snape scowled. "Says another future little lion."*

Sirius did his best to distract Harry once more by pointing at the Gryffindor table where James had joined Sirius and Remus. "Can you believe how young we were?" He chuckled as the scene played on behind him.

"You were friends right from the start." Harry smiled, ignoring Sirius's strange behaviour, likely assuming it was painful for him to relive the past like this. "Just like me, Ron, and Hermione."

"Just like you three. Yeah." He nudged Harry's shoulder, moving the boy along, side-stepping away from his past self as another Gryffindor joined the table. Sirius's eyes flickered back to her once before turning ahead again to watch as the rest of the Sorting took place, Snape eventually being put into Slytherin.

And the scene changed.

*Lily and Snape were walking across the castle courtyard, evidently arguing.*

Harry hurried to catch up with them, to listen in. As he and Sirius reached them, Sirius realised how much taller they both were. A few years appeared to have passed since the Sorting.

*"What about the stuff Potter and his mates get up to?" Snape demanded. His colour rose again as he said it, unable, it appeared, to hold in his resentment.*

*"What's Potter got to do with anything?" Lily questioned.*

*"They sneak out at night. There's something weird about that Lupin. Where does he keep going?"*

*"He's ill," Lily said. "They say he's ill . . ."*

*"Every month at the full moon?" Snape challenged.*

*"I know your theory." Lily sounded cold. "Why are you so obsessed with them anyway? Why do you care what they're doing at night?"*

*"I'm just trying to show you they're not as wonderful as everyone seems to think they are."*

*"They don't use Dark Magic, though." She dropped her voice. "And you're being really ungrateful. I heard what happened the other night. You went sneaking down that tunnel by the Whomping Willow, and James Potter saved you from whatever's down there . . ."*

*Snape's whole face contorted and he spluttered, "Saved? Saved? You think he was playing the hero? He was saving his friend's neck! You know that Black tricked me into going down there. All because he was stupid enough to think I had a personal grudge against his little girlfriend!"*

*"Don't you?" Lily asked.*

Harry turned and stared at his godfather.

"I . . ." Sirius started but stopped as he turned to Harry, a feeling of pure shame bubbling up from inside of him. "There's not exactly much I can say for myself. Except I was young, impulsive, and . . . and I thought he deserved it."

Harry shook his head. "You could have killed him."

"Yeah," Sirius confirmed. "Believe me, I was properly scolded by my friends for it too."

"All over a girl?" Harry asked with a raised brow.

"Not just *any* girl," Sirius whispered as the scene changed around them.

The surroundings solidified again and they stood on a hilltop, forlorn and cold in the darkness, the wind whistling through the branches of a few leafless trees.

*An adult Snape was panting, turning on the spot, his wand gripped tightly in his hand, waiting for something or someone. He said nothing; instead, he merely looked up at Dumbledore. "Hide them all, then. Keep her . . . them . . . safe. Please."*

*"And what will you give me in return, Severus?"*

*"In . . . in return?" Snape gaped at Dumbledore. After a long moment, he said, "Anything."*

"Sirius, did you know about this?" Harry questioned.

Sirius only shook his head. No, at that point it had been so long since they had seen Snape. They knew, of course, that he was a Death Eater. Everyone knew back then. At that point in the war, there was little to do with hiding behind masks. Voldemort was on the rise, and they expected a victory, why would they need to hide? But Sirius never knew that Snape had pleaded for protection for Lily, James, and Harry. Only that Dumbledore insisted he was a spy on their side.

The hilltop faded. They stood in Dumbledore's office, and something was making a terrible sound, like a wounded animal.

*Snape was slumped forward in a chair and Dumbledore was standing over him, looking grim.*

*"Her boy survives," Dumbledore said. "Her son lives. He has her eyes, precisely her eyes. You remember the shape and colour of Lily Evans's eyes, I am sure?"*

*"DON'T!" Snape bellowed. "Gone . . . dead . . ."*

*"Is this remorse, Severus?"*

*"I wish . . . I wish I were dead."*

*"And what use would that be to anyone?" Dumbledore coldly asked. "If you loved Lily Evans, if you truly loved her, then your way forward is clear."*

"He loved my mother," Harry whispered. "This whole time. *Snape* loved my *mother*?" He stared at the scene, watching his former professor—a man he had watched die not an hour ago—fall to his knees in grief-stricken sobs over the death of his mother.

Sirius turned away, unable to watch. He knew those sobs. They were all too familiar to him. Losing the woman you love was a pain unlike any other.

*"Very well. Very well. But never . . . never tell, Dumbledore! This must be between us! Swear it! I cannot bear . . . especially Potter's son . . . I want your word!"*

*"My word, Severus, that I shall never reveal the best of you?" Dumbledore sighed, looking down into Snape's ferocious, anguished face. "If you insist . . ."*

The office dissolved but re-formed instantly.

*Snape was pacing up and down in front of Dumbledore. "—mediocre, arrogant as his father, a determined rule-breaker, delighted to find himself famous, attention-seeking, and impertinent . . ."*

"You Potters sure do know how to leave an impression." Sirius sighed, raking his hands through his hair. This trip down Memory Lane—and not his own—was becoming more and more worrisome. Why did Snape need Harry to see all of this? To rub it in his face that he loved Lily first? One last moment to take a shot at Harry and James?

*"You see what you expect to see, Severus," Dumbledore said, without raising his eyes. "Other teachers report that the boy is modest, likeable, and reasonably talented. Personally, I find him an engaging child."*

The scene changed once more and they stood again in Dumbledore's office. Sirius and Harry watched carefully as Snape hovered over Dumbledore, staring at the blackened hand of the old headmaster.

*"You have done very well, Severus. How long do you think I have?"*

*Snape hesitated, and then answered, "I cannot tell. Maybe a year. There is no halting such a spell forever. It will spread eventually; it is the sort of curse that strengthens over time."*

Harry openly gaped at the scene. "He was already dying."

Sirius put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

*"The Dark Lord does not expect Draco to succeed. This is merely punishment for Lucius's recent failures. Slow torture for Draco's parents, while they watch him fail and pay the price."*

*"In short, the boy has had a death sentence pronounced upon him as surely as I have," Dumbledore said. "Now, I should have thought the natural successor to the job, once Draco fails, is yourself?"*

*There was a short pause.*

*"That, I think, is the Dark Lord's plan."*

*"The boy must fulfil his mission," Dumbledore spoke, and Snape turned and scowled at him.*

*"You would have a mere child throw away his life?" Snape narrowed his eyes. "After all he's risked so far? The Marking ceremony nearly killed him!"*

*"I would have young Draco fulfil nearly his entire mission," Dumbledore clarified. "I would not have the boy's soul ripped apart on my account. You must be the one to kill me."*

"Malfoy was telling the truth!" Harry shouted.

*"And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?"*

*"You alone know whether it will harm your soul to help an old man avoid pain and humiliation," Dumbledore said. "I ask this one great favour of you, Severus, because death is coming for me as surely as*

*the Chudley Cannons will finish bottom of this year's league. I confess I should prefer a quick, painless exit to the protracted and messy affair it will be if, for instance, Greyback is involved . . . I hear Voldemort has recruited him? Or dear Bellatrix, who likes to play with her food before she eats it."*

Sirius audibly snarled at the mention of Greyback and his dead cousin.

*At last, Snape gave another curt nod.*

*Dumbledore looked satisfied.*

*"Thank you, Severus . . ."*

*The office disappeared, and now Snape and Dumbledore were strolling together in the deserted castle grounds by twilight.*

*"Now listen closely, Severus. There will come a time . . . after my death . . . do not argue, do not interrupt! There will come a time when Lord Voldemort will seem to fear for the life of his snake."*

*"For Nagini?" Snape looked astonished.*

"Harry!" Sirius called Harry to attention. This was what Snape had been referring to after all when he had given the boy his memories. Something about the bloody snake.

He listened closely, watching the two men carefully as if looking for subtle clues that they were hiding anything else. How had he not known the reason Snape turned against the Death Eaters? He had spent months around the table at Grimmauld Place staring into Snape's face while listening to reports, all the while wondering what on earth could have brought him there to begin with. Was it so easy to think that Snape could have loved her? *Really* loved her?

*"Tell him that on the night Lord Voldemort tried to kill him, when Lily cast her own life between them as a shield, the Killing Curse rebounded upon Lord Voldemort, and a fragment of Voldemort's soul was blasted apart from the whole, and latched itself onto the only living soul left in that collapsed building. Part of Lord Voldemort lives inside Harry, and it is that which gives him the power to speak with snakes and a connection with Lord Voldemort's mind that he has never understood. And while that fragment of soul, unmissed by Voldemort, remains attached to and protected by Harry, Lord Voldemort cannot die."*

*"So the boy . . . the boy must die?" Snape asked quite calmly.*

*"And Voldemort himself must do it, Severus. That is essential."*

"Bullshit!" Sirius shouted. "We're done with this, Harry!" He growled and moved to raise his wand to bring them out of the Pensieve, but Harry pulled away from him. "Harry, I will not put your life at risk over the assumptions of a crazy old man and a so-called reformed Death Eater! I won't!"

"It's not your choice, Sirius. I'm not letting anyone else die for me!"

"No one's going to die for you!"

"My parents did! *You* did!"

"I'm still here! And I'm doing my job for once, James!" Just as Sirius caught his mistake, Harry caught it too. Sirius took in long deep breaths to calm himself, resting a hand on Harry's shoulder. "I'm supposed to look after you, *Harry*," he said clearly. "Keep you safe. I promised your parents. I promised . . . I promised to keep you safe."

The scene meanwhile played on.

*"Expecto Patronum!"*

*From the tip of Snape's wand burst the silver doe. She landed on the office floor, bounded once across the office, and soared out of the window. Dumbledore watched her fly away, and as her silvery glow faded he turned back to Snape, his eyes full of tears.*

Sirius could not look at it. He had known Snape's Patronus, and he had always been a little suspicious, but his belief that Death Eaters could not possibly love kept the truth far from him. However, seeing this . . . seeing the silver doe right in front of him . . .

*"After all this time?"*

*"Always," Snape said.*

Unable to witness anymore, Harry and Sirius rose up out of the Pensieve. Moments later, they were lying on the carpeted floor in exactly the same room; Snape might have just closed the door.

Sirius shook his head. "I don't know what to tell you, Harry."

"Snape loved my mother," Harry mumbled. "Do you think if he'd never called her a—"

"No! No, she would have ended up with James no matter what," Sirius said with as much emphasis and passion as a man defending his faith to an unbeliever. "Lily loved *James*, and James worshipped Lily."

Sirius held his head in his hands. The visions of the past had not all been pleasant ones. "One day, I'll take you back through *my* memories. And you can see . . . You can see how they were with each other. You can see *everything*. I'll tell you everything."

"I'm sorry, Sirius," Harry muttered softly.

Sirius frowned. "You've got nothing to be sorry for, Harry."

*"Petrificus Totalus!"*

Eyes wide as the spell hit him in the chest—knocking him backward and binding his body tightly—Sirius's gaze followed Harry as he frowned down from above him

"Thank you for everything," Harry said clearly. "You're the only father I've ever known, and you've done a good job with what you've been given. Take care of Hermione for me. Take care of everyone." He brought himself to a knee beside Sirius's frozen body and placed a hand on his shoulder. "This is *my* job, Sirius."

*Our job*, Sirius thought angrily as Harry walked out the door.

## Chapter Fourteen

### *Playing Dead*

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*This is my darkest hour  
A long road has lead me out here  
But I only need turn around to face the light  
And decide flight or fight  
(Hercules - Sara Bareilles)*

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**May 2nd, 1998**

"Hermione, you seen Harry?" Ron asked as he approached her while she was applying a generous coating of an orange paste to some deep hex burns on Lavender Brown's arm.

Hermione smiled at Lavender, who looked genuinely surprised by her gentle touch. "He went up to the headmaster's office a while ago with Sirius."

Ron nodded at Hermione before smiling at his ex-girlfriend. "Hey, Lav." He winced at the sight of her burnt arm. "How'd you get that?"

She shrugged. "Death Eater set my robes on fire," she answered casually as though fighting fire-wielding Death Eaters was as common as curling her hair.

Hermione had to stifle a laugh at the look of strange admiration on Ron's face. "Ron, go find Harry. We need to start planning what to do next." After shooing him away toward the doors of the Great Hall, she cast her amused gaze back to Lavender. "I think you should be okay unless the pain is too much. We're running low on Pain Potions, but I might have some Murtlap Essence around here somewhere."

"Why are you being so nice to me, Hermione?" Lavender asked.

"What?" Hermione raised a surprised brow. "Lavender, I'm doing my job. I'm treating *everyone* who needs to be healed."

"Yes, that, but you could have been mean to me considering everything that happened with Ronald last year," Lavender said. "I'm surprised you even let him speak to me just now."

"Ron's free to converse with whomever he pleases." Hermione rolled her eyes and then smiled as she finally caught sight of the Murtlap Essence, snatching it out of Neville's

hands as he passed by her. She tossed him a grateful look, and he dipped his head to her appreciatively. "Ron can *date* whomever he pleases as well."

Lavender gaped at Hermione. "You're not together? But I thought . . . Ginny said you had been off running together all year. And you're telling me *nothing* happened?" She had her "gossip voice" on—a voice Hermione spent years trying to tune out.

"Ron and I are not together, never got together, and *will* never get together," Hermione said as clearly as possible, smiling testily. "Got it?"

"Got it," Lavender said thoughtfully as she turned in the direction Ron had walked off to. "So you don't mind if I . . . ?"

"As long as you don't do it in front of me." Hermione blanched at the image that popped up in her mind. She used her wand to syphon the rest of the healing ointment off of her hands. "You're all set to go. Maybe wait until the battle's over to go snog Ron? Just a suggestion."

As the words left her mouth, the memory of Sirius's large hands pulling her onto his lap came into her mind. She instantly recalled the firm feel of his chest as she pressed her hands against it and the taste of his lips and the way he sounded when he moaned into her mouth . . .

"Son of a bitch!"

Snapped from her daze, Hermione's attention darted toward a raging Sirius, his body rigid as he moved, his hair flying behind him due to the speed of his steps. A furious-looking Ron tailed him.

"What's happened?" she asked anxiously as she rushed to Sirius, stepping in front of him and walking backward as he continued to move. "Where's Harry?"

"Never thought I'd live to see the day when I'd agree with bloody Snivellus!" Sirius snarled as he moved toward the exit. He looked as though he barely even noticed Hermione as she pressed her hands to his chest to slow him down. "Harry really *is* as arrogant as his father!"

She glanced to the side as Ron rushed over to where Kingsley Shacklebolt stood among the gathered Weasleys as well as Neville and Luna, presumably catching them up on the situation.

Turning back to Sirius, she paled at the look on his face and gave him a good shove to stop him in his tracks. His movements stilled, and she sighed in relief and asked, "What happened?"

"He's gone!" Sirius snapped.

Hermione quickly realised what Harry had done. "Gone? You don't mean . . ."

"Yes, I mean!" Sirius growled and continued moving, side-stepping Hermione and forcing her to trot along next to him. "Snape's memories showed Dumbledore telling the greasy git that Harry's got to . . . My own godson cursed me! And now he's gone and—"

"It's inside him, isn't it?" Hermione asked.

Sirius stopped again, mid-stride, to turn and glare at her. "You knew? Of *course* you knew," he said with exasperation as though this was so very typical of her.

His tone rankled, and she tilted her chin up in response. "Not until you just told me what happened! Either way, I agree with you." She scowled, shoving past him, and made her way toward the large front doors of the castle. "He's an arrogant arse!"

As Sirius caught up with her, she heard him mumble under his breath, "Wait 'til you see his father," but surely must have misheard.

They made their way quickly through the grounds, heading toward the Forbidden Forest, Sirius filled with stress and worry and anger over what Harry had done. At the sound of murmurs behind them, Sirius turned and spotted nearly all the occupants of the Great Hall falling in behind them.

"What are you all doing?" Hermione asked.

"Harry's in *there*?" Neville stood awkwardly, the Sword of Gryffindor in his hands. "Oh yeah, you forgot this. Thought it could be important," he said with a small blush as he approached Sirius and Hermione across the grass.

"You hang on to it for me, Neville." Hermione smiled. "And yes, we think Harry's gone into the Forest."

"Then let's make haste," Minerva said as she stepped toward the shadows of the trees in front of them. Everyone paused to stare at her, save for Sirius, who followed in

her footsteps, before they all jumped into action and began moving step-by-step toward the forest.

Just before they reached the edge of trees, dark shadows loomed above them, and the atmosphere grew cold.

Sirius heard Hermione gasp at the same time that he felt the air chill down his throat. He reached out for her, settling a hand on her arm. "Get ready."

Shapes moved out in the darkness, swirling figures of concentrated blackness, moving in a great wave toward the castle, their faces hooded and their breath rattling. Dementors, and more than Sirius had ever seen, even in Azkaban. His eyes widened, and he could not even bring himself to smile when he felt Hermione slip her hand into his. He squeezed her back in response and clenched his other hand firmly around his wand.

"Happy thoughts, everyone," Hermione muttered nervously.

Forcing a bubble of hope up through his chest, Sirius grinned down at her and winked. "I've got a good one. *Expecto Patronum!*"

A large, silvery dog erupted from the end of his wand and growled viciously at the dementors, moving forward just as a small otter reached its side.

One by one, those who could cast a Patronus did so, and soon, the large Grim and otter were joined by a hare, a cat, a terrier, a swan, a goat, a coyote, a hyena, a large bear, and a small weasel. The large group stepped ahead, urging their Patronus vanguard forward, and the dementors began to retreat, though not all of them.

The focus of the Order and the gathered students was secure and only faltered once when a few voices behind the crowd yelled, "*Expecto Patronum!*"

Three more Patronuses joined the fight. The large, familiar dragon belonging to Draco flew upward into the grouping of dementors, scattering them apart. It was flanked by two massive wolf Patronuses that charged forward together, side-by-side.

Sirius paled at the sight and dropped his focus, turning around to spot what he had been dreading. Moving forward into the fray was Draco Malfoy, wand aimed high controlling his dragon. Remus stood to the boy's left, and Tonks to his right.

"What the hell are you doing here, Moony!?" Sirius shouted.

Remus smirked. "Saving you from dementors. *Again.*"

Sirius growled. "*Harry* saved me from dementors, you arsehole."

"I taught Harry how to conjure a Patronus, so I could still take credit for it," Remus replied smugly.

"Oh yeah, and *who* taught *you*?" Sirius eyed him, feeling like he had won this argument.

"I'll maintain that since *I* taught Harry, and Harry ultimately taught *her*, I still come out on top here." Remus chuckled until Sirius punched him in the shoulder, knocking his concentration so that he growled and lowered his wand.

"Get your wife and go home!" Sirius snapped.

"No! *This* is where we're supposed to be," Remus fought back. "I wasn't there when I should have been for James and Lily! And I was too late when you went through the veil. I'll be damned if I'm going to sit at home waiting around for more of my friends to die!"

Sirius huffed, not liking that his orders were being ignored. He was *also* not liking that Remus had brought up James and Lily at a time like this when all he wanted to do was keep his head. It was too emotional, and he hated thinking about the deaths of the past that haunted him. So he decided to bring up a death in the present to at least help fuel them both.

"Did I forget to mention that Greyback's dead?" he asked, watching as Remus's chest puffed out while his eyes flared gold and amber. He had purposely kept the information from his friend after the escape from Malfoy Manor, wanting to keep Remus's focus on his wife and child. Usually, Greyback's name was a reminder to Remus of what he was, and Sirius had not been in the mood to talk his friend out of another existential crisis about worthiness and fatherhood.

"Who did it?" Remus demanded.

"Draco," Sirius answered, nodding toward the young, blond wizard. "Long time coming, too. Now, with that victory in your head, will you get the fuck out of here?"

Remus rolled his eyes. "Nice try, Padfoot."

"They're gone!" Hermione called back. "Sirius, the dementors are gone!"

"Good." Sirius glared at Remus and shifted into Padfoot.

Using the extra strength and speed afforded to him in his Animagus form, he charged forward, letting the branches and bushes near the forest floor whip at his body as he rushed into the shadows. Sniffing the air, he pulled out Harry's familiar scent and raced

head first in the direction that called to him. He could feel Remus sprinting after him, and the sweet scent of Hermione close behind, but he pushed on at record speed.

All the while, he cursed Remus and his stupid sense of honour and loyalty, cursed Hermione for following him to the edge of the forest and putting herself so close to danger, cursed Harry for his arrogance and sacrificial love for his friends. He even cursed James and Lily for ever thinking he was capable of dealing with their headstrong, stubborn, but oh-so-loving son.

The scent in the air changed, and Padfoot turned into a clearing, gazing wide-eyed down upon a sight he had hoped to never see: Harry's body on the ground, unmoving.

He watched closely from the shadows, trying to see if Harry was breathing. Listening for the soft sounds of a heartbeat. It was impossible to catch a sign of life with the loud crowd at his back on their way toward him and his own heart pounding in his chest, filling him with dread.

The gathered Death Eaters in front were crowded around another body that was rousing.

"That will do," Voldemort said. "The boy . . . is he dead?"

There was a complete silence in the clearing. The Death Eaters looked too terrified to approach Harry.

"You fear a dead child?!" Voldemort snapped, and immediately, several Death Eaters jumped into action.

A protective paternal feeling washed over his rigid body, and Padfoot lunged from the bushes with a growl, placing himself in between the Death Eaters and Harry, snarling viciously. The Death Eaters all took a step back, reaching for their wands and aiming them at him. He continued to growl as he stalked forward, his focus set on the red eyes of Voldemort.

While Bellatrix's blood had tasted like vengeance in his mouth, Voldemort's would most certainly taste like justice.

He readied his body to pounce, knowing that he could effortlessly clear the men standing in front of their master. Padfoot let out one last, low growl and leapt forward, paws and claws eager to tear through skin, jaw open and waiting to grip flesh. There was no plan; there was only raging temper and clouded vision. This personality trait was one that always came back to nip him in the arse: running headlong to confront Peter in a

darkened alleyway just to be framed for murder, disobeying orders and recklessly rushing to the Ministry of Magic only to get blasted through that bloody veil, snogging Hermione in that hidden passage. There would be consequences for that too but damned if he cared.

Yaxley's voice interrupted his ill-timed ruminations. "*Crucio!*"

Padfoot fell to the ground in a heap at the feet of Voldemort, whimpering as the pain shot through his body in sharp stabs and deep burns. "No!" He heard a muffled yell and felt a rush of movement around him at the familiar sound of his best friend's voice.

Remus stepped into the clearing, wand drawn and aimed high.

With what Sirius assumed was the Elder Wand in hand, Voldemort aimed another curse at him, taking over where Yaxley left off. Strangely, this one did not sting as badly. It kept him immobile for certain, but he felt almost numb to the point that he wondered if he had been killed again. Not until he heard Remus take the offensive did Sirius realise he was, in fact, alive.

"*Incendio!*" Remus yelled, aiming a spell straight for the snake.

Voldemort laughed as the spell bounced off of his favoured Horcrux, unaware that the ricocheted curse hit Thorfinn Rowle square in the chest, setting the Death Eater aflame.

The man screamed loudly, attempting to extinguish his robes, but before he could reach his wand, Remus called out, "*Expelliarmus,*" and disarmed him.

Voldemort sneered at the scene. With his wand held on Padfoot, he used wandless magic on Remus, hissing, "*Petrificus Totalus!*"

Remus turned a cold stare on Voldemort as he was frozen in place and levitated nearer. Unfortunately for Voldemort, Remus had been frozen with his wand in hand.

Padfoot watched Remus as he was brought closer—his wand automatically aimed downward. A feeling of pride filled Sirius as he watched his friend fight through the Full Body-Bind Curse, shouting, "*Bombarda Maxima!*"

The ground at Voldemort's feet exploded upward in a cloud of dirt and stone that covered Padfoot. Wholly freed from the curse, Remus rushed down to aid him.

Before either had a chance to move, Voldemort and three Death Eaters had their wands trained back on them, each growling out a loud, simultaneous "*Crucio!*"

The pain was so great, Sirius unwillingly transformed back into his human body as the brutal attack broke him out of his transfigured form. So lost in his own agony and the screams of his friend beside him, he almost missed the familiar scent, quickly approaching.

Forcing himself to crane his neck—which, under the curse, felt like his bones were snapping—and he saw her there, hiding amongst the trees. *Hermione, no . . .*

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*Have to mean it, have to mean it.* Hermione repeated her inner mantra as she approached the expanse in the forest where the Death Eaters and Voldemort had gathered. *Aim your wand and mean it,* she said again to herself as she brought her wand up ahead of her, letting her gaze linger for the briefest of moments on Harry's body before the grief was consumed by rage.

*Have to mean it.*

Her gaze locked onto a red stare, and she shouted, "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Voldemort did not move out of the way of the darting green light, but merely pulled one of his own Death Eaters in front of him as a shield.

Hermione's eyes widened as her curse, her first Killing Curse, hit Crabbe Sr instead of Tom Riddle. She gasped in horror over what she had done but had no time to properly react as her body went rigid and she felt herself being magically pulled forward.

"Well, well, well," Voldemort said as a too-wide grin stretched across his deformed face. His focus shifted to Sirius, Remus, and Hermione, in turn, as he identified them based upon their status. "A blood-traitor. A half-breed. A Mudblood."

He gripped Hermione's chin with long, pale fingers, hissing in her face.

She cried out in despair, but it was edged with a snarl of defiance. She could hear Sirius and Remus behind her, thrashing and wailing on the ground as the Death Eaters maintained their torturous Cruciatus Curses on them. She could do nothing to help them.

"A perfect trio," Voldemort went on to say, dropping her so that she landed in front of the wizards writhing on the ground.

She turned her panicked gaze to the side, looking at the path from where she had come, hoping and praying that their backup was closing in on the clearing, but there was no one in sight.

"Allow me to show you what a Killing Curse is *supposed* to look like," Voldemort hissed, aiming his wand at Hermione.

She let out a quiet sob at the sight and felt as though time itself had stopped. For the smallest of moments, her fear was overpowered by stalwart determination, and she stretched her arms out to the side, pressing her back against Sirius and Remus as though she could shield them.

*Be like Lily, she thought. Be brave like Harry's mum.*

Hermione closed her eyes for a second, remembering the love she had for those she would protect: for Harry, whose body lay to the side; for Remus, who had always been good and kind to her, who had taught her so much and had always trusted her; for Ron, Ginny, Neville, Luna, and everyone from Hogwarts who would soon be on their way.

For Sirius.

*For Sirius.*

Her eyes opened once more and she looked daringly ahead. Yes, she could do this. Hermione would let history repeat itself. Let herself be taken, let herself be sacrificed, and her love would protect them all. Voldemort would never see it coming. He was too prideful to think that such a thing could happen to him twice. She would die, but if he tried to harm either of the men behind her once she was gone, the curse would bounce back and hit him—again. Then all they needed to do was kill the snake.

She glanced to the creature that was looking at her as though she were dinner. Her focus shifted to the side where she saw the most wonderful sight in the world: Neville Longbottom, Sword of Gryffindor in his hand, and a look of determination on his face. Hermione raised her wand and aimed it at Voldemort.

He paused, looked at her, and let out a loud, high, cold laugh.

She dropped her hand several inches while he was distracted and shouted, "*Alarte Ascendare!*" with her wand trained on the snake that immediately flew twenty feet into the air and away from Voldemort.

She watched in anticipation as Neville tightened his grip on the sword. As Nagini's large body landed with a thud on the forest ground, he used the dust that raised up as a shield and lifted the sword. The young Gryffindor, Scion of the Ancient and Noble House of Longbottom, beheaded the last Horcrux.

Voldemort let out a violent scream. His wand still aimed at Hermione.

She closed her eyes.

She could do this.

She was ready.

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

"*Expelliarmus!*" a familiar voice yelled at the same time that Voldemort shouted, and Hermione's eyes opened to see Harry kneeling protectively in front of her.

The bang of the colliding spells was like a cannon blast, and the golden flames that erupted between the two wizards marked the point where the spells impacted. Voldemort's green jet of Dark magic met Harry's Disarming Spell. The wand flew high into the sky, a slim dark wand against the sunrise that gently broke through the trees overhead.

Harry, with the unerring skill of the Seeker, caught the wand in his free hand as Voldemort fell backward, arms splayed, scarlet eyes rolling back. Tom Riddle hit the floor with a mundane finality, his body feeble and shrunken, the white hands empty, the snakelike face vacant and unknowing. Voldemort was dead, killed by his own curse which had rebounded, and Harry stood with two wands in his hand, staring down at his enemy's shell.

The briefest moment of silence occurred before the Order and the others burst through the trees, wands drawn and aimed at Death Eaters, most of whom attempted to flee only to be stunned, bound, and gagged before they could even think of Apparating.

Hermione sobbed, hugging Harry tightly from behind. "You're *alive!*"

He turned in her arms to glare at her, clearly irate that she had put herself in harm's way. "Were you really just going to let him *kill* you?"

Hermione laughed and kissed his cheeks, unable to be too angry with him considering he was alive and had just defeated the greatest Dark Wizard of all time. "Why not? *You* did!"

Harry's jaw twitched, but he finally broke into a smile and hugged her back tightly, muttering under his breath about how she was never allowed to do such a stupid thing again. She thought to argue her point, but soon she felt arms from behind wrap around her, and Sirius and Remus echoed Harry's statement with vigour.

"Harry, how'd you do it?" Ron asked, his tone filled with relief as he approached the Hermione hug-fest.

"Elder Wand." Harry held it up. "In the Shrieking Shack, Voldemort killed Snape because he thought Snape had won the wand from Dumbledore. But the wand wasn't waiting for someone to *kill* his Master, only defeat him."

"Malfoy," Hermione said with a loud gasp, eyes wide.

"What about me?" Draco stepped through the clearing, scowl on his face as he watched from afar while Order members contained the Death Eaters, looking as though he were making it a point to stay as close as possible to people who knew his true allegiance to avoid arrest himself.

"You disarmed Dumbledore."

"Yes, your point, Granger?" He narrowed his gaze. "Honestly, can any of you ever finish vocalising a thought?"

"You're the master of the Elder Wand, you prat!" Hermione snapped.

"Really? Potter?" Draco smirked and held out his hand to Harry. "I'd just love to have my wand back, seeing as I'm apparently its master."

Harry grinned smugly up at Malfoy, handing over the *hawthorn* wand with eagerness. "Thanks for the loan," he said and then turned back to Hermione as Draco accepted his own wand with ease, treating it as a long lost friend instead of a consolation prize.

"I disarmed Malfoy at the manor," Harry explained to Hermione.

Ron looked gobsmacked. "Bloody hell."

"Care to explain the *playing dead* bit there?" Sirius narrowed his eyes, threatening anyone with a stare to dare make a dog trick joke at his words. No one made to speak except Harry, who removed the broken pieces of his holly and phoenix feather wand from the moleskin pouch around his neck, using the Elder Wand in his hand to repair it.

"Oh, I *died*," Harry confirmed and looked at Sirius. "Came back. But compared to *you*, that's old news, I guess."

Despite the stress of the moment, Sirius let out a loud barking laugh, and Harry joined him, gripping his godfather affectionately by the shoulders and letting the moment sink in. Hermione sighed in exasperation and relief, sharing a smile with Remus.

Voldemort was gone.

The war was over.

All was well . . . *for now*.

# BOOK TWO

*The Time-Turner*

## Chapter Fifteen

### *Courage and Craft*

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*Time stands still  
Beauty in all she is  
I will be brave  
I will not let anything take away  
What's standing in front of me  
Every breath  
Every hour has come to this*  
(A Thousand Years - Christina Perri)

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**September 17th, 1998**

Sirius sat on the front porch of his ancestral home, a glass of Ogden's finest on the step beside him, lit cigarette in his mouth. He scanned the neighbourhood curiously, smiling as he watched the people around his home going about their business. With Grimmauld Place under a renewed Fidelius and an extra Muggle-Repelling Charm for good measure, he was able to enjoy Muggle-watching from the open door of his home. Even though Hermione often called it voyeurism—considering the Muggles in question were unaware they were being watched—he still found it soothing.

It was only one of *many* criticisms that she brought up in regards to his behaviour following the end of the war. Muggle-watching was relatively low on the list of his annoying habits, especially when compared to his drinking and smoking. Now *those* were Grade-A pet peeves of Hermione's that she was not shy about vocalising. His smoking easily made it to the top of the list once he had permanently signed over Kreacher to work at Hogwarts; he avoided any talk of house-elf enslavement or mistreatment around her ever since.

In fact, Sirius had been going out of his way to knock items off her list of his annoying habits, thus avoiding any form of confrontation with her.

Which was why, at that very moment, he was enjoying an early afternoon drink and cigarette on his front porch because Hermione was currently not there to berate him about it.

Since Harry, Ron, and Hermione had moved into Grimmauld Place with Sirius, she spent most of her time secluded in her room. Sirius worried constantly, as did Harry, though everyone else—meaning most of the Weasleys—insisted that perhaps she needed

time to herself. It was something Harry reluctantly agreed to, but Sirius outright refused to let her retreat into herself in the aftermath of war.

Following Voldemort's defeat in the Forbidden Forest, the occupants of Grimmauld Place had become celebrities. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were labelled war heroes and nicknamed the Golden Trio—a moniker that annoyed Hermione, seeing as she was very audible about her dislike of nicknames.

While the rest of the Wizarding world began repairing Hogwarts, Diagon Alley, and the Ministry of Magic, those who fought in the war were still repairing themselves and the wounds they suffered because of it.

Harry's chosen way to heal was to move on with life and be as normal as possible. Sirius encouraged him when he joined the new Auror training class alongside Ron, invited by the Minister for Magic himself. Kingsley had offered similar positions to Sirius and Draco; both declined, Sirius with a string of colourful profanities, Draco with a mocking glare.

Instead of re-joining the workforce or the efforts to rebuild society, Sirius focused on rebuilding his family, which of course included Harry and Hermione, but also now extended back to his blood—family that he had long ago split away from. Per Hermione's encouragement, he decided to reconnect with his cousins. With Malfoy Manor having served as the headquarters for Voldemort and the Death Eaters, the property was confiscated by the Ministry, forcing Narcissa and Draco to seek shelter elsewhere. Andromeda had all but insisted that her younger sister and nephew stay with her, as both women had grown to rely on one another in their grief. Unable to stand the sound of the constantly sobbing women, or so he whinged to Sirius, Draco took his offer to stop by Grimmauld Place anytime quite literally, much to the annoyance of Harry and Ron.

Sirius took charge of Hermione's healing himself since everyone else assumed she was smart enough to know what was best for her. He would wake her every morning with breakfast treats from a nearby bakery, seeing that he had no idea how to properly use the kitchen in the basement. When she would return to her room or the library to lock herself in for hours of reading, Sirius would insist she take breaks and get out of the house. Venturing into the Wizarding parts of town made such forays difficult, as her celebrity status kept her in the constant spotlight, which she absolutely detested. So he had suggested

some of his favourite Muggle locations where they would go and drown in mismatched memories.

The nightmares, of course, were the worst, but Sirius had years of experience in dealing with them. Harry and Ron, however, were horrified by Hermione's screams. When she woke up shrieking each night, the boys would rush to her room in a panic to find Sirius already there, holding her in his arms and stroking her hair and back until she fell asleep once more.

Harry admitted that he felt responsible for Hermione's condition. Sirius insisted that *he* was responsible for everyone in the house and that Harry needed to let him do his job and take care of them.

By extension, that meant Sirius was also responsible for taking care of Draco, who had been ostracised by most of the community, including pureblood society for his new blood-traitor status—something with which Sirius was quite familiar. He took the boy under his wing and did what he could to make Draco feel worthwhile. Harry and Ron refused to be anything more than cordial to the Slytherin, so Sirius had suggested that Draco help him get Hermione out of her shell.

The two shared the trait of being able to get under her skin, provoking her to emotions other than apathy, and Sirius was grateful for the help.

His gratitude might have been premature.

Draco's voice echoed within the house. "Sirius!"

Sirius launched his cigarette into the street as though it burnt him, and he quickly poured his firewhisky over the side of the steps before pushing the glass itself out of sight. He took a deep breath just in time to hear Draco's frustrated sigh as the younger man cleared the corner of the entrance hallway.

A quick survey told Sirius he had been rash in tossing his vices. "Hermione's not with you?"

Draco's lips twisted in annoyance. "She'll be here soon. I took the Floo because I figured it would be faster since she was headed off to an Apparition point. Thought I should give you a heads-up about her current mood."

Sirius glared as he walked into the house, closing the door behind him. "What did you do?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "I did what *you* told me to do. Took her for lunch. And *no* I did *not* suggest that she was putting on weight—*again*. I've still got the burn marks from the hex she sent at me over that one," he said with a scowl. "We went to the bloody bookshop."

"Why's she in a mood then?" Sirius asked as they moved fully into the house. Reaching for his wand, he cast an Air Freshening Charm around his body to get rid of the remnants of the cigarette that he had abandoned too quickly.

Before Draco could say another word, there was a loud crack of Apparition from outside.

The front door blew violently open, and Hermione stepped foot into the house, her mass of wild curls sparking at the ends, a look of rage and humiliation clearly painted across her face. The second the door slammed shut behind her, the portrait of Sirius's mother began screaming, "Blemish upon the noble House of my Father!" but before she started spewing out more creative slurs, Sirius flicked his wand to shut the curtains.

He smiled sweetly at Hermione, approaching her carefully as though she were a wild hippogriff, nearly going so far as to bow before her. "Afternoon, love. Everything all right?"

At the sound of the slammed door, Harry and Ron appeared over the rails of the staircase. "What'd you do to piss her off this time, Malfoy?" Ron called down. "Are you two finally done being friends?"

"We're *not* friends, Weasel," Draco sneered.

"Fine, whatever you are. Is it over? I miss the good old days when we could hex you, and she'd punch you in the face."

"Shut up, Ron." Harry sighed in frustration. "Hermione, is everything okay?"

"No!" she screamed and immediately burst into tears, rushing past Sirius and Draco, shoving the latter with her shoulder as she flew up the stairs in a tornado of sobs.

Sirius watched helplessly as she brushed past Harry and Ron who tried to stop her but failed miserably. Her door banged shut and all of the men let out a collective sigh of irritation.

Draco finally broke the silence. "Seen the *Daily Prophet* this morning?" He handed the folded paper in his hands over to Sirius before turning on his heel toward the large, formal dining room, likely raiding Sirius's secret stash of bourbon, Draco's not-so-secret guilty pleasure.

"How bad?" Harry asked as he and Ron descended the stairs to meet with Sirius in the hallway. They cast their gaze over the opened paper in Sirius's hands where a large moving picture of Hermione and Draco was plastered on the front page.

The two appeared sitting outside Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour. Neither looked overly pleased in the photo, though as the picture moved, Draco pushed his half-eaten sundae across the table to Hermione. It had been only a few days ago when Sirius suggested the two get out of the house; Harry and Ron had been at the Ministry undergoing Auror training, while Sirius had made plans with Remus for the day. Hermione had spent the night dealing with a particularly bad nightmare, and when Draco showed up bored, Sirius had asked his young cousin to distract her.

It was not the picture that caught his attention but the ridiculous headline and attached article surrounding it.

### *HARRY POTTER HEARTBROKEN BY GOLDEN GIRL*

*by Rita Skeeter*

"Ugh," Sirius groaned and began reading it aloud:

*"It seems The Boy Who Defeated You-Know-Who Twice has more on his plate than fighting Dark wizards in the weeks following his great triumph. As this reporter stated in her latest award-winning biography, Golden Trio: Young Love in War, said Golden Trio (consisting of war heroes Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley, and their shared love interest, Muggle-born Hermione Granger) spent the better part of this past year on the run from the forces of darkness. Under the pressures of war, they found love in the arms of one another. Details of the love triangle can be found in the pages of Golden Trio: Young Love in War, available at your local bookshops now.*

*It's no secret that the Gryffindor Golden Girl spent the majority of her time at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in the arms of many famous young heartthrobs. She first appeared on the scene during the Trivizard Tournament which had been brought back to Hogwarts in order to establish unity between Wizarding schools. Unfortunately, Miss Granger brought dissension to the tournament in the form of her first love triangle between herself, Harry Potter, and famed Bulgarian Seeker and Trivizard champion, Viktor Krum.*

*Despite our world still healing from the aftermath of war, it appears that Miss Granger has no qualms about inflicting new wounds on her famed lovers, Potter and Weasley. The Princess of Gryffindor*

*now finds herself in the arms of the self-proclaimed Slytherin Prince and supposedly reformed Death Eater, Draco Malfoy. It begs many questions including—*"

"Stop reading," Draco advised him, reappearing at Sirius's side with a glass of bourbon in hand. "Let's just say that mine and Granger's loyalties in the war are called into question, and she's also rumoured to be pregnant with my child. But, depending on whether or not the kid comes out with red or black hair, it could be one of yours," he said and gestured to Ron and Harry who gaped at him. "I know, I don't get it either. As if *any* girl would pass up sex with me for either of you."

Harry shook his head, staring down at the words. "This is really bad."

"Very observant, Potter. Now, one of you go fix her." Draco gestured his hand toward the stairs. "If I wanted to be around crying women I'd go home to my mother and aunt. In fact, I think I *do* prefer their company," he said, finishing his bourbon and setting the glass down on a nearby dresser.

"Cousin, always a pleasure." He dipped his head to Sirius and headed for the door. "I fully expect to be compensated for being forced to deal with an irate Muggle-born."

"Prat," Ron muttered as Draco Disapparated from the top step of the porch.

Sirius turned and smiled at his godson. "You want to take care of her?"

Harry glared at Sirius and Ron. "Cowards."

Sirius shrugged. He knew that Hermione in this state was something he had a reputation for making worse. Sad and distraught he could handle. Scared or passionate he could *certainly* help with. But when it came to the humiliation of publicity, he was terrible at comfort. He'd had plenty of publicity himself and took it all in stride, either energetically feeding into the rumours for his own amusement or ignoring the papers altogether. Making such suggestions to Hermione would only piss her off, and this was *one* week where he was determined to keep on her good side at all costs.

"Remus is supposed to be over soon," he said. "If she's up to company we can stick her in a room with him. They can commiserate over bad publicity, and he can cheer her up by talking about boring books."

"Looks like I won't miss much, then." Ron nodded and headed toward the Floo. "I'm going to stay at the Burrow for a few days. Mum's upset 'cause I never come 'round anymore."

"Don't forget Hermione's birthday is Saturday," Harry reminded him.

"I got it," Ron said with a smile and stepped into the green flames of the fireplace, vanishing from sight.

"All right," Sirius said with a chuckle, returning his focus on Harry. "You go and be the big hero. Tell her you'll pull the Chosen One card and have the *Daily Prophet* shut down."

Harry shook his head with a laugh. "You really overestimate my influence." He made his way up the stairs toward Hermione's room just as the front door opened and Remus stepped through.

Though he complained to Sirius about little sleep dealing with Teddy and an exhausted Tonks, Remus still looked younger than ever. Fatherhood clearly suited him as well as marriage, though he often said that he was eager to get out of the house as often as possible considering he and Tonks had both been cooped up for the length of her pregnancy at Sirius's request.

"Is she here?" Remus asked.

"Upstairs in her room, more than likely sobbing her heart out onto Harry's good-natured shoulder." Sirius gave half a wry smile and led Remus into the large dining room where he narrowed his eyes at the open bottle of bourbon on the counter. Sirius wondered how on earth Draco was surviving at Andromeda's place without having house-elves constantly picking up after him.

Remus sighed. "I take it she's read this morning's paper?"

"The suggestion that Hermione, of all people, would have a love affair with a Malfoy is hysterically funny."

"I'm sure *she* doesn't see it that way."

"Give her a couple of days," Sirius said, his words laced with hidden meaning that only Remus could fully understand.

"I personally think there are more amusing romantic pairings for Hermione." Remus grinned slyly at Sirius who rolled his eyes, giving him a rude gesture with one hand while he set his bottle of bourbon back into the cupboard with the others.

He sighed as he ran his finger over the line-up of liquors in front of him, taking note of the ones that had collected dust over the years due to neglect. At the end sat an old, half-empty bottle of Blishen's Firewhisky that he remembered was his father's favourite brand. 1971. A good year.

"So what's left to do?" Sirius asked anxiously.

Remus raised a brow. "For the party?"

"I'm a little more concerned about what happens *after* the party, Moony." Sirius eyed his friend. "All I have to do is open my house to all our friends who want to spoil the witch. And stay sober the day of. You're the one in charge of the important stuff."

"Are you sure you're ready?"

"Does it matter?"

"No. It's always been a time sensitive issue," Remus admitted.

Sirius let out a loud laugh at the ironic choice of words. "I'm ready." After a moment, his laughter faded, and he eyed the firewhisky in the cabinet, wondering if the different brand would be able to ease his worries since Ogden's no longer did the trick. "I hate not knowing how this will all play out. If it works and she . . . It's going to bring up a lot of shit from the past, and I'm going to have to tell Harry everything. Never mind the rest of the world and, Merlin forbid, Molly Weasley."

"I'm planning on not being here when Molly finds out the truth," Remus admitted. "I'd like to at least live to see Teddy go to Hogwarts. Do you have the bracelet?"

"I snatched it from the Potter vault when I went with Harry a few months ago to find a gift for Ginny's birthday. I suggested he give her something of Lily's. Made it easy to dig through the jewellery boxes without him catching on. It's all wrapped up and ready to go. How about *your* little gift?"

"It's set."

Tugging anxiously on the silver chain around his neck, he asked, "You think she's going to be pissed at us?"

"At *me*? Possibly. You? Undoubtedly."

Sirius groaned and rubbed his hands down his face. "Fan-fucking-tastic."

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## September 19th, 1998

The evening of her nineteenth birthday was strangely calm. Hermione's friends gathered together at Grimmauld Place where Mrs Weasley had spent all day cooking up a feast, despite pleading with her not to make a fuss.

Since Hogwarts had yet to finish the repairs to the castle, the opening of the school had been postponed until November, which allowed Ginny to attend the birthday celebration. Hermione, however, had been upset about the delay, considering she had decided to return to school to make up her seventh year. Despite Sirius telling her over and over to take her time making up her mind about going back, she refused to be swayed.

Guests began to arrive, and Hermione tasked herself with being a dutiful hostess while Sirius played bartender to all the new arrivals. She thanked them for coming, insisting that they did not need to and hoped that they had not changed plans on her behalf.

As the presents were brought in and stacked on a large table in the corner, she paled. It was one thing to have her friends make a big deal about her birthday, but quite another for them to expect her to awkwardly stand in the spotlight and be doted upon with gifts she did not need whilst everyone stared at her.

It was not until Remus and Tonks made their entrance with little Teddy that she excused herself from the "Welcome Wagon Committee," taking the tiny boy into her arms with a bright smile.

"Can I just have *him* for my birthday?" Hermione grinned as she snuggled her face into the side of Teddy's plump cheeks, kissing him repeatedly as he giggled and changed his hair from straight blue locks to honey-brown curls.

"He's teething, feel free to *keep* him," Remus said with a smirk.

Tonks gave a little chuckle at her husband's comment and kissed Hermione's cheek in greeting.

Hermione took notice of Remus's tired eyes, and how he looked at her with a sad smile before excusing himself to the loo, slipping downstairs. She pretended to not notice the small gift in his hands.

"Give me my godson!" Harry demanded with a happy laugh as he stole Teddy from her grip and held the boy proudly as Teddy's hair changed from brown curls to straight

black. "He's going to end up with issues. Parents who are too eager to hand him over and a hovering Hermione who won't stop kissing him. You're too old for him, Hermione!"

"Age is just a number, Harry." Hermione chuckled as she ran her fingers through Teddy's now messy, black hair, trying to get the back to stay down. "I should know; I've been reminded of my own age many times today."

There was a loud whoosh from the room, and Hermione looked up to see Ron stumble out of the fireplace, a haphazardly wrapped present in his hands.

"Happy birthday, 'Mione!" He kissed her cheek in greeting.

"Thank you." She smiled, looking at the gift. "Any chance I can convince you to return whatever that is and instead stop calling me 'Mione'?"

Ron scoffed. "You and nicknames. Sirius calls you 'kitten.'"

"That's not a nickname, it's a pet name," Sirius defended, handing a bottle of butterbeer to Ron.

"Do I look like a pet to you?" Hermione put her hands on her hips and then, as Sirius opened his mouth, she narrowed her eyes. "Don't answer that."

"Is it time for presents yet?" Ginny bounced on the balls of her feet, snatching Ron's gift and tossing it onto the large pile on the table. "I'm dying to know what everyone got you and if anything's better than my present . . . which is *so* unlikely."

Hermione frowned, feeling uncomfortable at the ridiculously large pile of gifts. "I really wish you all hadn't gone to such trouble." Ginny ignored her entirely, looping her arm through Hermione's and dragging her toward the table.

Gifts were opened, and Hermione spent the better part of a half-hour thanking people graciously—while feeling extremely guilty since so many people put forth so much effort and were far too generous. Most of her friends bought her books, which was expected, though Ginny had given her tickets to a Weird Sisters concert for when she would be home for Christmas. Harry had given her an old book on runes that he had found in his family vault; the inside cover had *Lily Evans* written in lovely penmanship. Fred and George gave her a large box of various Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes items that she was afraid to touch, and Ron had given her a gift card to Honeydukes.

When most of the guests departed for the night, Hermione was grateful to see them go. She had been more introverted than usual since the end of the war, and a big gathering made her a bit anxious. She had gone to help clean up after the party, but a determined

Mrs Weasley refused her assistance, so Hermione thought to retire to the library. She turned to go down the stairs but was instantly blocked by a sweetly smiling Sirius, a small crimson box in his hands.

"You thought I didn't get you anything?" He grinned smugly, and she blushed. "Open it."

Hermione opened the small container as Sirius held it out for her, and her attention immediately fell on the shiny, gold bracelet within that flashed red in the flickering lights of the overhead chandelier. She gasped at the sight, instantly recognising it as goblin-made and, therefore, expensive—though she could not bring herself to yell at him for going overboard, considering the very genuine look of anticipation on his face.

She felt her cheeks flush, wondering if a gift of this kind was some sort of pureblood gesture. There was a book in the library about courting protocols, but Hermione had avoided it, not wanting to be teased should Harry or Ron—or God forbid, Draco—catch her reading it. "Sirius, this is too much!"

"It's really not," he insisted, pulling the bracelet out and putting it on her extended wrist, setting the clasp. "Just an old heirloom I had lying around."

He smiled down at her, and she momentarily got lost in the variations of grey in his eyes. The warmth in her cheeks turned red hot under his gaze, forcing her to turn away from him.

She and Sirius had yet to discuss the bond that came along with the life debt ritual she had used to bring him back from the veil. Any mention of the bond—or the extremely steamy kiss they had shared in the caved-in passage after destroying Hufflepuff's Cup—and he would repeat the promise he had made while they had been on the run: they would discuss it all the day after her birthday.

Though she was not certain *why* he insisted on putting it off any longer, she had agreed. Suddenly, she realised how nervous she was to bring the subject up with him. Despite the butterflies in her stomach, she whispered, "Tomorrow's the day after my birthday."

Sirius leant in close and tucked a curl behind her ear, making her shiver. "I remember. We'll talk then. I promise."

Hermione turned her gaze down to look over the beautiful gift. She strained her focus for a moment as she saw an engraving on the goblin-forged bangle and raised a brow. "Sirius, these aren't the words of your House."

"I never said it was a *Black* heirloom." Sirius laughed. "I wouldn't dare to give you anything that once belonged to my psychotic family."

"*Animo et astutia*," Hermione repeated the Latin words aloud. "Sirius, where did you get this?"

"By Courage and Craft."

She quirked her lips, knowing the translation of the words herself. "I asked you *where*, not *how*."

Harry came around the corner. "Where've I heard that saying before?"

"Anywhere in Godric's Hollow," Sirius replied. "You might have read it on anything in your vault at Gringotts. Those are the words of the House of Potter."

At his explanation, Hermione's eyes widened, and she moved to unclasp the bracelet as though it were suddenly deemed much too valuable and delicate for her to wear. "Sirius, I can't accept this."

"Yes, you can. It was . . . It belonged to Harry's family. Now it's yours."

"I'm not a Potter, Sirius, I can't accept this." She turned around, extending her wrist to her best friend, insisting that he take it off of her. "Harry, you should—"

"Nope." Harry shook his head, cutting her off with a smile that somehow made his green eyes sparkle. "I agree with Sirius. You're my sister, and that makes you a Potter. Besides, I like the idea of you having something that connects you to my family. If anyone honours the words of my House, it's you. Courage and Craft? Might as well just say 'Hermione Granger.'"

"See?" Sirius gestured to Harry. "Even Harry says it's okay."

"I still don't feel right about it, but fine." Hermione frowned, suddenly feeling very guilty and unworthy at the same time. "You can take it back anytime you want, Harry. When you have children of your own, you can pass it along to them."

Harry laughed. "Just take the gift, Hermione, and stop arguing with everyone. You've fought every single person who brought you a birthday present tonight."

"Well, I told you not to get me anything in the first place, so it's not *my* fault," she countered.

Sirius interrupted their back-and-forth. "I think we're missing a big moment here. I gave a birthday gift, and I haven't gotten any thanks."

"Thank you, Sirius," Hermione gently murmured before she leant in and kissed his cheek, the soft hair of his beard tickling her lips. "Now, if the two of you are done forcing presents on me, I'm excited to go down to the library and read all my new books." She grinned and hugged Harry before turning and walking down the stairs and through the open doors of the large Black family library where Remus had been kind enough to deposit the large collection of new books that her friends and family had given her that evening.

She turned to the stack of tomes that had been assembled in a tower on the large oak coffee table in the centre of the room. On top of the stack sat a small crimson box tied with gold ribbon. Assuming it was another gift from Sirius since the boxes matched, Hermione sighed and spun back to shout out the door at him. When she turned, however, she came face to face with Sirius *and* Remus, who were lingering in the doorway.

She narrowed her eyes at Sirius and gestured to the gift. "What's that?"

"That's actually from *me*." Remus smiled softly.

"Oh," Hermione said, embarrassed, as she recalled the box that he had earlier disappeared with. Her curiosity was certainly piqued as she wondered what could be inside that Remus would want hidden from the rest of the party guests.

"Dora and I are heading out. I wanted to come and say goodbye." Remus slowly approached her, looking incredibly anxious as he pulled her close to him, wrapping his arms around her. She hugged him back tightly, feeling as he breathed deeply. "I hope you had a wonderful birthday, Hermione. You really deserve something good after everything you've done."

She ignored the praise and released him, reaching for the box. "Let me open your present while you're right here."

Remus gently grabbed her wrist before she touched the gift. "No. Wait until I leave. It's . . . private." Her eyes widened slightly, and she watched as he winced, his face turning a bit pink. "I mean, it's just . . . You might not like it." He frowned, and his soft green eyes momentarily flashed gold. "The next time I see you, you can tell me if you like it."

"Is everything okay?" she asked quietly, knowing that those quick flares of colour in his eyes only shone through when Remus was dealing with emotional or physical triggers.

"Hope so." He gave her a tight smile before letting her go, placing a hand on Sirius's shoulder before vacating the library.

"Is he okay?" Hermione asked worriedly.

"He's got a lot on his mind," Sirius said. "We've been going through a few stints of nostalgia lately. Brought up some intense memories from the past." He shrugged and slowly walked into the room, reaching for her bracelet-clad wrist and tugging her toward him. "It's almost the day after your birthday."

She swallowed and nodded nervously.

"Before we dig into old magics and awkward adult conversations, will you allow an old dog one last moment of recklessness?" he asked, his grey eyes dark and deep.

Her breath hitched in her throat, terrified that the warmth his touch was spreading through her body was being caused by the magic she had used to bring him back to life. A strong part of her doubted the authenticity of his affections, but she did not have the heart to push him away, so she nodded her head in consent.

Sirius cupped her cheek with the palm of his hand and leant in toward her, ever so lightly brushing his lips against hers. She could tell he wanted more. His hands were shaking, and he appeared to be holding in a breath, leaving her struggling to think of how to respond. She knew what *she* wanted to do, of course, but with Harry just upstairs, she could not seem to find that infamous Gryffindor courage.

A shiver went down her spine, and she breathed in deeply. Sirius smelled like firewhisky, leather, and the lingering hint of tobacco—which made her want to scold him but not right then. Before she had a chance to properly react to his lips against hers, he pulled away from her with a nervous stare.

"Happy birthday, kitten," he whispered, his fingers momentarily tightening their hold on her. "No matter what happens . . . promise me you'll just try to be happy, all right?"

"Sirius, I don't underst—"

"Nope, no more talking until tomorrow. Now, open Remus's gift. He's been fussing about it forever." He smiled and stepped away from her, moving toward the doors of the library until, with what looked like great reluctance, he slipped out of the room.

Hermione exhaled slowly, trying to ease her racing heart. Why did Sirius have such an effect on her? It *had* to be the magic. He had been so different since she had pulled him from the veil. She remembered that, before he died, he sometimes avoided her while she

stayed at Grimmauld Place—almost to the point where she thought he disliked her—which hurt because she had always felt a little drawn to the mysterious wizard. Since he had returned from the veil, Sirius had been overly attentive, protective of her, and abundantly flirtatious, though she assumed he was that way with many women. However, she had never seen him kiss another woman, and certainly not like how he had kissed her during the battle. Or just now.

Refusing to get caught up in the mysteries of Sirius Black, Hermione turned her attention to the crimson box on top of her new books. She smiled, thinking how silly it was that Remus was so worried about her not liking his gift. He was always so thoughtful. Despite the age difference and the fact that he had once been her professor, she considered him one of her most treasured friends. She was certain to love whatever it was he gave her. She picked up the small box and pulled on the gold ribbon. When her fingers touched it, she realised it was not ribbon at all, but a small gold *chain*. She raised her brow at the sensation, and her eyes grew wide in panic.

The chain suddenly glowed bright blue, and she felt a familiar tugging behind her navel that screamed *Portkey!* to her experienced body. But there was also another familiar sensation.

Something she had not felt in years.

The feeling of flying backward, very, very fast.

## Chapter Sixteen

### *Chocolate Frogs*

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*You said, remember that life is  
Not meant to be wasted  
We can always be chasing the sun!  
So fill up your lungs and just run  
But always be chasing the sun!*  
(Chasing the Sun - Sara Bareilles)

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**August 1st, 1971**

Despite the horror stories of getting splinched—including actually experiencing it herself while on the run the past year—Hermione still preferred to travel by Apparition over Floo or Portkey. While Harry and Ron each preferred the simplicity of using the Floo, Sirius agreed with her on her favoured method of getting from place to place, though he insisted that her reason for enjoying Apparition was simply because she had been the first in her class to get her licence, and continuing to use the skill she had so quickly picked up was a silent way of patting herself on the back without drawing attention or publicly inflating her ego. She never argued with him over it.

Hermione's *least* favourite method of travel was Portkey.

It was a rough process that was never as instantaneous as Apparating, and she had rarely ever been able to land squarely on her feet once she arrived at a destination. Still, sometimes a Portkey was the fastest and most efficient way to travel, especially over long distances.

Immediately after the war, she had obtained an International Portkey allowing her to travel to Australia to see her mum and dad.

She told passing acquaintances that her parents now lived in Melbourne, eager to start an early retirement. She told closer friends that she had altered their memories for their own good. But those who knew her best had been told the truth: there was no coming back from the in-depth way Hermione had Obliviated her parents. It was for their own safety, she knew, but they were lost to her forever. Still, she had requested a Portkey and, for eight hours, spent a day in Australia, tailing Wendell and Monica Wilkins just to make sure they were happy. When she went home, she had immediately collapsed

and *nearly* vomited from the mixture of stress and uncomfortable sensation associated with Portkey travel.

This time, she actually *did*.

After spinning and speeding backward for what felt like at least twenty minutes, Hermione slammed, feet first, into the ground. Her knees buckled on impact, and she hit a cold floor, relishing the feel of the cool stone against her cheek. She felt briefly relieved before her stomach lurched and she violently retched up the birthday cake that Mrs Weasley had spent all day making for her.

It took several minutes for Hermione to regain her balance, but the moment she did, she realised the gold chain was still clenched around her right hand while the crimson box holding the end of the chain was in her opposite palm. She dropped them both immediately and reached for her wand, only to find it missing.

"Fuck," Hermione whimpered, the expletive on her lips showing the stress of her situation as it was something she rarely did.

Someone had *planted* a Portkey in her birthday present, she had essentially been kidnapped, and, if she remembered correctly, her wand was sitting on the bookshelf just inside her bedroom. She had not carried it with her during the birthday party since she saw no reason to, especially since the war had ended.

With no way of testing the object magically, Hermione slowly reached for it, assessing it by touch. When nothing happened, she let out a sigh of relief and pulled on it, slowly bringing the other end out of the box. Her eyes widened as she lifted the pendant that hung suspended on the gold chain.

It could not be mistaken for anything but a Time-Turner.

She paled at the sight of the instrument. "Okay, this is not good. So not good." She felt her anxiety build as she scanned the room around her. Not Grimmauld Place, that much was certain, but she still knew it well. Hogwarts. Specifically, what looked to be the empty and undecorated classroom where she had spent years learning Defence Against the Dark Arts.

It was that tiny factor that triggered something in her.

*Remus.*

She reached for the crimson box the Time-Turner had been placed in and ripped the lid off completely. Inside lay a typical birthday tag that read:

*Happy Birthday.*

*Always,*

*Remus*

But it was not the tag that drew her attention—it was the neatly folded square of parchment beneath it, nestled at the bottom of the small box. Hand shaking, she retrieved the square and slowly opened it.

Her worst fears were confirmed. This was not some underhanded plot by an enemy. This was not a prank by the Weasley twins. This was not a burst of accidental magic.

It was Remus.

He had done it on purpose.

*Dearest Hermione,*

*First of all, you are safe. I plead for your forgiveness for what I've done, but in all honesty, I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place. Either betray you, my dear friend, by tricking you into accepting this gift, or betray someone I loved a long time ago who made me promise to betray you. Please know that I've spent years conflicted over the choice.*

*When I was much younger, I was given knowledge that I've protected for many years. Knowledge, instructions, and a mission. That mission has now been fulfilled, and you hold in your hand the fruit of my labours. You might recognise the Time-Turner in your hand from when you entered the Department of Mysteries to rescue Sirius. Once I saw it and recognised it for what it was, I knew it was almost time. You needed to go back.*

*If I've charmed it properly, the instrument in your hands is not only a Time-Turner but also a Portkey. Very clever, those Unspeakables. Hopefully, you've been taken to Hogwarts, specifically the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom if I've done my calculations correctly. It should be the first of August, 1971.*

*Again, I beg your forgiveness and hope that in time you'll understand and forgive me. I'm only following the instructions of someone who understood time better than I ever did. She told me that time was a loop. Every action we take is the causation of destiny, time travel won't change anything.*

*You remember in your third year when you went back in time to save Sirius? You mentioned that the only reason Harry was able to conjure his Patronus is because he'd already seen it conjured. This is how time works. Which, unfortunately, means that nothing you do will change what is meant to be. It breaks my heart to know this. To know that you will be your brave,*

*self-sacrificing Gryffindor self and run headlong into the fray in an attempt to stop a war that cannot be stopped, to save lives that cannot be saved, and to redeem those who are, at that moment in time, irredeemable.*

*But you will try anyway. Because that is your heart, Hermione. It's why you are so loved.*

*But please, I beg you, do not blame yourself over the future. What is meant to happen will happen regardless of how it comes to be. Live your life. Enjoy your life. And hopefully, very soon you will come across a very lonely boy who is terrified to go to Hogwarts and is desperate for some understanding friends.*

*Your ever devoted and obedient friend,*

*Remus*

*PS: Say hello to Dumbledore for me. He and I have always had a shared interest in "Chocolate Frogs."*

"No!" Hermione shouted as the feeling of betrayal washed over her.

How could he have done this to her? She was just starting to live again, to feel as normal as she possibly could considering she had essentially lost her parents, went to war, had been tortured, and killed a man all within one year. That was not even including whatever it was that she had done regarding the bond that now existed between her and Sirius.

*Sirius!*

He had kissed her and promised her that they would talk tomorrow. They would be open and honest and deal with the "awkward adult conversations," as he had so eloquently put it just minutes earlier. She wanted that conversation! She wanted answers to the questions that had been bothering her all year when it came to the consequences of the Blood Magic she had used to bring him back to life. Remus had taken that from her, only to give her a new set of problems and even more questions without answers.

She read his letter again, unable to push down on the anger that was rising in her chest every time she looked over the words pleading for her forgiveness. He had stolen a Time-Turner, held on to it for over a year, and had followed through with an elaborate plan to send her away, all because someone from his past told him to.

Slipping the Time-Turner securely around her neck, she moved to leave the empty classroom. She needed answers; if this was not some horrible joke that her werewolf friend

had played on her, and she really was in 1971, then there was only one place where she could get the help she needed.

"Chocolate Frogs," Hermione said to the gargoyle guarding the staircase that led to the headmaster's office. It had been just over four months since she had last seen it. They had won the war, and Harry had returned to the office to speak with Dumbledore's portrait, making plans to securely hide the Elder Wand. The castle had been nearly destroyed, though now it was nothing if not immaculate, or as immaculate as a centuries-old castle could be.

The gargoyle moved, and Hermione made her way up the stairs and through the open door. She was shocked to see how similar Dumbledore's office appeared to the one years in the future. The desk was littered with the same small jumping trinkets and baubles beside a large sweet dish that sat to the left side of the desk. On the right stood a large golden perch where the most beautiful red and gold bird sat, chirping a sweet song.

"Hello, Fawkes," Hermione said softly, with great affection.

"Good evening," a voice came from the nearby shadowed window, and Hermione let out a loud gasp. "Lovely sunset."

Hermione stared, wide-eyed, at the living figure of a slightly younger—and certainly not dead—Albus Dumbledore. The old wizard's eyes shone a bright, unnatural blue that sparkled with delight, mischief, and curiosity.

"I've always compared summer sunsets to the colours in a phoenix's tail. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, sir," she answered without hesitation.

"You seem to be familiar with the creatures. Or at the very least one of them. You called Fawkes by his name. I can only presume that the two of you are acquainted?"

"Yes, sir."

"Loyal creatures. Mine especially, though I don't intend to boast."

Hermione smiled softly, knowing Fawkes's loyalty from Harry's stories of their second year when the beautiful bird came to his aid, blinding a basilisk and ultimately saving his life.

"He seems to trust you. I would like to think that I may put a great deal of trust in his judgement of character."

"I hope that means you'll trust me then, sir," she said quietly, her nerves aflutter.

"I hope so too, Miss . . ."

"Granger. Hermione Granger."

"A pleasure to meet you, Miss Granger." His eyes twinkled when he smiled at her. "Now, I have a question for you. The security wards around Hogwarts, put up by my own wand—" Hermione's wide-eyed gaze fell upon the Elder Wand on the desk, "—are pieces of very sensitive magic. They have the magnificent ability to prevent Apparition, you see. That being the case, they also alert me when breached, and I was alerted within the hour that a breach took place in the form of Apparition. Something which should not be possible."

"It wasn't Apparition, sir. It was a Portkey," She corrected with a frown, her stomach churning a bit at the reminder. "Well, sort of. Sir, I need your help."

"I will be happy to advise you as best I can. I trust you'll be forthcoming in helping me as well? I might have a few questions for you."

She hesitated to speak again, remembering the rules that had been drilled into her by Professor McGonagall during her third year when she had been given a Time-Turner to use for her classes. Thus far, she already had broken the most important one: do not let yourself be seen. But without any answers to how and why she had arrived here—not to mention how to get back—Hermione handed over the folded piece of parchment with Remus's words on it.

Dumbledore took his time looking over the letter, his impassive face showing no concern or fear like she was feeling. Hermione was about forty percent certain that she would somehow get in trouble for whatever it was that Remus had done to her. Eventually, Dumbledore adjusted his glasses and looked up from the parchment. "What year do you come from, my dear?"

The simple question caused Hermione's eyebrows to rise into her hairline. "You believe me?"

He chuckled. "While I don't consider myself overly attentive of the latest Muggle fashions, I can't imagine your clothing is of this era."

Hermione glanced down at her attire which she did not find to be so strange, but she recalled seeing photos of her parents from the seventies, and she could not help but let out a nervous laugh. Yes, she must look terribly strange. "1998, sir."

"Quite a trip."

"I didn't do it."

"No," Dumbledore agreed. "This Remus Lupin seems to have sent you here," he said the name with a smile on his lips, and Hermione wondered if the headmaster had already met the younger version of her friend . . . or whatever one would call someone who intentionally tricked a person into time-travelling. As if Dumbledore knew what she was thinking, he stated questioningly, "A friend of yours from the sound of this letter."

She hesitated. "Yes, sir. At least . . ."

"Do you feel that he lies, that he has sent you back in time with malicious intent?"

"No," she said quickly, no hesitation in her voice. "I trust him with my life." She remembered the final battle of Hogwarts in the Forbidden Forest. She had trusted Remus with her life, and he had trusted her with his. She had nearly sacrificed herself for Remus and Sirius at the hands of Voldemort. She could not help but feel deep pain over what felt like a great betrayal. "At least, I did until about an hour ago."

The headmaster chuckled. "Or a few decades from now, as the situation appears to be both."

"I need to go back."

"Mr Lupin's letter says otherwise."

"Sir, I've experimented with time travel before," she said, her voice gaining an edge. "In my third year, I was provided a Time-Turner in order to have access to multiple classes without overloading my schedule."

"Forgive me, my dear, but that sounds like the very definition of overloading one's schedule. Did it work out well for you?"

"It was . . . fine," she lied as she remembered how frazzled she had been by the end of the year, snapping at professors and friends, the lack of sleep having practically aged her an extra few years. "But I've studied Time-Turners since then; I know all the laws and rules of time travel. Me being here could be catastrophic. I could change things just by talking to you."

"According to your friend, you being here seems to have already occurred."

She raised a brow. "Sir?"

"I've had a similar thought about time. When using magic to alter the past, are we, in fact, altering anything, or merely inserting ourselves as the catalyst that causes the future to happen as it already has?"

"That is . . . I mean to say . . ." It *did* make sense. Remus had brought up the night of Sirius's escape and how Harry was able to summon his Patronus under the knowledge that it had already happened. Full circle. But that was not the only reason she needed to go home. "Sir, I don't belong here."

"Unfortunate as that may be, I regret to inform you, Miss Granger, that I know of no way to send you home." His words caused her heart to sink. *No*. If Albus Dumbledore couldn't help her, who possibly could? "And even if I were available to do so, I would hesitate to take action. You say you've studied time travel in depth? Have you by any chance read about Eloise Mintumble?"

Hermione *had* read about the famous time-travelling witch. Eloise had been an Unspeakable in the Department of Mysteries, researching in what Hermione now knew to be the Time Room. During her experiments, she had sent herself back in time five centuries and upon her miraculous return—which was still a mystery to the Wizarding world as Time-Turners were only known to go backward, not forward—she aged the five centuries she had travelled through and died.

Her eyes widened. "Oh my God. You're saying that if you were to send me back to my own time, I would instantly age thirty years?"

"That is a very large possibility."

She thought about it for a long moment. Would it be worth the risk? Would she even survive it? Did that matter? Her being there and speaking to Dumbledore alone could cause a rip in time and change everything. The Butterfly Effect. She had fought so hard and sacrificed so much over the last year in order to help win the war. What if she did something here and now that ruined it all? No. She had been willing to sacrifice her life for the cause four months ago in battle; this was no different.

"I don't care. I'd rather forfeit my life than to risk ruining the future by any actions I take."

Dumbledore smiled at her words as if taking a survey of her character. "Thinking back to Eloise Mintumble," he said, ultimately ignoring her decision, "I assume you read what happened as a result of her time alterations?"

"Her meddling with the past is the reason the Ministry of Magic enacted so many laws regarding time travel. She single-handedly erased over twenty-five people from

history," Hermione said, repeating the words as though she were reading them directly from a book.

"Are you familiar with children's stories, Miss Granger?"

Hermione scoffed at the memory of the book that man in front of her bequeathed to her in his will. "Beedle the Bard?"

"One of my favourites." Dumbledore beamed excitedly. "Yes, the Bard took stories from actual events and wrote them in a way to tell a story, to entertain the masses, and to teach a lesson. What is your favourite tale, Miss Granger?"

"The Three Brothers," she said, biting back the sarcasm that she felt was due in her answer.

"I am a fan as well." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled, and Hermione struggled not to turn her gaze to the Elder Wand on his desk. "And do you believe that Death, who handed over the Elder Wand, the Cloak of Invisibility, and the Resurrection Stone, was an actual being?"

"No, sir. Even if the brothers and their objects truly existed, which I highly doubt," she asserted with a silent chuckle, "death is not a person."

"So the tale has been passed down as instruction then. What lesson perhaps would children learn from such a tale?" he asked her.

"Not to treat death lightly," Hermione answered. "The brother who took the Elder Wand thought he could thrust death upon others by force, but in the end, there is always someone stronger than you. The brother who took the Resurrection Stone thought he could steal from death, but you cannot control who lives and who dies. The final brother thought to evade death by hiding, but death comes to us all in the end."

"What lesson, do you think, children and adults alike would learn from Eloise Mintumble's story?"

Hermione stared at the man as she pieced his words together. Then her eyes narrowed and her temper flared. "Are you saying that she *didn't* destroy twenty-five people? That the Ministry of Magic made it all up in order to avoid having people foolishly use magic to alter time?"

Dumbledore grinned. "That would be a very cunning story to create."

"Yeah, the author was probably in Slytherin," she muttered bitterly.

"Do you have the Time-Turner, Miss Granger?"

"Yes, sir." She reached beneath the collar of her shirt and removed the chain, lifting the instrument over her head and holding it out for the wizard to inspect.

"Marvellous," he said with an airiness, as though he were looking at a pretty flower or a piece of artwork instead of the life-altering device that it was. "I've only seen drawings of them myself, but not in great detail. I was, however, under the impression that for time travel to be possible, the sand must move through the hourglass?"

"No, that's not how Time-Turners work. You spin them and then go back a few hours at most, and then you move until you catch up with your present timeline. The hourglass is merely a container for the sands of time. I'm not sure if moving them in one direction or another is what triggers the magic," she said clearly. However, as she focused on the instrument in his hands, she furrowed her brow in concentration. Dumbledore was right. The sand in the hourglass was sitting firmly on one side, despite being turned upside down in his hand.

"Is this the same Time-Turner you used before?"

"No, sir, this one is . . . it was . . ." She recalled the night she and Remus had gone into the Department of Mysteries—when they had stepped into the reconstructed Time Room. She remembered how he appeared confused that she wanted to leave the room, surprised that it had not been her planned destination. "Remus said he took it from the Department of Mysteries. It's new. I've never seen one like it before."

"During your very busy third year, did you happen to take Ancient Runes?"

She actually rolled her eyes. As if *not* taking Ancient Runes was even an option. "Of *course*, sir."

"Tell me, what does this mean?" He tipped the Time-Turner to show her an engraving on the bottom.

It took Hermione only a moment to decipher the rune. "Predestination."

"Something tells me that your Mr Lupin knew what he was doing when he took this Time-Turner and gave it to you. You seem to be an intelligent young lady who adheres to the rules quite well." Hermione almost laughed. *That* was an understatement. It took a life or death situation plus Harry Potter to get her to break rules. "May I make a suggestion?"

"Sir?"

"Treat this letter as your new set of rules." He held the parchment out to her, and she hesitantly took it, glaring down at Remus's familiar script.

"I can't just exist in this time, sir. I'm . . . I know what's happening out there right now. I know war is coming," she explained with a heavy heart.

"There are rumours." He gave a slight nod, refusing to give any more details to her than she was giving to him.

"Muggle-borns are being attacked," she stated, watching his face as he seemed to acknowledge the statement and agree. "Viciously. I'm a Muggle-born, sir. I can't just fall from the sky into this time and attempt to live without drawing attention to myself. I'm frankly not thrilled about the idea of coming face to face with Death Eaters." *Again.*

He smiled at her. "I have a suggestion. How would you like to return to Hogwarts?"

"I'm eighteen, sir, well . . . *nineteen* now. Today is my birthday. Or was. It was the nineteenth of September when I left." She sighed in disappointment as she remembered it had been close to midnight. The day after her birthday. She and Sirius were supposed to talk.

Hermione frowned. *Damn you, Remus Lupin.*

"Well, many happy returns to you, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said with such a genuine voice that it made her smile sadly. "Now, as I was saying, you've already crossed the boundaries of time, why not push the line a little further? I have, in my possession, a very rare De-Ageing Potion. It was a gift from a friend on my one-hundredth birthday. I've only kept it for emergencies. Every few years, I see a student or two attempt to age themselves in order to sneak into Hogsmeade to purchase firewhisky. The spell is rarely effective, and the hospital wing is often a refuge for a couple of elderly third years. Normally, we can de-age them with charm work, but I've always been worried that a student might accidentally go a little too far. Sometimes, a potion does the trick. I suggest that you take this potion and become a student here at Hogwarts once again. I believe it is the safest place for a Muggle-born, as you say."

She remembered seeing the work of an *Ageing* Potion; though Fred and George had not used it to purchase firewhisky. They had the Marauder's Map for that. No, the twins had used an Ageing Potion in order to try and wiggle their way into the Triwizard Tournament. A plan that backfired badly and left them in the hospital wing until they returned to their sixteen-year-old, beardless selves.

"How young?" She hated admitting defeat, but Remus had clearly left her no options in this awful situation, and without knowing a way home, she needed to make a plan to secure her own safety.

"I would suggest eleven. You will return to the school in one month to be sorted along with the new students. You would then not stand out or draw unwanted attention to yourself."

It made sense. Bringing her in any older would draw attention. Hogwarts had not had a transfer student in over a century. She would be as easy to pick out in a crowd as Harry had been, and she knew how big of a target that had made *him*.

"Would I be able to stay inside the school year-round? I would stand out during holidays. I've no family here, sir."

"Then we should find you one. Perhaps a good pureblood family. We could then further alleviate your worries about being recognised as a Muggle-born."

"I can't say I'm familiar with any *good* pureblood families, sir," Hermione snapped in reply.

"Luckily, *I* am." He beamed, his attention suddenly drawn to her hands. "That is a beautiful bracelet, Miss Granger. I am familiar with the words. Are you acquainted with the Potter family?"

Hermione held back her snort. "You could say that."

"And do you trust them?"

She frowned as she thought of Harry. Harry who had saved her life. Harry, who called her his sister. "They are . . ."

"Family?" Dumbledore offered.

"Yes," Hermione confirmed immediately. "But not . . . I'm sorry, sir." She frowned as wayward tears began to escape from the corners of her eyes. Would she ever see her best friend again?

"Nothing to apologise for, my dear." He offered her a handkerchief, and she smiled gratefully as she took it. "May I suggest a trip to the hospital wing? Perhaps a short rest will help."

"Thank you, sir."

He reached his hand into a drawer after waving the Elder Wand to unlock it. Removing a small, red phial, Dumbledore smiled. "Here is the potion we discussed. If you

like, hand *this*," he said as he passed the potion over to her and then pulled out a piece of parchment and a quill, scribbling a note and rolling it up quickly, "and this letter to Madam Pomfrey. If you decide you agree with my suggestion, she will know the proper dosage. You and I shall meet again once I've conducted a little business on your behalf, and then we shall set a plan in motion to keep you safe and protected until I am able to privately investigate the instrument you've brought with you."

"Thank you, sir." She sniffled again. "You're being incredibly calm about this, all things considered."

"I am a man of many interests. The future is one of them. I must ask, however, that you divulge no further information about your origins to anyone, myself included. Nothing that could alter this timeline."

"But sir, I thought you said that anything I do has already been done."

"You are responsible for your own actions, yes," he agreed. "But not the actions of others. I can see you are fairly skilled at Occlumency, as I've been attempting to break through some of the walls you've erected inside your mind during our conversation."

"I'm aware, sir." And she had been. From the moment she arrived in the headmaster's office, she had felt the familiar nudges against the barriers in her mind that protected her memories. Occlumency had never been something that she was skilled at, but since the war ended, Sirius had forced Hermione into a pseudo-friendship with Draco, who had been assisting her with the skill. Though she imagined it was more for his own amusement over the fact that he had finally bested her at something.

"Forgive me, but I felt it was necessary to at least test your skills before offering my assistance at integrating you among my students."

"I understand, sir."

"I only bring that up, because if you speak of the future to others who are not so skilled, they could easily divulge the information to parties that would put you in grave danger, as well as others who might be privileged to your knowledge."

"I understand, sir. I won't speak a word."

He stood and walked her to the door. "Thank you, Miss Granger. Please get some rest, and I will see you in a few hours."

## Chapter Seventeen

### *Young Miss Learns Fast*

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*You don't know about my past, and  
I don't have a future figured out.  
And maybe this is going too fast.  
And maybe it's not meant to last*  
(Taking Chances - Celine Dion)

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**August 1st, 1971**

Hermione slowly made her way down the corridor leading toward the hospital wing. It was so familiar and yet so different from all the many nights she had spent there. Nights recovering from accidentally turning herself into a cat and then, shortly thereafter, the time she spent after being petrified by the basilisk, or the days of recovery after the battle at the Department of Mysteries. The last time she had seen the hospital wing of Hogwarts had been directly after the end of the war when she had offered to assist Madam Pomfrey with the seriously wounded.

As she walked through the door to the infirmary, Hermione was surprised to see it empty and quiet. Just another reminder that she was, in fact, in 1971 and not 1998.

This was not home.

A younger-looking Madam Pomfrey approached, and the soft eyes of the mediwitch made Hermione smile. "Hello, dear. How may I help you?"

It had been jarring to see a living Professor Dumbledore, but this familiar face made her feel closer to her actual life. "Umm. The headmaster asked me to give you these," she said, holding out the rolled parchment in one hand and the bottle of De-Ageing Potion in the other.

Madam Pomfrey took the letter first, mulling the words over for a bit before eyeing the potion curiously, her brow raised. Eventually, she lifted her gaze once again to Hermione. "And have you decided what you want to do?"

"I . . . I'm not sure," Hermione admitted sadly, letting out a quiet sob as she covered her face with her hands. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

Remus had literally thrown her into an impossible situation. Just a few hours ago, she had been home, celebrating her birthday with the most important people in her life. Harry, Sirius, Ron, Remus, Tonks, Teddy, and the Weasleys. God, she would even be happy to see *Malfoy* at this point! How was she supposed to follow Remus's instructions and live her life? This was not her life.

*Damn you, Remus.*

"Do it. I don't have any other options."

"Very well," Madam Pomfrey agreed with a frown. "Have a seat on any bed. The headmaster insists that you get some rest, and if you are serious about taking this potion, you'll need to be lying down regardless. It can be a bit unsettling as it takes effect."

Hermione smiled kindly. "Thank you, Madam Pomfrey. It's nice to see a familia—" She faltered, suddenly realising she was about to reveal the fact that she had known the mediwitch in the future. Her brows furrowed. It was clearly going to take her some time to adjust to everything.

"I understand, dear." Madam Pomfrey nodded with a wave of the parchment. "Dumbledore explained in his letter. Not in much detail, mind you—he does like his secrets—but I won't be asking questions. I know better than most not to go about meddling with unfamiliar magic." She set down Dumbledore's note on the side table and turned her full attention to Hermione. "Now, how old are you, dear?"

"Nineteen; just turned, actually," Hermione said as she sat on the edge of the bed, taking a deep breath to steady her fraying nerves. She had planned to spend the rest of her birthday reading her new books and then maybe having a late cup of tea before going to bed. Now, she was here, planning to erase not only her most recent birthday but the seven that came before it.

"All right, you'll need to drink this." Madam Pomfrey measured out a large portion from the phial, pouring it into a small cup and handing it over to Hermione. "Take it quickly; it tastes fairly awful, and the adjustments won't be comfortable by any standard, but you can take a Sleeping Draught if you like, and you'll drift off before you feel a thing," she said, reaching for another small phial in the nearby cupboard.

Hermione worried her bottom lip between her teeth before hesitantly asking, "May I . . . May I request the Dreamless Sleep Potion?"

"Are you familiar with it?"

Dreamless Sleep was highly addictive, and Hermione would not normally ask, but without her friends and family here to help her through the night, she thought it would be better. The last thing she needed was to scare the daylight out of Madam Pomfrey by screaming herself awake. "I am. It's best for everyone if I take it. I've . . . I've been known to cause a stir in my sleep."

"I'm not opposed to dealing with a few nightmares, dear."

Hermione sighed irritably, knowing that the woman was just doing her job, but she was not in the mood to argue. Reaching her right arm across her torso, she tugged at the sleeve of her dress and began rolling it up her arm, revealing the deep, purple scars that covered her flesh.

*Mudblood.*

Madam Pomfrey gasped, and her eyes widened. She looked up and met Hermione's calm gaze, and, without another word, she dipped her chin, reached into the storage cupboard, and handed the purple potion over.

Hermione gave her a grateful nod and tugged on the cork, downing the bottle in a single swig, the familiar liquid sliding down her throat. She then took the De-Ageing Potion and swallowed every last drop. Squeezing her eyes shut and willing her tears to retreat, she turned and settled herself on the pillow as the Dreamless Sleep overtook her.

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### **August 2, 1971**

Hermione slept just a few hours, but she did not dream. She had no nightmares of Bellatrix Lestrange torturing her, no flashing images of Padfoot bound and thrown over the back of Fenrir Greyback or of herself being splinched, no thoughts of Harry lying dead on the ground of the Forbidden Forest or of Sirius and Remus being tortured.

Nor did she dream of home.

When she finally opened her eyes, she felt different. Sitting up, it was still dark, and she briefly wondered if she had not fallen asleep for more than a few moments. She was shocked when her dress got caught underneath her as she moved. Looking down, she realised her clothing was several sizes too large.

"I see that you made a decision." Professor Dumbledore stood at the foot of the bed, a soft smile on his face. "I'm very glad. I've come to inform you that I've obtained a home for you. A pureblood couple have agreed to take you in. I hope you'll trust my judgement in saying that they are good people—better than most, in fact."

"Thank you, sir." Hermione bowed her head sadly, her eyes twitching with surprise at the light, airy sound of her voice. Her words came out strangely as well. With a groan, she reached up, brushing her fingers against her mouth where she felt the protrusion of her overly large front teeth. "Wonderful," she said with a bitter growl. "Madam Pomfrey, may I make a request?"

"What do you need, dear?"

"I need . . . my teeth back to normal. I had them fixed fourth year, and I know it's completely superficial, but if I'm going to be forced to attend Hogwarts again, I'd rather not have one extra thing against me."

At the thought of being teased over her teeth again, she felt a string of very sharp emotions rise within her chest. She wanted to cry right then and there, which felt ridiculous considering that she had not cried over anything else that night. She let out a heavy sigh of frustration when she pieced it all together and realised that the De-Ageing Potion had not just made her *look* eleven, she actually *was* eleven years old. That meant dealing with puberty all over again, rapidly changing hormones, and growth spurts. She wondered if her mental acuity would be changed at all. Or, God forbid, her magic. Another thing she clearly had not thought through before taking the potion.

"I imagine when you've reached the age that your teeth were fixed, they will adjust automatically," said Madam Pomfrey.

Hermione rose a brow. "I don't understand."

"Well, dear, it's still your body. The potion doesn't exactly give your physical self a new start. You've already lived and gone through physical experiences, and at the age those occurred, your body will tend to readjust itself, as a way of catching up, I suppose."

Immediately, Hermione looked at her left arm, rolling back the now-too-large sleeve of her dress. A sob escaped when she saw the flawless skin of her youth, unblemished, scar and curse free. "But . . ." She looked up, tears in her eyes. "They'll come back?"

Madam Pomfrey frowned. "It's highly likely, my dear. I'm sorry."

"Then I ask that my teeth be fixed now. If I can expect my scars to all return to me one day, I'd like to have this one thing, I suppose." Hermione looked up pleadingly at Madam Pomfrey, remembering the many times that the mediwitch had treated her injuries and dried her tears. "If I had my wand, I'd do it myself. Can you . . . Can you shrink them for me, please?"

The older witch finally relented and approached the bed. "Of course dear, you just tell me when." She handed a small mirror to Hermione, who choked out a gasp as she looked at her reflection.

Eleven-year-old Hermione, almost twelve. Buck teeth and bushy hair, a smattering of light freckles across her nose and cheeks. She smiled sadly and nodded, opening her mouth to allow Madam Pomfrey to begin the spell.

Wincing a bit as she felt her teeth shrink, Hermione kept quiet until they felt and looked exactly as they had before. Then she nodded, running her tongue over each tooth. "Thank you. I feel a little vain about it, but . . ."

Madam Pomfrey smiled and gently squeezed her arm. "We've all got our own insecurities, dear. Think nothing of it."

"Now, Miss Granger, if you're feeling up to a Floo trip, I'd like to bring you to meet your new adoptive family," Dumbledore said. "Though none, save for the family in question as well as Madam Pomfrey and myself, will know any details of your true identity. I will ask all involved to take an Unbreakable Vow to protect your secret."

Hermione smiled gratefully. "Yes, sir." She stood up and almost fell off the bed, forgetting she was a few inches shorter now. The front of her dress fell off one shoulder, and Hermione grasped the fabric quickly, embarrassed as she looked with wide eyes at Madam Pomfrey. "You wouldn't happen to be willing to do a little more altering for me, would you?"

The mediwitch gave a soft chuckle, waving her wand over Hermione's dress, shrinking it to better fit her form.

"Not sure what I'm going to do without you, Madam Pomfrey."

"I suppose I'll see you in a month, my dear. Feel free to come by if you need anything once you've returned to Hogwarts."

"I will." Hermione nodded. "Thank you again."

Dumbledore stood at the door, holding it open. "Come, Miss Granger."

She quickly followed him through, staying a few steps behind him as the pair walked back to his office in silence.

The headmaster approached the fireplace, reaching for the powder on the mantle. "Here you are, my dear. Now, I've already explained a bit of your arrival to the family taking you in. They only know that you are a Muggle-born in need of great protection and that your family is no longer with us," he explained as he placed the powder in her small, open palm. "They've been kind enough not to ask any further questions, though I might have insisted upon it regardless. I promise you, they can be trusted with your life."

"I appreciate you putting such a great deal of effort into securing this for me, sir." Hermione smiled at the old wizard and stood back, allowing him to step forward into the large fireplace. She sighed as she looked at it, remembering that only four months ago she had been coming through that particular entrance, breaking into the school, alongside Sirius, Harry, Ron, and Draco.

"Listen carefully, and follow just behind me." Dumbledore tossed the Floo powder down, spoke a clear, "Potter Manor!" and vanished in green flames.

Hermione gasped. "Potter?" She knew she should not have been surprised, considering Dumbledore had brought the Potters up before, but to know that she was about to enter the home of Harry's relatives caused anxiety to creep up inside of her.

She summoned her Gryffindor courage and stepped into the fireplace. "Potter Manor!"

Hermione let out a gasp as she exited a massive fireplace, her eyes adjusting as she looked around a giant drawing room that rivalled that of Malfoy Manor. She had heard and said the word *manor*, but she could not wrap her head around it until now. It made sense, of course; Harry's ancestors were purebloods until his father married Lily Evans and moved to the cottage in Godric's Hollow.

Unlike the vast, chilled space that was the pristine Malfoy Manor, *Potter Manor* gave a much warmer impression. It was as if someone had put an Enlarging Charm on the Gryffindor common room; the large array of windows surrounding the circular room were draped in deep crimson crushed velvet curtains with gold lining, the furniture was made of polished dark oak, and the soft-looking armchairs and sofas were covered with pillows in a variety of soothing colours.

"Wow," she whispered, eyes lit up in awe as she scanned the room with a smile. How did this place already feel like . . . home?

"Is it to your liking, then?"

Hermione turned her attention toward the sweet feminine voice to see three other people in the room, all standing and watching her with amused expressions on their faces.

Dumbledore stood beside a couple who—though certainly older than Hermione's parents—were nowhere near as old as the headmaster himself. Both appeared to be in their early fifties, though there was a youthful twinkle in the man's hazel eyes. He had familiar salt-and-pepper hair that appeared to almost stand on end despite it thinning along his hairline.

The woman who had spoken bore an uncanny resemblance to Andromeda Tonks, all but the colour of her hair—dark auburn instead of brown. She smiled brightly, her grey stare and aristocratic features only enhanced by good humour and perhaps a little mischief in her eyes. She had a softness to her that reminded Hermione of Mrs Weasley.

"It's beautiful." Hermione smiled gratefully. "Thank you, for . . . for allowing me into your home."

"It's *your* home now too, dear. I've been in dire need of another woman around the house." The witch smoothed her hair before clasping her hands eagerly in front of herself. She laughed sweetly when her husband winked at her. "I'm desperate to escape the foolishness of youthful boys and old men who absolutely refuse to grow up."

"My wife exaggerates," the wizard said. "She loves it. Keeps her on her toes."

The witch extended her hand. "Dorea Potter."

The wizard grinned down at Hermione. "Charlus."

Shaking Dorea's hand, Hermione smiled at them both. "Hermione."

Dumbledore beamed, looking just a bit too proud of himself. "Well, I don't mean to be rude and under stay my welcome, but I have only one month left to prepare my speech for the start-of-term feast." He reached into his robes, removing a familiar-looking envelope and handing it to Hermione, who looked down at it with a twinge of nostalgia.

Her Hogwarts letter.

Her *second* first Hogwarts letter.

She wiped a tear from her eye, trying to push the memory of receiving it the first time out of her mind. Instead, she focused on committing *this* moment to memory. "Thank you, Professor. For everything."

"I look forward to seeing you again at Hogwarts in one month's time, my dear girl. Charlus, Dorea, I hope to see you both more often."

"Hopefully not too often," Dorea said in a teasing tone. "I'd rather *not* receive letters from the Headmaster of Hogwarts. I imagine it will usually be bad news."

Dumbledore shook Charlus's hand and then accepted a chaste kiss to the cheek from Dorea. He gave one last smile to Hermione before stepping back into the fireplace and vanishing in a burst of green flames.

Dorea turned immediately to Hermione with a sweet but energetic smile. "Now, Albus explained that you've had quite the rough night. We won't pry, promise," she said to Hermione's relief. "But the hour is late, and I insist we all get a good night's rest and start fresh and early tomorrow." She clasped her hands together as if she were already planning out a day full of activities, something that made Hermione slightly anxious.

"Tilly!" Dorea called, and, with a soft pop, a small, spritely house-elf appeared in front of the Potters and Hermione.

Hermione paled at the sight of the house-elf and took in a sharp breath. *No. Absolutely not!* She was not being adopted into a pureblood family that enslaved house-elves!

"A Young Miss?" The little elf looked up at Hermione with large, expressive eyes the colour of the sky on the brightest day in summer. The creature smiled up at her, jumping up and down with the excitement of a Weasley on Christmas morning, turning and grinning at Dorea and Charlus as though they had just gifted her something precious. "Tilly is so excited! Tilly has wanted to care for a Young Miss. Not that Tilly doesn't love the Young Master."

Charlus chuckled affectionately. "Be careful, Tilly; you don't want to play favourites now."

"Tilly does as Tilly does," the house-elf said with what sounded like a tone of humouring defiance. Hermione nearly choked as Charlus let out a loud laugh.

Dorea rolled her eyes. "Hermione, this is Tilly. She'll take you to your room. Be careful, or she's certain to go overboard and start dressing you up like a doll. And don't let her spoil you."

The elf rolled her bright blue eyes, mimicking Dorea's expression perfectly. "Tilly does not spoil," she said, sounding offended. "Tilly cuddles, dotes, and pampers."

Charlus smirked. "That's the same thing."

"Tilly does as Tilly does." The little elf shrugged, brushing him off as she reached for Hermione's hand, giving a soft tug. "Young Miss will follow Tilly. Master and Mistress must go to bed, yes they must. Tilly will be cross if theys be staying up too late again."

"Yes, Tilly," Charlus said with a grin on his face, pretending to be scolded by the house-elf as though he were a young child. "Goodnight, Hermione. Sleep well. We'll figure everything out in the morning. You're safe here."

Hermione wanted to take another moment to properly show her gratitude to the couple, but she was tugged out of the room by the overly excited—and strangely independent—house-elf.

"Tilly? Can I ask . . . Are you treated well here?" Hermione whispered with a frown. "Do you . . . ? I mean to say . . . wouldn't you rather be a free elf?"

"Tilly *is* a free elf."

Hermione's eyes widened in shock. "What? You've been given clothes?" she asked, looking at the little tea towel that Tilly wore. Hermione knew it was the typical uniform of the house-elves, and the quality of their care could often be seen in the cleanliness of the cloth. Kreacher, for instance, had been perpetually filthy.

"Tilly does not need clothes to be free," Tilly explained in a tone that Hermione felt was just a bit patronising. Tilly continued to tug on Hermione's hand, leading her down another long hallway and up a flight of stairs.

"Tilly took care of Mistress Dorea when she was a Young Miss. When Mistress married Master Charlus, Mistress Dorea asked Tilly to come live with her. But Mistress Dorea's mother was not happy, no, no she was not. Tilly's old Mistress Violetta was not happy at Mistress Dorea's wedding. Tilly's old Mistress Violetta said that Tilly would have to stay with her just to spite Mistress Dorea. But Mistress Dorea yelled at Tilly's old Mistress Violetta; told her she was taking Tilly. She hexed Tilly's old Mistress Violetta good, yes she did. She *hexed* her."

The house-elf let out a happy, nostalgic sigh of contentment. "Tilly is very happy to takes care of Mistress Dorea and her family. Tilly is free from the bad Mistress Violetta."

"I'm glad." Hermione smiled, happy to hear that Tilly appeared to be well cared for. Her happiness was short-lived as she realised that she needed to set immediate boundaries with the elf. "Tilly. I insist that you don't clean up after me. I can do my own cleaning, and I am good at cooking as well."

Suddenly, Tilly stopped in her tracks and turned very slowly, wide eyes watering with fat tears, a sad little frown crossing her face. "Young Miss doesn't want Tilly?"

Hermione frowned, shocked at the sight of Tilly's expression. She was much more used to Kreacher's insults or Dobby's short attention span. "No, no, Tilly, I just don't want you to have to take care of me."

"Young Miss wants Tilly to be sad? Oh, poor Tilly!" She burst into tears, releasing Hermione's hands and covering her face as she sobbed, bracing herself against the nearest wall like a heartbroken woman in one of those old romance movies that Hermione's mother used to watch. "Tilly wished and wished and she wished so long for a Young Miss, and Young Miss doesn't want Tilly. All Tilly ever wanted was to care for a Young Miss."

"Tilly, please don't cry!" Hermione said, horrified by the scene she had caused. "Please, please. I don't want to make you sad. I'm sorry! Please, please stop crying." When Tilly's knees buckled and she collapsed into a crying heap on the floor, Hermione surrendered. "Okay, okay. You can take care of me, just please stop crying."

"Tilly accepts," the elf said, immediately halting her sobs and standing up, dusting her hands off on her little tea towel and looking no worse for wear. She reached again for Hermione's hand and tugged her toward a large room at the end of the hallway. "Tilly's new Young Miss learns fast, yes she does."

Hermione moved forward, gobsmacked. Had she just been emotionally manipulated by a house-elf?!

Tilly opened the double doors at the end of the hallway, pointing out the personal bathroom as they walked into the suite.

Hermione's eyes widened at the sight of the large room with a massive four-poster bed in the centre, draped with beautiful blue and gold curtains. A large antique wardrobe stood at the end of the room; its open door revealed not clothing, but a generous stack of various folded fabrics.

Tilly approached the wardrobe with a smile on her face, pointing to the linens excitedly. "Tilly is going to make Young Miss new robes and dresses. Young Miss needs

new clothes and books and quills, and Young Miss needs a wand! Mistress told Tilly that Young Miss goes to Hogwarts soon with Young Master. Tilly will be sad to see them go, but she is proud, yes she is, ever so very proud."

Hermione smiled sadly at what looked to be real tears—very different from the fake manipulating ones she had seen only moments earlier.

Tilly, though, had brought up something that Hermione had already forgotten. She looked down at the envelope in her hands and smiled, running her finger over the scripted lettering across it that read:

*Miss Potter  
Second Floor Room at the end of the Hallway  
Potter Manor*

She stared at the words with disconnected emotions. She knew that she would not be able to be called "Granger" here. Dumbledore had found her a pureblood family for a reason. As a Muggle-born, she was in danger and would draw unwanted attention over her blood status. But her surname was the last thing she had left of her parents, and the feeling that she had lost *that* now, too, broke something inside of her, something that *needed* to be broken. She had spent months mourning the loss of parents who were not actually dead.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly as she cracked the seal and removed the neatly folded parchment from the thick, heavy envelope. No longer Granger. Maybe she could learn to heal now.

Harry had apparently been right. Hermione was, in fact, a Potter.

*HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY*

*Dear Miss Potter,*

*We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment. Term begins on the first of September.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Minerva McGonagall  
Deputy Headmistress*

Hermione allowed herself to smile as she read the letter. Hogwarts. Professor McGonagall. Some things *could* be familiar. Some things *could* still be home for her.

Her attention was reclaimed by Tilly who had, in the few minutes that Hermione had been distracted by her letter, fashioned a light blue nightdress for her and was now proceeding to try and dress Hermione herself, just as Dorea had warned her she would do.

"Tilly," Hermione mumbled, trying to tug her dress away from the house-elf's hands. "I can undress myself." She was caught off-guard when the feisty little house-elf actually growled, freezing Hermione in shock, at which point Tilly took advantage of the situation and proceeded to undress and then redress her.

"Young Miss is stubborn. Sleep now. Young Miss needs rest."

Hermione sat on the bed completely defeated, wondering if the basilisk had taken her down as quickly as this little elf. Voldemort sure had not been able to. She shook her head in amusement, trying to clear out the sudden image of a house-elf Dark Lord. Frightening and definitively undefeatable.

"Thank you, Tilly." She crawled into the bed quickly, a bit afraid that Tilly would drag her beneath the covers and tuck her in tight enough to trap her there.

The house-elf snapped her fingers, extinguishing all the lamps.

Hermione could only hope the Dreamless Sleep that she had taken the night before was still in her system. The last thing she wanted to do to this gracious family—and the overprotective house-elf—was to scare them with her screams.

## Chapter Eighteen

### *Live Your Life*

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*I learned from you that I do not crumble  
I learned that strength is something you choose  
All of the reasons to keep on believin'  
There's no question, that's a lesson, that I learned from you  
(I Learned From You - Miley Cyrus)*

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**August 2nd, 1971**

Hermione slept soundly without dreams and awoke rested and bleary-eyed in the comfort of a large four-poster bed. Confused at first at the feel of the bed that was so different from the smaller one in her room at Grimmauld Place, Hermione struggled to take in her surroundings. She studied the large room from right to left, her gaze coming to a halt on the silhouette of a figure standing before her in a blaze of sunshine.

The figure leant closer, and Hermione blinked to see a head of messy black hair. She smiled, stifling a yawn. "Mmm . . . Harry?" she murmured in her sleepy state.

"Who's Harry?" a vaguely familiar, but still strange, voice replied.

Hermione's eyes snapped open, and she blinked rapidly to clear her vision. She stared up into the face of a young boy with familiar black hair that stood up so high in the back that she could see it from her position in front of him. Instead of the sparkling emerald eyes she had grown so used to over the past seven years, she saw her reflection in hazel brown.

This was not her Harry.

*1971.*

Hermione drew in a sharp breath as everything came flooding back: the crimson box in the Black family library, the Time-Turner charmed into a Portkey, the letter from Remus, meeting with a very much alive Albus Dumbledore, Madam Pomfrey and a De-Ageing Potion, Flooing into a large manor, and meeting the Potters and that incredibly bossy house-elf.

And now there was a boy standing at the side of her bed, staring at her with a curious gaze and a crooked smile.

"So you're my new sister, huh?"

"Who are you?" she screamed and twisted violently away to the opposite side of the large bed. This translated, apparently, to an invitation for the boy to climb onto the mattress with her to get a closer look. She held up her hands defensively, flexing her fingers when she remembered how much smaller her limbs were again thanks to the De-Ageing Potion.

"Wait." She looked at the boy closely, shocked at the nearly identical resemblance to her best friend. How had she not assumed? *1971, Potter Manor*. She gasped, bringing one hand to her mouth. "You're James? Oh my . . . goodness, you . . . you look—"

James grinned smugly. "Handsome? Dashing? Brilliant?"

Hermione let out a loud laugh, shocked by how genuine it sounded. She had not had a good laugh since this whole fiasco began. She smiled at him; his strong resemblance to Harry and his apparent lack of understanding in regards to personal space made him somewhat endearing.

"You look like a right mess is what you do. Do you even own a brush?" She subconsciously reached up to smooth his hair as she had done to Harry for the past seven years, unable to stop herself from doing so, as though her muscles acted on their own.

"You're one to talk." James laughed, reaching a hand up to shake out his hair, making it look twice as bad. He then ruffled her locks teasingly. "I think I see a bird somewhere inside your hair. Can you hide snacks in this mane of yours?"

"Never thought to." She scowled, almost taking the chance to properly scold the boy for talking to an adult like that, but then she remembered that she was no longer an adult. Her mind held the memories of a nineteen-year-old witch from 1998, but, in fact, she was now an eleven-year-old girl living in 1971.

"Well, since *you* don't, can *I* hide snacks there?" he asked with a grin. "Seems a bit more convenient than weighing down my pockets."

She rolled her eyes. "No, you cannot hide sweets in my hair."

He laughed again, the sound a joyous one, unlike Harry's which always seemed to come out like relieved surprise, as though he were continually shocked that he was able to find humour in life. James, however, was completely unburdened.

"Look at us, siblings already! Always wanted a little sister," he said, leaning back against the headboard. He rested his hands behind his head, making himself comfortable.

Hermione gathered that his parents had informed him of her apparent adoption. She was shocked to see that he was reacting quite well to the news.

"When's your birthday?" she asked.

"Twenty-seventh of March."

"Well, mine's the nineteenth of September, so technically I'm older than you . . . *little* brother," she teased.

Unaffected by her news whatsoever, James shrugged as he sat up a bit. "*Technically*, Mum said that we're telling everyone you're my twin sister. And I'm insisting that I was born first. After all, I was *here* first." He tossed his head back confidently—nearly smacking it into the headboard—as though he already had won the argument.

"Twins?" She raised a brow. "We don't look a thing alike."

"*That's* your issue?" James snorted loudly. "Considering that I woke up this morning to my parents telling me I had a brand new twin sister, and 'Oh, don't tell anyone that Albus Dumbledore dropped her off,' I think I'm handling this pretty well. And *your* problem is that we don't look alike? But hey, if you don't want a brother, fine. Not like I'm heartbroken or anything," he said, feigning a pout.

"No, I'm . . . I'd like a brother," she said, the words bringing a hint of pain with them as she thought about Harry. Harry was gone, but James—Harry's father—looked so much like him. It hurt to stare at him for too long.

James, noticing her shift in mood, frowned and paused a moment before reaching across the bed, yanking on a lock of her hair.

"Ow!" Hermione snapped, narrowing her eyes at him. "What was that for?"

"Well, we're siblings now, and I feel like I've missed out on some really good pigtail-pulling years with my sister."

She glared and rubbed the sore spot on the side of her head. "Remember that when I hex that mop of hair off your head."

"Can't hex me without a wand. And by next week I'm sure you'll have gotten over it. I have a very forgivable face. Mum says so."

He was incredibly arrogant, and Hermione chuckled at his confidence.

"What's next week?"

James beamed with excitement. "We're all going to Diagon Alley to get our wands and stuff for Hogwarts."

"Oh, I didn't even realise." She knew that she would be returning to Hogwarts and that her wand was left behind in 1998, but Hermione had forgotten that she would need to get a new one if she planned on attending Hogwarts again.

"What? Think you can do magic without a wand?"

Hermione chuckled again, knowing that she could, in fact, do just that. Unlike older and more powerful witches and wizards like Professor McGonagall, Sirius, and Remus, Hermione could only do such magic under great stress, but she had been getting better with Sirius's tutelage.

"Do you ever shut up?" she asked James.

"Very rarely," he answered, clearly unoffended by her jab. "Get up. Mum sent me in to tell you breakfast is ready." He bounded from the side of the bed and headed toward the door.

Hermione smiled. "Good, I'm starving."

He stopped in his tracks, his hand on the doorknob. "Oh hey, since you're going to be my little sister and all, I think there's something really important I should know."

"What's that?"

"What's your name?"

"You don't even know my name? Your parents didn't tell you my name?" Hermione asked in disbelief. "Your parents told you that you have a brand new sister, and you wake her up, jump on her bed, pull her hair, and you don't even know her name?" What was wrong with him? Did he have even one suspicious bone in his naive, scrawny body?

"They might have mentioned it. I heard sister and twin, but then Tilly showed up with breakfast . . ." he explained, scratching his head.

"Hermione."

He raised a brow. "What?"

She smiled sweetly. "My name is Hermione."

"That sounds fake."

Her mouth fell open. "It is not fake!"

"That doesn't sound like a real word."

Hermione scowled at him. "It's not a word, it's my name."

"It's a mouthful, is what it is," he said, chortling. "I'm gonna call you Mia."

Having a brief flashback to her short-lived relationship with Viktor, Hermione slowly enunciated, "Her-my-oh-nee."

James blinked as he replied in a similar tone, "Her-*my-uh-nee*. *My-uh*. See?"

Hermione growled, pinning him with a glare she normally reserved just for Harry and Ron—and sometimes Sirius. "I don't like nicknames."

"I don't like bossy sisters. Clearly, we've both been shorted by this family." James shrugged, unaffected by her sour mood and her glaring. That would pose a problem down the line, she supposed.

"My name is Hermione Granger," she said firmly, already forgetting how her Hogwarts letter had been addressed.

"Potter," James corrected her.

She blinked. "What?"

"Your name is Hermione Potter. *Mia* Potter, actually."

"Potter? I'll . . . I'll have to get used to that."

"You're my sister," James said with a genuine smile, looking at her in a way that reminded her so much of Harry that it hurt, but she still smiled back at him. "And that makes you a Potter."

Hermione's nose stung as she felt tears well up. Wasn't it just last night that Harry had told her the same thing?

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"There you are, dear!" Dorea smiled up at Hermione from the large dining room table as she entered the room behind James.

"Hello again, Mrs Potter, Mr Potter," Hermione blinked at James with wide eyes when he pulled out her chair for her, surprised that the boy who had tugged her hair just minutes ago upstairs was being a perfect gentleman. She eyed the Potter parents, who smiled proudly at their son and acted as if his actions were not anything out of the ordinary.

"Well, we should probably skip right ahead and have you start calling us Mum and Dad," Charlus suggested with a kind smile, and Hermione's chest tightened. "No sense in living a double life now; it'll just get confusing. Besides, we've made it perfectly clear that you are family now. It's okay if you don't want to talk about what happened before. Albus

wasn't very forthcoming about the details, just that there was a young lady who needed a family."

"I'd always wanted a little girl," Dorea admitted with a gleam in her eye, and Hermione was overwhelmed by their instant acceptance of her.

James scoffed. "Thanks, Mum."

Charlus smirked at the boy. "Eat your breakfast, son."

"Albus left some parchments for us to sign and send to the Records Division at the Ministry in order to officially make you Hermione Potter," Dorea explained as she sipped at her morning tea.

"Mia," James blurted out, after swallowing a mouthful of porridge.

"What's that?" Charlus looked up from his morning paper.

"Her name's Mia."

"I hate nicknames," Hermione repeated, narrowing her eyes at James.

Dorea beamed at the two children. "I think it's cute. Mia is a lovely name," she said to Hermione.

"If you'd like, we will still call you Hermione," Charlus assured her.

"I'm not going to." James shrugged as he placed half the dish of sausages onto his plate. "She's *Mia* now."

"Fine." Hermione teasingly glared at him. ". . . *Jamie*."

"Well, that's . . ." James frowned, rolling the name over and over in his head before nodding. "Actually, I think I quite like it."

Hermione bristled.

"I'm glad you two are already getting along. If you have need of anything, Hermione, please just let us know," Dorea insisted.

"Thank you, Mrs, err . . . Mum." Hermione swallowed, the word sounding artificial in her mouth. "I think I'm okay right now. Just adjusting, I suppose. It's been a strange few days," she admitted quietly, letting her previous polite smile fall from her face.

"No frowning now," Dorea said immediately. "I know you have had some hardships lately, but we're Potters, and we push on. You take what happens, learn from it, and bravely move forward."

"Courage and Craft," Hermione whispered.

Impressed, Charlus said, "House words."

"I hope I can live up to them." Hermione smiled tightly, fingering the bracelet around her wrist, glad that none of the Potters appeared to have noticed it thus far. If they did, they did not care. Maybe they assumed Dumbledore had given it to her. She was worried that they would accuse her of stealing, especially since she had only known them for less than a day. Sirius just *had* to give her a Potter heirloom on her birthday. It would be difficult to explain how she knew their grandson.

Charlus grinned proudly. "I think she'll be a Gryffindor."

"Of *course* she will. All Potters are Gryffindors." James rolled his eyes as if the point were moot.

Dorea folded her arms across her chest. "I wasn't."

"Well, you weren't fortunate enough to be *born* a Potter, dear," Charlus teased.

"Don't you mean fortunate for *you*?" Dorea winked at him.

"What house were you in?" Hermione asked politely, reaching for a piece of toast in front of her.

"I was a Slytherin, dear," Dorea explained.

Hermione's eyes went wide. *Harry's grandmother was in Slytherin?*

"Sneaky little snake tricked me into our first date." Charlus scooted his chair closer to his wife, reaching for her hand which she casually allowed him to take, a devious smile on her lips.

"Are you complaining?" Dorea asked.

"Not a bit." He smiled flirtatiously, kissing her wrist.

Hermione chuckled and glanced at James who was rolling his eyes.

"Don't worry, Mia. Mum was probably the only good Slytherin to ever come out of that snake pit."

"Don't start causing trouble already, James." Dorea shook her head and sighed as she released Charlus's hand, picking up her cup of tea. "There's already enough animosity between the Houses. I won't have you walking into that school and being a problem child."

James widened his bright eyes and stuck out his bottom lip as he stared at his mother. "Does this look like the face of a problem child?"

"Don't give me that innocent look, James Charlus Potter." Dorea's eyes narrowed into slate grey slits. "I know better by now. Speaking of innocent, you better be exactly that when we go to Diagon Alley tomorrow."

James looked surprised but excited. "I thought we were going to Diagon Alley next week?" he asked as he refilled both his and Hermione's pumpkin juice from the carafe, oblivious of her astonished reaction.

She had never seen a boy do such a thing without an ulterior motive.

Dorea sighed in mild frustration. "No, we told you *last* week that we were going *this* week. Tomorrow in fact. Charlus, are you certain he's ready to go to Hogwarts on his own? Poor boy might get lost on the train or fall in the lake."

"No one falls in the lake." Charlus laughed.

Hermione joined in, chuckling at the memory of a young Dennis Creevey, who actually *had* fallen in the lake on the inaugural boat ride to the Sorting Ceremony.

Tilly appeared, clearing away plates and levitating new dishes to the table and refilling cups that the Potters had not refilled themselves. The small family smiled at her, all saying words of gratitude as she moved around the table with a determined air. "Tilly's young Master will *not* fall in the lake," she insisted. "Tilly taught him to swim—oh, yes she did."

"Tilly," James said with a pout, "Mum's not sure I'm ready to go to Hogwarts." He let his pout turn into a grin, and Hermione furrowed her brows, recognising the look. It was the same look Harry got whenever he and Ron planned on sneaking out of the castle beneath the cloak.

Tilly suddenly turned on Dorea, and with a fierce voice, said, "Tilly's young Master *will* go to Hogwarts. Young Master is the smartest wizard, brave and valiant. They lets young Master into Hogwarts to be the greatest wizard." She left a silent "or else" hanging in the air.

Hermione stared at the scene, only ever having heard a house-elf speak like that before when Sirius and Kreacher were in a row; those never ended well. However, Charlus was chuckling under his breath, Dorea seemed only mildly put out, and James looked smug at Tilly's endorsement. Well, now Hermione was certain she knew who was responsible for James's abundant self-confidence.

"I can't believe you turned a house-elf against your mum," she quietly scolded him.

"*Our* mum," James corrected, throwing her a crooked smile.

Hermione smiled, shaking her head and reaching for her empty plate as she stood.

Tilly got to the plate at the exact same time and sent Hermione a challenging look. "Tilly will take young Miss's plate."

Hermione pulled the plate back with a frown. "Tilly, I can clear away my own plate."

Tilly persisted, however. Though rather than the fake tears of the night before that Hermione was prepared to ignore this time, the house-elf began growling. Wide-eyed, Hermione promptly released the plate.

Tilly took the plate and beamed with the same sudden affection she had shown James not moments earlier. "Young Miss is the smartest witch. She goes to Hogwarts soon with young Master and will make her House so proud, yes she will!" She stomped her little foot at the end of her decree and vanished with a soft pop, taking Hermione's empty plate with her.

"I've never seen an elf so . . ." Hermione began, still in shock.

"Overbearing?" Charlus suggested with a hearty chuckle. "She's been like that since about a week after moving into the manor. So happy to be here that she overdid everything. I didn't grow up with house-elves myself, so I was used to doing most things on my own just like you," he revealed. When he smiled at her, Hermione could not help but feel better. "I learnt quickly not to get in her way. The third time she caught me hanging up my own robes, she threatened to bite my hand."

Dorea laughed at the memory and regarded Hermione affectionately. "It's true. So get used to her, love, but try not to let it go to your head." She dipped her head to her son with a knowing smile.

"I don't know what you're all talking about. Tilly's a genius." James shrugged and drained his pumpkin juice.

"I'll keep an eye on him at Hogwarts," Hermione offered, looking at James with a smirk. "I'm sure his head will deflate a little without Tilly there to dote on him."

Charlus smiled, leaning in conspiratorially. "You're officially taking on the position of sister?"

"Courage and Craft," Hermione repeated her new House words, yielding to the circumstances she had been forced into—or maybe lucked into. "I'm a Potter now. Something tells me that looking after him will come with my new name."

"You're a good girl, Hermione," Dorea said proudly.

Hermione swallowed hard and turned to smile at James. "Mia. I think I'd like to be called Mia."

James threw his fists into the air in a sign of victory.

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After breakfast, Hermione retired to her room where she was forced into an incredibly large bathtub by a very pushy house-elf. She was only allowed to scrub herself because she had promised to let Tilly brush her hair when she was done. Hermione was glad for it in the end as Tilly took to her bushy locks with determination, taming the curls into submission and promising to look for a spell that would make it easier next time. Hermione wished her luck with that.

New, handmade robes waited for her, set out on her large four-poster bed in a variety of beautiful colours. She smiled as she touched them, never having imagined she would casually wear something so fine in all her life. She hated to be doted upon like this, but she was grateful for the Potters who brought her into their home with such ease and no awkwardness at all. Other than Tilly, none of them coddled her or pitied her. For all they knew, her family could have been slaughtered by Death Eaters, and yet they treated her like any other child. Like their *own* child.

And James treated her like a sister already. It almost felt like she was with Harry, though he lacked the knowledge of pureblood etiquette that had been instilled in James from birth. Hermione wondered how much of that would change when they went to Hogwarts and he was no longer under the gaze of his parents. A part of her could not wait to see. The thought surprised her, and she swallowed a note of anxiety that threatened to push its way in, torn between wanting to get to know James better and knowing what the future had in store for him.

After dressing in the new robes that Tilly made for her, she reached beneath the mattress of her bed and pulled out the folded parchment that Remus had left in the crimson box. She read it again, over and over, frowning at the words. A part of her was still quite angry that she had not been consulted. His words were easy enough to decipher.

*I'm only following the instructions of someone who understood time better than I ever did.  
You needed to go back.*

Remus had sent her back because she already had *been* back. If Remus and Dumbledore were right, and time was a loop, then sometime in his past, Remus had met Hermione and discovered her secret about the Time-Turner. She must have told him how she had arrived in 1971. Remus had likely been torn over his orders—this mission—and Hermione figured out that it must have been *her* who begged him long ago to make sure she was eventually sent back.

But why? If not to end the war early, if not to destroy Voldemort before he grew into power, if not to save so many lives . . . then what?

*Live your life. Enjoy your life.*

Was that the reason? Was Remus somehow giving her a second chance at life? Was this her reward for all her efforts in the war? A *normal* childhood with a chance to grow up in the Wizarding world without being knocked aside due to prejudice? She had been gone less than a full day, and somehow she already had been gifted with a family and a brother and a chance to experience Hogwarts without the need to fight trolls, three-headed dogs, basilisks, Death Eaters, and Voldemort.

Dumbledore told her that Remus's letter was her guide now—her new rules to abide by. As much as it pained her to agree with him, she did. She was good at following rules. Especially when Harry and Ron were not there to convince her otherwise.

Thinking of them hurt. Thinking of everyone back home in 1998 hurt. But hurting was against her new rules.

*Live your life. Enjoy your life.*

Hermione sucked in a deep breath and slowly let it out. She could do this. She would use the letter as her guide. She would live her life as instructed by Remus and Dumbledore. She would try to enjoy her life. But Hermione Granger's life came with baggage. Baggage that she could not carry here in 1971. So she would do the only thing she could do.

Her attention was drawn to a mirror that hung on the wall, and she examined her reflection with a nod of acceptance. She would leave the baggage with Hermione Granger and start fresh—as Mia Potter.

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Mia spent her first day as a Potter getting a tour of the ancestral manor and a history lesson on her adoptive family. Dorea was a skilled witch who exuded intellect and grace but somehow still clung to that piece of mischief that lingered in her gaze. Charlus, not knowing how much Mia was privy to about the Wizarding world, attempted to educate her. She did little to stop him as it was an opportune time to bond with the man whom their world would see as her father.

"How are people not going to ask questions about me?" she asked him as they strolled through the family orchards—which reminded her a great deal of the ones in the Weasleys' back garden.

"Well, we're the last of the Potters," Charlus explained. "When Dorea and I married, a good many of the other pureblood families weren't too pleased with it. Her mother had wanted to marry her into one of two other families, but her father loved her and let her choose her own husband." He let a smug expression cross his features. "I like to think she chose well."

Mia smiled. "I do, too."

"Well, when we married, most of Dorea's family cut ties with her, and my parents died the year after. I worked from home for a long while, and it took years and years before we had James. By the time we had the 'Potter heir,'" he said with a roll of his eyes, "society didn't care much about what we were doing. People we went to Hogwarts with had all their children right out of school, so it was hard to fit in with the crowd after James was born. We didn't even publicly announce his birth. Didn't want Dorea's family causing trouble, you see. People know the Potter name, but we've purposely kept to ourselves. Dorea does her charity work, and I've consulted here and there over the years, but people who know that we have a son would be embarrassed to think they'd forgotten we also had a daughter, so they'll never question it."

"Is James going to be upset when he finally figures out that no one out in the world knows who he is?" Mia asked with a wry smile.

Charlus shook his head with a chuckle. "Your brother creates his own world, and in it, he's the highest ranking authority."

"We'll see about that." She was all too eager to take her new brother down a few pegs once they got to Hogwarts.

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Meals were served in the formal dining room at the long oak table, though each member of the Potter family all sat at one end, close enough to pick off one another's plates, something that Charlus and James did constantly despite Dorea and Mia's objections. After dinner, the family gathered in the drawing room where Dorea and Charlus watched their children play game after game of Exploding Snap, talking constantly about their eagerness to attend Hogwarts in less than a month.

When Tilly announced it was time for the family to get some rest, Mia practically ran to her room, taking off her robes and throwing on her nightdress swiftly in order to make sure that the house-elf did not do it for her. When Tilly came in later to see if Mia had need of anything, she grinned at her as though she were a challenge. Instead of fighting her new young Miss, Tilly wished Mia sweet dreams.

But as much as Mia Potter wanted to set aside the baggage of Hermione Granger, the two identities were still of the same entity, and just a few hours into the night, Mia began screaming in her sleep.

"Please! Don't hurt them! Please! No!"

"Mia? Mia? Are you all right?"

"Let him go. Please, let him go!"

Her mattress dipped, the motion slightly drawing her out of her nightmare, and when she felt hands on her shoulders, she startled fully awake.

"It's okay." He patted her head affectionately. "It's just a nightmare. You're safe."

"Harry?" Mia whispered.

There was a long pause. "It's James."

Mia looked up at him, tears still welling in her eyes. "Jamie?"

"Yeah, it's me." He looked down at her with a sympathetic gaze, and in the dark, she could almost mistake the hazel colour of his eyes for green.

Her tears overflowed, and a bubble of pain burst inside of her chest as she cried and reached out to hug him close to her, sobbing quietly in his arms.

"It's okay, Mia." James patted her back when she hugged him tight. "I've got you now. You're fine. I'll . . . I'll protect you now."

## Chapter Nineteen

### *Are You Serious?*

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*'Cause it's you and me and all of the people  
With nothing to do, nothing to lose  
And it's you and me and all of the people  
And I don't know why I can't keep my eyes off of you  
(You and Me – Lifehouse)*

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**August 3rd, 1971**

Mia woke up the following morning on the right side of her bed next to Jamie, who was using their tightly clasped hands as a pillow under his cheek. She smiled sadly, staring at the boy who looked so much like Harry that her heart ached. Then again, most things hurt these days. She'd had nightmares constantly since the war—since Malfoy Manor really. She had spent a month at Shell Cottage recovering from her run-in with Bellatrix LeStrange where Sirius kept watch over her while she slept, guarding her against the night terrors that plagued her. When she had moved into Grimmauld Place where the memories continued to haunt her sleep, Sirius would be there to comfort her—more than likely feeling responsible since it was *his* cousin who had tortured her. But when Sirius was not there, it was Harry who would hold her until she stopped crying and fell back asleep.

Regarding James now with his eyes closed, she could not help but see the son in the father, and it warmed her heart to think that somehow fate had smiled and given her a piece of Harry to keep with her in this time.

James was abundantly kind about the situation, and instead of asking Mia questions about her nightmares, or even bringing up the fact that he'd had to stay with her through the night, he teased her about her hair and began enthusiastically planning the rest of their day trip to Diagon Alley.

Much like the morning before, they had breakfast as a family—the conversation littered with many warnings about wandering off. Most of these were directed at James, who appeared to be oblivious to his mother's stern gaze.

When they stepped into the Floo, arriving in Diagon Alley seconds later, Mia smiled at the familiar sights.

Her focus was immediately drawn toward Flourish and Blotts, a strong part of her eager to get her hands on the earlier editions of books she had bought during her own time.

"Can you two be trusted to be on your own while I head into Gringotts?" Dorea asked, her attention strictly on James.

"You don't trust your own son?" he asked, pretending to be offended.

"The last time I brought you to Diagon Alley, you got lost for three hours, and we found you in the back storeroom of Sugarplum's Sweet Shop." Dorea stared down at her son accusingly, and James rolled his eyes.

"That was *not* the last time we were in Diagon Alley." James scoffed as if the *date* of the incident was the problem. He turned to Mia, shaking his head. "Mum exaggerates."

Mia quietly laughed as Dorea's jaw twitched, clearly debating whether or not bringing him was a smart move on her part. "I'll take care of him, Mum."

Dorea smiled thoughtfully at Mia, then she turned and pointed a finger at her son. "James, stay with your sister. I mean it, young man. You can look around for a bit, but meet me at Ollivanders in twenty minutes. And don't wander. And do not go anywhere near Knockturn Alley."

"Yes, Mum." James bobbed his head, and the newly acquainted "Potter twins" were left to their own devices, one incredibly eager to run amok.

"Do you want to go to Flourish and Blotts?" Mia asked, scanning the shop with anticipation.

James made a face at her idea. "Or we could go to Broomstix."

"Obscurus Books?" Mia suggested.

He smirked. "I counter your boring idea with a trip into Gambol and Japes."

*A joke shop?* Mia shook her head. *Absolutely not.* The last thing she needed was a Potter in a joke shop. She had spent enough time dealing with Harry and Ron inside Zonko's and eventually Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. Though she missed her friends, she felt relieved that she need not worry about encountering Fred and George in this era.

"We should be looking for things on our lists for school." She frowned at him, unaware that she had adopted the look Dorea used when trying to rein in her son.

"Fine, fine. Let's head over to Quality Quidditch Supplies then," he said as though it was a great sacrifice on his part.

"You don't need Quidditch supplies," Mia scolded him. "First years aren't allowed to play."

"Then I'll be pretty famous when I make the team, won't I? Youngest Chaser in a century! That's what they'll call me," he said smugly.

"You're incorrigible," Mia said, laughing.

While she knew James would not become the youngest Chaser in a century, she felt a strange bit of pride in knowing that Harry would carry on James's Quidditch dream. Even if the sport was a ridiculous waste of time and an excuse to be barbaric. Was it too much to ask to deal with a boy, just one boy in her entire life, who was not obsessed with the insane excuse for a sport?

"Flourish and Blotts first, and *then* I'll agree to accompany you to your little broom shop. It's not like we even have money to buy anything just yet. We're only browsing while waiting for Mum."

James looked to be okay with the small compromise, and the two headed toward the bookshop.

A thin, sallow-faced woman stormed past Mia on the right, her feet stomping a little as she sped forward. She glanced back once, dark circles beneath her eyes and an exhausted scowl fixed to her jaw. "Severus, hurry, your father wants us back before noon!"

*Severus?*

Mia turned around to follow the woman's line of sight, but as she moved she collided with someone, losing her balance, and gripped the only thing within reach to keep from falling: a threadbare coat.

"Don't touch me!" the boy she had run into shouted.

She looked up into a pale face draped in black hair, and dark eyes narrowed at her. Shocked at the familiar sneer, she let go of his coat and mumbled out a quick, "Oh, I'm so sorry."

His gaze narrowed angrily before shoving her out of his way. "Watch where you're going!"

Mia tripped backward, still awkward and unused to her smaller frame. She tried to recover her balance but fell to the cobblestone road, skinning her knees and scratching her palms against the rough surface of the street.

"Hey! Don't shove my sister!" James yelled, rushing forward.

"She should watch where she's going," the sour-faced boy said, glaring daggers at James as the two faced off.

"Severus! Get over here!" the gaunt woman yelled.

James scowled at the offending stranger. "Sounds like Mummy's calling you."

Mia sniffed and looked down at her bleeding knee. It certainly was not the worst injury she had ever had to deal with, and she almost laughed at the sting of the cut compared to the Cruciatus Curse or the feeling of being splinched. No, this was nothing, though she was slightly embarrassed by tripping so easily.

As James continued stalking after the other boy, presumably to make sure he did not double back for another round, a shadow fell over Mia from behind.

"Hey, you okay? That looked like a bad tumble."

"I'm fine," Mia grumbled as she tried to pick a few bits of gravel out of the minor wound on her leg.

She turned her attention upward to thank the person for being considerate, but when she went to speak, her mouth fell open as she stared up into a colour of grey that she was intimately familiar with and instantly set her heart aflutter: the colour of campfire smoke on an early autumn morning. Her breath caught in her throat.

"I . . ." She exhaled slowly and unconsciously whispered, "Sirius?"

The boy in front of her quirked an eyebrow, and a smile crossed his face. "Have we met?"

Mia blinked. "What?"

"You called me Sirius."

"What?" she repeated, silently scolding herself for being so easily distracted that she broke one of the main rules of time travel. Cringing, she sought out an excuse to cover her tracks. "No. I said are you serious? A bad tumble. Are you serious? I've had worse."

The boy pondered her answer as though he were trying to decide whether or not she was lying. "Huh."

Mia swallowed and decided to go for casual. "Why did you think we'd met?"

"My name *is* Sirius," he said with a wink.

She laughed. "Are you serious?"

"Yep."

He grinned, and Mia melted.

This was Sirius. Sirius Black. *Her* Sirius. No, no, not *her* Sirius. *Her* Sirius was not even *her* Sirius, and he was almost thirty years in the future waiting around for her, the day after her nineteenth birthday when they were supposed to talk about their bond.

*Their bond!*

Mia's eyes widened as she looked at the boy, wondering if the bond still existed here and now. She recalled reading about the life debt ritual and how it was supposed to exist throughout time and space, but did that mean time travel as well? Certainly not. Hesitantly, she tried to seek out that magical feeling inside of her but came up empty. Something was missing.

"I'm . . . fine," she finally answered Sirius's original question, trying to distract herself from gawking at him.

His lovely aristocratic angles were hidden beneath the softer features of his face, but she knew that those rounded cheeks leftover from childhood would soon fade to reveal a chiselled jaw. His fair skin—not sickly pale, like when she had first seen him in the Shrieking Shack—contrasted dashingly against the shiny black hair that hung just past his ears. Without the aged lines, numerous scars, and tattoos, Mia struggled to search the boy's face for the man who had left her in his family library just days ago.

There was the smallest hint of mischief in the boy's eyes, and Mia smiled.

*Found you, Sirius,* she thought to herself.

He gestured to her knee, pulling her out of her daze. "You're *bleeding* is what you are."

She frowned and looked down, embarrassed.

"Here," Sirius pulled a silk handkerchief from the pocket of his finely made robes—finer than even her own, which was truly saying something as Tilly's seamstress skills were excellent. He knelt down at her side and held out the handkerchief.

She eyed the black silk, taking immediate notice of the Black family crest embroidered in silver in the corner of the cloth. "Are you sure? This looks expensive."

He smirked. "All the better to ruin it, then."

She smiled gratefully and pressed the cloth to her small wound, wiping the blood from her skin. "I'm H—Mia, by the way."

James returned at a jog. "What an arse! You okay, Mia?" he asked, concern and irritation in his voice.

"Fine, just scraped my knee. And watch your language." Mia smiled up at James, who was ignoring her scolding in favour of observing the other boy.

Sirius reached out to Mia, helping her to her feet, and she awkwardly slipped his handkerchief back to him with a grateful look.

"Hey, thanks, mate." James extended a hand to Sirius.

Sirius nodded, taking the hand. "No problem."

"James, this is Sirius," Mia said, smiling brightly at what she suddenly realised was a very historically important moment. She beamed at the two boys, searing the memory into her mind. She hoped that she could keep it, so when—or if—she returned to Harry, she could tell him all about it or, better yet, show him inside of a Pensieve. "Sirius, this is my brother James."

"You like Puddlemere?" Sirius asked, gesturing to the shirt that James was wearing beneath his open robes.

James grinned. "Doesn't everyone?"

"I don't," Mia interjected. "I don't like Quidditch much."

"You don't like Quidditch?!" both boys shouted at the same time, eyes wide and gaping at her as though she just had sprouted a second head.

"What the hell, Mia?" James clutched his chest as if heartbroken. "I knew you didn't want to go into the Quidditch shop, but I didn't know it was this bad." He shook his head. Considering his reaction, Mia might as well have been infected with dragon pox.

"What's *wrong* with you?" Sirius gaped.

James sniffled. "Why do you want to hurt me?"

"Oh for the love of G—Merlin." Mia rolled her eyes at the melodramatic scene playing out before her. "Can we go look for our books now?"

"No way," James said with a scowl, his eyes narrowed at the bookshop. "That greasy-looking git that knocked you over is in Flourish and Blotts with his mum. I'd rather avoid meeting him again."

"Who was he?" Sirius asked, a matching scowl crossing his face.

James shrugged. "No idea. Just another sleazy snake in the making."

"Not a fan of Slytherins?" Sirius asked.

"Why, are you planning on becoming one?" James joked. "Then again, anyone who would *plan* to be sorted into Slytherin has to be mental."

Sirius laughed awkwardly and sighed. His smile completely faded from sight as he muttered, "Not like I have a choice."

"Sirius Orion Black!"

Mia's eyes widened at the familiar sound of Walburga Black, and she spun to see the horrible witch across the street, alive and in the flesh. It was more than a little uncomfortable to see the woman in front of her and not be able to cover her up with curtains after spending months inside Grimmauld Place being screamed at by her portrait. Walburga Black never hesitated to call her a "filthy Mudblood who was tainting the Ancient and Noble House" by stepping foot inside.

The wretched woman glared down at Sirius as she stormed across the street, ignoring James and Mia entirely. "Did I not tell you to stay by your brother?"

"What for? He hasn't let go of your skirt all morning." Sirius eyed the smaller boy who was, in fact, holding onto Walburga's hideous black dress with a tight fist.

His grey eyes, so similar to Sirius's, were small and wide as he looked nervously between his mother and brother. Mia held her breath at the sight of him—*Regulus Black*—remembering the grief in *her* Sirius's eyes when he spoke of his brother's death.

This younger version of Sirius did not look overburdened with grief. Instead, he appeared to be fuming with rebellious anger. "You probably didn't even realise I was gone until you looked for *him*."

"You watch your mouth, you little—" Walburga raised her hand, clearly having no qualms about striking her own child in the very public square of Diagon Alley.

Sirius, defiant as ever, did not even flinch.

Mia, however, felt like reaching for her wand to defend Sirius, only to remember she no longer *had* a wand.

"Walburga," Dorea interrupted as she glided over, approaching the scene. For as calm as she sounded, her eyes were cold and hard as she stepped between Walburga and Sirius, forcing him back to stand side-by-side with James and Mia.

Walburga glared, lowering her hand. "Aunt Dorea."

Dorea looked over Walburga as if assessing her. "It's been a long time."

"Not. Long. Enough," Walburga seethed.

Lifting a slender brow at the childish antics, Dorea looked away dismissively. "Still just as dramatic as ever, I see."

"Still married to a blood-traitor, I see."

"Blood-traitor, yes." Dorea laughed, looking down to examine her manicured fingers. "How *clever* of you. My brother must be *so* proud."

Still caught up on the word "aunt" that Walburga put in front of Dorea's name, Mia quietly observed the two women. She had almost forgotten that Harry's grandmother was a Black. She had researched it, of course, in preparing for the life debt ritual, needing something from the Black bloodline in order to call for Sirius. However, she had all but forgotten the connection after meeting Dorea face-to-face, finding no similarities between her adoptive mother and the vile witch standing in front of her.

Walburga turned her focus to James. "I'd heard you had a child some time ago."

"Yes, this is my son, James, and my daughter, Mia," Dorea said.

"A *daughter* too?" Walburga said the word as if it came with great shame. "I'd not heard." She openly patted Regulus on the head, silently showing off that she had provided not just one, but *two* sons to the "Noble and Most Ancient House of Black," thus one-upping Dorea.

"Well, you know how society is. Once you've got the heir, what more reason is there to celebrate?" Dorea remarked sardonically.

Walburga inclined her head. "I suppose you're right."

"I was being sarcastic, you overstuffed bint," Dorea said, nose twitching.

James and Mia both goggled, wide-eyed, up at their mother, who was usually so calm and collected but had just displayed the classic Black temper, grey eyes narrowed at Walburga.

Sirius, however, beamed up at Dorea Potter as though she were the greatest thing he had ever seen in his entire life. With a look of awe on his face, he grinned and extended his hand to her. "Sirius Black, ma'am. An *absolute* pleasure to meet you."

"Dorea Potter." She smiled down at the boy, ignoring the look of loathing that crossed Walburga's face as she took Sirius's hand. "And whom do *you* belong to?" she asked knowingly.

The sound of Walburga grinding her teeth together was audible as she fumed. "That is my son."

Dorea gasped in feigned shock. "But he can *smile*, Walburga. Where on earth could he have learnt to do that?"

Sirius's grin widened, and he looked over at James and Mia with great appreciation before turning his admiration back to Dorea.

"Sirius is the heir to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black," Walburga said proudly, though she refused to look at the son she spoke so highly of. The same son she nearly had struck only minutes ago. "You remember *that*, don't you, Dorea?"

"My own House? Yes, I'm fairly certain I can recall."

Walburga snorted. "Surprising, considering that you refuse to act accordingly."

"I act as my conscience dictates, and I teach my children to do the same," Dorea said, affectionately moving to stand behind James and Mia, putting a hand on each of their shoulders.

"Shame." Walburga glanced down at the children as if Dorea's actions immediately labelled them as blood-traitors. "I teach my children obedience and tradition."

"You teach bigotry and hatred, and you don't fool me for a second," Dorea said viciously, looking as though she were a viper ready to strike. Suddenly, envisioning Dorea Potter as a Slytherin was not so difficult for Mia.

Mia tugged on Dorea's sleeve, eager to get away from Walburga. "Mum, weren't we supposed to get our wands soon?"

"Yes, well." Dorea let out a shaky exhale. "If you'll excuse me, Walburga, my family and I have some school shopping to do."

"Sirius is attending Hogwarts this year as well. Certain to make Slytherin House *very* proud." Walburga turned her nose in the air and stormed away, clearly eager to have the last word. Dorea, likewise, turned and walked off in the opposite direction. Regulus immediately followed after Walburga, but Sirius did not move.

"I heard at the Sorting we have to fight a dragon," he said with a grin, acting as though nothing had happened.

Mia shook her head. "That's rubbish, Sirius."

"Sirius, come!" Walburga screamed from across the street, but Sirius continued to ignore her.

James's eyes brightened. "I wonder what kind of dragon it'll be!"

"Jamie, we *don't* have to fight a dragon," Mia insisted.

Sirius grinned excitedly. "I hope it's a Chinese Fireball!"

"Or a Peruvian Vipermouth!"

"Wicked!"

The boys laughed when they had realised they had spoken simultaneously.

Mia glowered. "Are you two even listening to me?"

"Sirius! Come!" Walburga screamed once more, stomping her foot.

"Woman treats me like a bloody dog," Sirius growled.

Mia stifled a laugh as he began to move. "We'll see you on the train?"

"Save me a seat," he said, smiling as he turned to catch up with his family. He dodged to the side as Walburga tried to smack him, laughing when she missed her target.

"Well," Dorea said as the children caught up with her. "Interesting friend you've made."

Mia sighed, her heart clenching as she suddenly realised just how much she had missed Sirius's smile and laughter. "He was nice. A boy shoved me down, and Sirius helped me," she explained, gesturing to her skinned knee.

"A son of Walburga Black helped a Potter?" Dorea laughed softly as she knelt down to examine Mia's injury. She waved her wand gently over the scrape, cleaning what was left. "Salazar Slytherin must be rolling in his grave."

Both James and Mia laughed.

"All right, we're a little behind thanks to that nonsense. I would have just walked away had it been anyone else," Dorea explained. "But there's something incredibly satisfying about ruffling that vulture's feathers."

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The Potter family made their way to a narrow, shabby-looking shop ahead of them. Peeling gold letters over the door read *Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 B.C.*

Mia smiled brightly up at the sign, and James bounced on his toes as they entered the shop.

"Good afternoon." Mr Ollivander smiled as they approached the counter, glancing with anticipation at the children.

Mia regarded the man who, only months ago, had been devastatingly unhealthy the last time she had seen him at Shell Cottage. The man before her *now* looked bright and healthy despite his age, obviously eager to help two new customers.

"Dorea Black," Mr Ollivander said with a tone of fond nostalgia. "Ten and a half inches. Cherrywood, pliable, dragon heartstring core."

Dorea chuckled. "It's Dorea *Potter* now. My children are going to Hogwarts this year and are in need of wands."

Mr Ollivander grinned. "Always happy to provide wands to new Potters. Charlus's wand is eleven inches, walnut, supple with the core of a unicorn hair, is it not?"

"You *know* it is, you great show off," Dorea said in amusement. "James, you first."

"Hold out your arm. That's it." Mr Ollivander measured James from shoulder to finger, then wrist to elbow, shoulder to floor, knee to armpit and around his head. As he measured, he said, "Every Ollivander wand has a core of a powerful magical substance, Mr Potter. We use unicorn hairs, phoenix tail feathers, and the heartstrings of dragons. No two Ollivander wands are the same, just as no two unicorns, dragons, or phoenixes are quite the same. And of course, you will never get such good results with another wizard's wand."

Mia blinked, wondering if her original wand was somewhere in the shop, waiting to choose her, or if perhaps she would end up with something different and the beautiful vinewood wand would sit on a shelf and wait.

After only three tries, James eagerly reached for an eleven-inch mahogany wand with a unicorn hair core as Mr Ollivander held it out to him. His eyes lit up, and he let out a breath. "This . . ." he whispered, "this feels . . . good." He grinned and swished the wand which immediately sparked red and gold.

"Ah, wonderful, wonderful," Mr Ollivander exclaimed. "This has very consistent magic. Good for transfiguration. Now, the young lady?" He looked to Mia, who immediately approached the counter to be measured like her brother had been.

The wandmaker turned to the shelves and pulled out three boxes for her to try. The first was a brittle ash wand with the core of a unicorn hair, but it did not touch her fingers for longer than three seconds before he shook his head and removed it from her grip.

"Ah, here." He pulled a familiar-looking wand from a box, and Mia's eyes widened.

*No, no, absolutely not!*

"Holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple."

*Harry's wand.* Mia recognised it immediately and hesitated to touch it. She knew this wand and knew its brother, and she swallowed hard as she slowly put her hand out, panic rising to the surface. She refused to swish it, to flick it, or to move it at all.

Mr Ollivander focused on her and frowned at her reaction to the wand and removed it from her palm, watching as she let out a deep sigh of relief. "Interesting," he muttered and replaced the wand with another.

A warmth ran across her fingers like soft bath water after being out in the cold for too long. "This feels . . . familiar."

"Ah, good." Mr Ollivander smiled. "Ten and one-quarter inch, vinewood with the core of a dragon heartstring."

Mia stared at the man. It was not her original wand—the measurements were slightly off—but it felt familiar in her hand. "Dragon heartstring?"

"Yes, Miss Potter, very powerful. The dragon that donated the heartstring was an old Ukrainian Ironbelly. He donated two others that year. A wand made of willow that I sold to a young Muggle-born girl just this week, and another vinewood in the back, just a bit longer than this."

Somehow she had ended up with the *sister* wand of her original; it made Mia feel like she had not left it behind in 1998 after all.

"Perfection, as usual, Mr Ollivander." Dorea smiled and placed fourteen Galleons in the wandmaker's hand. He bowed in thanks and escorted the Potter family through the shop door.

*Maybe this won't be that bad,* Mia thought.

1971 was slowly beginning to feel like home.

## Chapter Twenty

### *Adopting Strays*

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*And how can I stand here with you,  
And not be moved by you?  
Would you tell me,  
How could it be, any better than this?"*  
(Everything - Lifehouse)

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**September 1st, 1971**

Mia quickly followed James through the barrier that separated platforms nine and ten. The twins eased their way through the stone wall, both grinning as they pushed their carts; James's taller than Mia's as it held a large cage with one of the family birds, a small owl with speckled brown and white wings by the name of Hector. Though Mia had been offered the chance to bring her own familiar to Hogwarts, she had declined. A part of her was unwilling to bond with another creature, so soon after leaving, the same way that she had done with her beloved Crookshanks.

Smoke billowed out of the engine of the train. The familiar sight of the giant, scarlet steam engine calmed Mia's frazzled nerves—nerves that had been building since Tilly had woken her that morning. It was a familiar kind of anxiety; one that made her think of her original first trip to King's Cross and the anticipation of attending Hogwarts for the first time.

Despite knowing exactly what would happen when she stepped foot on the train that would take her to school, she was not lingering on memories of a battle-worn castle. She had spent the past month as Mia Potter, the daughter of Charlus and Dorea Potter, twin sister of James Potter, and it was practically effortless to get lost in her new life.

The small family rarely left the comfort of the manor; instead, they spent the late mornings reading together or separately in the massive library that rivalled that of the Black family library at Grimmauld Place. Afternoons were spent in the orchard, garden, or the small clearing that James was determined to eventually convert into a proper Quidditch field where he practised flying, pestering his sister to join him. She always refused.

Evenings were spent enjoying dinner together, listening to their parents tell stories, playing Exploding Snap or wizard's chess, and eventually, rushing off to bed to escape the grip of the overbearing house-elf who had apparently made a game of trying to tuck the young Potter children into bed. While James normally enjoyed being doted upon, he had seen the amused and proud expression on his sister's face when she had properly evaded Tilly, and he quickly decided to join in on the fun—much to Tilly's annoyance.

It was only the nights that made Mia's life difficult.

She had refused to let her parents know about her nightmares, not wanting to frighten them or let them see how utterly broken she was. Thankfully, James was always there, sneaking into her room and crawling into her bed an hour or two after they separated into their own suites. He would take her hand into his own, utter promises of protection, and the siblings would fall soundlessly asleep.

Life was strangely good here, and Mia was adjusting well, reading Remus's letter each night before bed to remind herself of her rules.

*Live your life. Enjoy your life.*

Dorea looked to her children, tears welling in her eyes. James immediately showed his soft side by hugging his mother tightly around the waist and not making a fuss as she affectionately tried to flatten down his black hair that was standing up in several different directions in the back. "Be sure to write to us after the Sorting."

"When you get sorted into *Gryffindor*," Charlus added with a chuckle.

Dorea stared at her husband. "Or *Slytherin*."

"Anywhere's just fine."

Both Mia and James chuckled at the way that their mother crossed her arms over her chest before mumbling something derogatory under her breath that ended with, ". . . as if children of *mine* would be Hufflepuffs."

Charlus patted James on the shoulder once before bringing the boy into a tight hug. After releasing his son, he reached a long arm out for his daughter, pulling her in as well. "Go on then, you'll want a good seat."

"Hey, isn't that Sirius?" James asked.

Mia turned out of Charlus's embrace to follow after her brother, spotting the Black family off to the side—consisting of Walburga Black, a pouting Regulus, a tall man with a fixed sneer on his face that could only be Orion Black, and an utterly annoyed and

impatient-looking Sirius, who caught her eye and broke into a grin as they passed him on the platform.

Mia started to smile until she made eye contact with Walburga Black. "Let's head inside, Jamie." Escaping the older witch's utter contempt was an absolute necessity.

Sirius sighed as he watched his friends disappear onto the train, wishing he could just make a run for it and escape his parents.

"Do not disgrace our family, Sirius," his mother threatened. "You have an attitude problem and a habit of flocking to ill-bred children."

She was doubtlessly referring to the Potters, whom she had great fun lecturing Sirius about after meeting them in Diagon Alley. He had mentioned that he stopped to help, offering Mia his handkerchief when he saw her knee bleeding. Any other pureblood girl, and Sirius might have been praised for his efforts, but his mother had been furious. She ended up incinerating the handkerchief and using a painful Scouring Charm on his hands, muttering about how one never knew the type of filth that blood-traitors mingled with.

"Luckily, when you're sorted into Slytherin, you won't have to interact with that kind of filth and muck as often."

Sirius groaned impatiently. "I'm going to miss the train if I don't go now."

"Please don't go," Regulus whispered.

"I'll write to you every week, Reggie," Sirius promised, seeing the tense look his brother was giving him. They were as close as they could be, given their home life, though it seemed almost as though their parents were intent on creating animosity between them as though they could hold Regulus over Sirius's head in an attempt to control him. He wished them luck with that.

Regulus frowned. "I want to go, too."

"Don't be ridiculous, my precious boy." Sirius's mother beamed and pulled Regulus closer to her. "You have a whole year just with me. Without distracting influences," she said, narrowing her eyes once more at Sirius.

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Subtle."

"What did you say?" she snapped at him.

"I said . . ." He tried to think of a lie—*What rhymes with subtle?* "Bubble."

"Bubble?"

He let out a disappointed sigh. "Yeah, I'll admit it, I wasn't even trying there."

"Get on the train before I change my mind and send you to Durmstrang," she said through clenched teeth. Though he knew she had no issues with publicly disciplining him, the platform was overly crowded, and she was clearly more interested in leaving as quickly as possible.

"Reggie, Father . . . Walburga, it's been great." Sirius saluted them all with a smirk on his face as he ducked away and rushed toward the door of the train, tugging his trunk behind him.

When he made his way aboard, he smiled as he ran into Mia and James, both having watched his farewell to his family from an open window. "You weren't really going to leave without me were you?"

"It's not *my* fault that you lingered behind to kiss your mum," Mia teased.

"Ouch, kitten has claws." Sirius smiled broadly at her, and Mia beamed.

"Hurry up, you two," James called after them, "before all the compartments get taken up."

"You boys go find one, I'm going to watch the train leave," Mia said with a smile.

"Girls." James rolled his eyes. "So bloody sentimental." He laughed, and Sirius joined him. The two made their way down the aisle, eagerly searching for an empty compartment.

"Boys," Mia muttered affectionately, watching as her brother and Sirius disappeared into the crowded aisle.

Misty-eyed, she watched from the window when the train pulled out of the station as the clock struck eleven. Her new parents waved from the platform, and she let out a shaky breath as she was carried away from the anchors of her comfort in this world. Closing her eyes, she remembered that soon she would be at Hogwarts—her safe place. The place where she had grown and blossomed within magic. Her *true* home.

Mia summoned her inner Gryffindor courage and headed down the aisle to search for Sirius and James.

As she walked, something tugged inside of her as though an invisible string were pulling her gaze to the side. It felt similar to the something missing she noticed when she was around Sirius. She had originally assumed it was the magic that she knew existed between them but might have been fractured during her time travel. Now, however, she was forced to rethink her theory as a similar emptiness moved her gaze on a small

compartment at the front of the train where a pale, thin boy with sandy-blond hair sat with his nose stuck in a book.

She raised a brow as she studied him, unsure as to why her magic was reaching out needily.

The boy's nose twitched, and she watched him sniff the air; immediately a confused expression painted his face as his soft green eyes turned and peered up expectantly at her.

She took quick notice that, unlike most of the other students, the boy was already wearing black Hogwarts robes. They looked slightly big on him, covering him from head to foot—save for his hands and the small expanse of neck where Mia could see the faint outline of what looked to be a fresh scar.

Mia let out a soft gasp.

*Remus.*

She turned her head away from him, stifling her anger as she moved past his compartment, breathing heavily. This boy was the reason she was here in the first place. The reason she had been torn from her own time and thrust into the past without her permission. The reason she was an eleven-year-old again and forced to create a new life and a new identity.

Mia wanted to walk into that compartment and hit him. But then she remembered the confused expression on the boy's face and the scar on his neck. This was not the Remus that tricked her into going to the past; this was just a boy, a boy who, from the looks of it, was feeling very ill.

Mia suddenly realised that the full moon was due in just three days' time. *Damn.*

He was probably in a lot of pain, feeling sick and on edge, and now he had to deal with the stress of his first trip to Hogwarts.

*And hopefully, very soon you will come across a very lonely boy who is terrified to go to Hogwarts and is desperate for some understanding friends.*

Her frown deepened. Remus was her friend. No matter what he had done, she had always trusted and admired him. He had been the best teacher she'd ever had the privilege of being mentored by, and he was *always* there for her. She, in turn, had tried to be there for him, helping Tonks with his transformations and the healing that he needed afterward. At his worst moments—like when he doubted his ability to be a good father—it had always

been *Hermione* to bring him friendly comfort and raise his self-esteem. She could not just turn her back on him now.

With a take-charge attitude, Mia turned back to Remus's compartment, poked her head inside the door, and smiled at him. "Hello!" she said brightly.

Remus jumped at the sudden noise and stared back at her with wide eyes. He clutched his book tightly to his chest, as though he was trying to physically erect a barrier between them.

"Umm . . . me? Hello, m-me?" he stuttered, a very confused expression on his face. "I mean hello . . . umm, hi."

"Are you waiting for your friends to join you?" Mia asked sweetly, trying to ignore the way he shied away from her.

Remus frowned. "No."

Mia tried to hold back her emotions. She had known that he would be alone and would not have been there with friends, but she could not very well let *him* know that.

"So you're here alone?" she asked, stepping further into the compartment and watching closely as he pressed his back tightly against the window, trying to distance himself more.

"D-Do you . . . ?" he stammered again, his breathing heavy as she closed in on him. "I mean . . . yeah, I'm alone. That's fine, though," he insisted quickly. "I'm okay. I mean, did you need this compartment?"

She watched him carefully, noticing that his gaze flickered between her and the door, looking like he wanted to make a hasty retreat.

"No, my brother's getting us one in the back," she answered, and then pointed to the book he clutched tightly. "What book are you reading?"

"*Hogwarts, A History*."

"Merlin, that's my favourite!" She grinned and sat down right beside him, watching as he took in a sharp breath and stiffened.

She took a moment to let him adjust to her presence, realising that Remus had probably been terrified at this point to be around other people, especially without his parents to look after him. She recalled an older Remus telling her how afraid he had been of hurting others, or even worse, infecting them. It explained everything about the terrified-looking, lonely boy in front of her. But the older Remus had implied in his letter that his

younger self was in desperate need of understanding friends. And his letter was her guide and her rules, and she would obey it.

Mia smiled over at him, gesturing to the book in his hands, watching as he very slowly let his guard down a little.

"My favourite, too." He gave her a nervous smile. "I was really excited to go, so I wanted to read up. I didn't think I'd ever be able to attend."

"Why not? You're a wizard, aren't you?" she asked.

"I . . . I, umm . . . yeah. I mean, my parents weren't sure if they wanted to send me somewhere else is all."

Mia understood why he lied to her and did not push the issue any further. Instead, she beamed at him, offering a friendly smile. "Well, lucky us then."

He raised a brow as though he did not understand the word. "Lucky?"

"Yeah, you're coming to Hogwarts, and now we're going to be friends."

"Friends?" The word sounded painful as it left his lips.

She did her best to hide the expression of grief that threatened to escape her. Yes. Remus was her friend and would be her friend again. She needed him, just as he very desperately needed her.

Eventually, she held a hand out to him that he gaped at with wide eyes. "I'm Mia Potter."

"Remus Lupin," he said without touching her, still staring at her extended hand.

"You know, I don't have germs."

"I know, I mean . . ." He glanced up at her face and then back down at her hand, and she could almost see him calculating the risks. Any other child would have probably thought him to be completely strange or possibly have been offended by his reaction, but Mia knew better, which was also why she refused to back down.

*Shake the bloody hand, Remus,* she urged him silently.

After a moment, he looked up at her, and she tried to express to him the safety of the situation. Slowly, he took her hand, and she smiled as though she had just received an Outstanding on a test.

"Come on, Remus," she said, tugging on him like Tilly was constantly doing to her.

Remus looked panicked, but he did not struggle against her. "Where . . . Where are we going?"

"To join up with my brother and our friend." She watched as he hesitated, lingering in the door to the compartment that had—up until she arrived—been his safe and secluded place. She waited patiently, communicating with her stance that she was not letting up.

"If you come sit with me, I'll buy us all a feast off of the trolley," Mia said, resorting to simple bribery. "You like Chocolate Frogs?"

With mischievous grin, she watched as the invisible barrier he had put up between them fell down with a silent crash.

As they made their way to the back of the train, she could hear loud laughter coming out of a compartment near the end on the right side of the aisle. And then a very familiar voice shouted out, "See ya, Snivellus!"

Mia frowned. "Oh, no."

"Something wrong?" Remus asked.

"At least *two* things." She sighed in frustration as she witnessed a young Severus Snape bolt from the compartment door, a sneer on his face as he stormed down the aisle.

Severus made his way past Mia and Remus, shouting, "Move!"

Mia jumped back, not wanting him to push her over again as he had done in Diagon Alley.

A small red-haired girl passed Mia and Remus, tossing them an apologetic look before following after the boy, calling out, "Sev, wait up!"

Mia let out a growl of frustration and made her way to the compartment door, throwing it open and staring down at a laughing James and Sirius. "What did you do?"

Hazel eyes bright with delight, James smiled up at his sister. "We got a compartment!"

"That's not what I meant. Were you mean to the two other students that just came out of here?"

"We didn't do anything," Sirius defended immediately. "That greasy git started it."

"Yeah, he called us stupid."

"And the girl?" Mia asked, eyes narrowed at her brother.

"Probably just another Slytherin like that kid." James shrugged.

Mia rolled her eyes. *Oh Jamie, if you only knew what you'd just done.*

"You know *he's* the one that pushed you in Diagon Alley, right?"

Sirius growled. "Yeah, I'm not polite to blokes that shove girls."

She sighed in frustration, knowing that their intentions had, at least, originated from a semi-good-natured place, though she was not pleased with how they had gone about it.

"Thank you for defending me, I suppose. However, I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself," she added stubbornly as she moved completely into the compartment, reaching back to grip Remus's hand and drag him inside with her, taking a seat across from James and Sirius and pulling Remus down beside her. "By the way, this is my new friend Remus."

"James Potter." James smiled and held out his hand.

Remus stared at it much the same way he had stared at Mia's when she had introduced herself, but this time he did not waste much time in shaking it before another hand was held out to him.

"Sirius Black."

"Remus Lupin," he offered with a small smile.

"What house do you want then, Remus?" James asked quickly.

"Gryffindor," Remus stated without a skipping a beat.

James grinned. "Good. Hey, Mia, you want to hear something funny? Sirius might end up in Slytherin."

Sirius scoffed and held his head high, determination on his face. "Not if I can help it."

"Mum was in Slytherin," Mia pointed out.

"Really?" Sirius baulked. "But your mum seemed so . . . nice."

"She's a Black. Like your mum," Mia pointed out.

"Your mum is *nothing* like my mum," Sirius said, quick to defend the honour of one Dorea Potter. "At least I hope not, for your sakes."

James cocked his head. "Your mum called my mum 'Aunt Dorea.' That makes us family, yeah?"

"All pureblood families are related somehow if you go far back enough," Mia explained, shifting her bookbag to the floor.

"I never cared to look too hard at my family tree," Sirius said with a grimace. "It criss-crosses too often."

Mia gave him a knowing smile. She had seen the Black family tapestry with her own eyes, and Sirius was by no means exaggerating. There never was a tree with more intertwined branches.

"We're second cousins, I think," she said, pointing to herself, James and Sirius. "However, considering what Sirius said about the criss-crosses in the family tree, there's a chance it could be once removed. Maybe twice. I'd have to research a little just to be sure."

Sirius chuckled. "She always talk like this?"

James grinned, poking Mia's leg with his foot, laughing when she shoved him off. "It gets better the farther she is away from a library or bookshop."

"Move it, first years!"

A shout came from outside the compartment, and all four inside turned to look at the window as a tall, blond boy shoved his way into view.

"Salazar, if I knew what House they belonged in, I'd already be taking away points," the boy drawled.

Mia's eyes widened at the sight. There before her stood the mirror image of a fifteen-year-old Draco Malfoy, recognisable smirk on his lips and two large boys flanking him on either side, also very familiar. For a second, she felt incredibly out of place before she realised that the blond boy in question was not, in fact, Draco, but his father, Lucius Malfoy, and the cronies at his side must have been Crabbe Sr and Goyle Sr.

She felt a sharp pain and pressure in her chest at the sight of Crabbe. Though she had watched as Lucius Malfoy had been struck down by the wand of his own son, seeing Crabbe was more difficult as it was her own wayward curse that had killed the man during the final battle in 1998. The first and only time the words "Avada Kedavra" had left her mouth.

She was distracted from her remorseful thoughts as Lucius Malfoy turned his bullying attention toward a boy in front of him.

"Prefect coming through. Out of my way!" he said as a small first year tried to walk past him. He shoved the boy violently, and the first year collided with the door frame of the compartment, sinking quickly to the ground, nearly being trampled by Crabbe and Goyle in the process.

James and Sirius stood quickly, scowls on their faces at the scene, and Mia jumped from her seat to reach the round-faced boy.

"How awful! Are you all right?" she asked, grabbing his hand and helping him to his feet.

"Yes, thank you," he mumbled, a sad frown on his face.

"What an arse," Mia growled, eyes narrowed at the back of Lucius Malfoy's head as he walked away from them. "Just because he's a prefect, he thinks he can go about shoving people?"

Sirius glared after Lucius, tapping his wand in his palm threateningly despite not yet knowing how to properly use it. "He thinks he can do whatever he wants because he's a *Malfoy*."

"You know that prat?" Remus spoke up.

"Met him over the summer. He's going to be betrothed to my cousin."

"You sure you're okay?" Mia asked the boy. He nodded, favouring his shoulder—it would certainly be bruised the following day.

"Come on in," James insisted.

He took a seat opposite Sirius, sandwiching Mia between himself and Remus. "Thanks for being nice to me."

James grinned and began another round of introductions. "Course, mate. I'm James."

"Sirius."

"Remus."

"Mia." She smiled at the boy.

"I'm Peter," he said with a kindly, hopeful expression on his face.

*No!*

Mia's smile disappeared with what felt like all the blood from her face, and her stomach lurched. She turned her face away from the boy, trying to control her anger as cold dread flooded through her body. She tried to focus on something to ground her.

Sirius and James were already deep in discussion with one another, Remus had re-opened his book, and *Peter* sat there quietly, so close to Mia that she wanted to scream. She closed her eyes and tried to think of Remus's letter. Her guide and her rules.

*Every action we take is the causation of destiny.*

Mia silently ground her teeth together. Though she felt proud to have been the reason to introduce James to Sirius and Remus, she was also the catalyst that brought Peter Pettigrew into the company of the future Marauders. She swallowed her guilt and wondered if anyone would notice if she hexed the boy to her left into oblivion. Remus had told her in his letter that she could not change anything. That there were those who were irredeemable. She knew that one such person was sitting right beside her.

A voice distracted her from her bitter thoughts: "Anyone want anything from the trolley?"

She jumped up, desperate to get away from Peter. "I'll get it. My treat."

Sirius grinned at her. "Careful, if you spoil us too early, you'll never get rid of us."

"Like feeding a lost dog?" Mia chuckled, and her smile brightened when Sirius let out a familiar barking laugh, soothing the open wound that meeting Peter Pettigrew had caused.

"Can I get two boxes of Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans, and five . . ." she began, figuring she could not leave Peter out without appearing rude and suspicious. But then she remembered Remus was probably feeling sick due to the approaching moon. "No, six Chocolate Frogs?"

"Get me some Pumpkin Pasties, Mia?" James begged her.

"Can I have a Cauldron Cake?" Sirius added excitedly.

Mia rolled her eyes. "And what they said."

With her arms full of treats, Mia made her way to sit in between Sirius and James, wiggling her tiny hips and forcing both boys to make room for her. She subconsciously needed to feel surrounded by them both as she looked across at Peter Pettigrew, who was making himself comfortable next to Remus. Though she had been very content to sit beside the young werewolf, being so near to the traitorous rat had left her feeling sick inside, as though her magic were violently trying to repel him. Somehow, feeling cocooned between her brother and Sirius erased the sickness.

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They crashed from their sugar high a few hours later.

Mia fell into a quiet slumber, grateful for James and Sirius sitting beside her to chase away the nightmares. Instead of memories of war playing behind her closed eyes, she dreamt of Hogwarts and of Harry and Ron.

When her eyes opened hours later, she blinked the sleep away and surveyed her surroundings with an amused smile on her face. James, to her left, had snuggled into her shoulder, his messy black hair tickling the side of her cheek as he softly snored. Sirius, however, had collapsed on her lap, his long black locks strewn all over her thighs, his legs splayed out toward the end of the bench.

Mia smiled down at him affectionately and ran her fingers through his hair without a thought as to how strange it might appear.

"You seem pretty close to Sirius after only just meeting him," Remus commented.

Mia glanced up with a smile. "I guess I have a habit of adopting strays."

"I heard that," Sirius mumbled sleepily, snuggling further into her lap.

Mia looked down at him, wondering how he was so easily affectionate with Walburga as a mother. She could hardly imagine that woman being the type to hug her children.

"If you're awake, why are you still on my lap?"

"This 'stray dog' enjoys having his head scratched." Sirius reached up without looking, took her hand, and put it back on his head. When she laughed and swatted him gently, he grabbed her free hand and laced his fingers with hers.

Mia blushed, shocked, but continued to run her fingers through his hair, remembering how an older Sirius would shift into Padfoot and crawl next to her, head against her thighs as she petted his soft black fur. Apparently, the man had always been a bit of a lap dog, and someone who clearly did not know the meaning of personal space.

"I'm going to ignore the fact that your head is on my sister's lap because there are more important things to take care of right now," James said with a yawn as he sat up and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes.

"Like what?" Mia wondered, still running her fingers through Sirius's hair.

"Remus, Peter," James addressed them with a very intense stare. "I have a *very* important question for you both, and the future of our friendship hangs in the balance here."

Remus sat back with a concerned look on his face as though James were just about to ask if he was a werewolf. Beside him, Peter swallowed hard.

James's voice was completely serious when he asked, "Which Quidditch team do you support?"

Mia rolled her eyes. "Ugh."

"Puddlemere United," Remus answered immediately with a big smile.

"You like Quidditch?" Mia stared at him with shocked eyes, and Remus smiled at her and shrugged. She teasingly scowled at him. "Traitor."

"I've always liked the Falmouth Falcons," Peter answered but then quickly added, "But I *could* like Puddlemere."

"Good answer," Sirius said, his head still buried in Mia's lap, eyes closed.

"What about the Chudley Cannons?" Mia asked with a mischievous smirk.

"What?" James yelled, and Sirius, echoing James, pushed off of her lap.

"Are you out of your mind?"

"They haven't won the League Cup since like 1892!" Sirius shouted and narrowed his eyes.

Mia burst into laughter as she stood. "If it's that easy to rile you all up, this is going to be a fun year. We better get our robes on. I'll leave so you boys can change."

She caught a brief look of relief on Remus's face that she assumed had been because he was already wearing his robes and would not have to explain to his new friends about whatever scars covered his body.

Just as she moved to open the door to the compartment, a voice echoed throughout the train: "We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes time. Please leave your luggage on the train; it will be taken to the school separately."

She turned back once more at the compartment full of boys, watching as Sirius and James struggled to find their robes whilst Remus turned his attention quietly back to his book. Peter, however, was smiling up at her, and Mia hated him for it. She wondered if she treated the boy kindly enough, would he change? If she fostered a bit of courage in him, would he stand up to the Dark Lord and not betray his friends? No. Not only had Remus's letter said that she would not change anything, but a sinking feeling in her gut told her on instinct not to trust him.

No. Mia would not be overly kind to the boy who would grow into the traitorous man.

It was then that she remembered her first ride on the Hogwarts Express when she had accidentally created a bit of resentment between herself and Ron. This time, she decided to do it on purpose. Pausing in the door, she stared at Peter, and muttered, "You've got dirt on your nose, by the way, did you know?"

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A few minutes later, the train slowed right down and finally stopped. People pushed their way toward the door and out onto a tiny, dark platform. A lamp came bobbing over the heads of the students, and Mia heard a familiar voice: "First years! First years over here!" Her smile brightened at the sight of Hagrid. "C'mon, follow me—any more first years? Mind yer step, now! First years follow me!"

Mia reached for her boys, tugging them along into a row to keep them close. She purposely kept Peter at bay as she moved ahead, linking her arm with James's as the students began walking behind the half-giant.

Hagrid led them through the darkness, separating the first years from the rest of the students who were entering large carriages drawn by thestrals. "You'll get your first sight of Hogwarts in a sec," he called over his shoulder. "Just round this bend here."

The narrow path had opened suddenly onto the edge of a great black lake. Perched atop a high mountain on the other side, its windows sparkling in the starry sky, was a vast castle with many turrets and towers.

"No more'n four to a boat!" Hagrid said, pointing to a fleet of little boats sitting in the water by the shore.

James and Sirius raced to get into a boat first, and James grinned as he won, claiming himself captain in the process. Mia reached for Remus's hand, and he politely held it to help her climb in, following swiftly behind her.

"Sorry, Pete." Sirius looked back at the boy with a shrug. "We'll see you on the other side of the lake, mate."

Peter nodded, and Mia felt incredibly satisfied. Her satisfaction did not last long, however, as the boats surged forward across the lake, and both Sirius and James began rocking back and forth.

"James Charlus Potter! If I fall in this lake and get eaten by a giant squid, I will haunt you forever!" Mia screamed, gripping the side of the boat.

James laughed. "Aww Mia, you know we'd save you if you fell in."

Sirius grinned. "Yeah, I'm sure one of us knows how to swim."

"Heads down!"

Everyone ducked obediently, and the little boats carried them through a curtain of ivy that hid a wide opening in the cliff face. They moved along a dark tunnel—which appeared to be taking them right underneath the castle—until they reached a kind of underground harbour, where they clambered out onto rocks and pebbles.

"See? You're fine." James smiled at Mia, who had accepted Remus's hand to maintain her balance as she climbed out of the boat. If she had not been so annoyed with her brother and Sirius, she would have taken great pleasure in seeing Remus opening up so easily to her, taking her hand without hesitation when she reached on instinct for him.

They scrambled up a passageway in the rock following the light of Hagrid's lamp, coming out at last onto smooth, damp grass. They walked up a flight of stone steps and crowded around the huge, oak front door.

Hagrid raised a gigantic fist and knocked three times on the castle door.

Mia took a deep breath as the doors began to open.

*It's good to be home.*

## Chapter Twenty-One

*Potter, Mia!*

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*I'll be there someday, I can go the distance  
I will find my way, if I can be strong  
I know ev'ry mile, will be worth my while  
When I go the distance, I'll be right where I belong  
(Go the Distance - Michael Bolton)*

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**September 1st, 1971**

The awed first years walked through the entrance hall, and Mia let out a sigh of relief; there were no battle scars in the hall, nor any signs of the war's wounded and dead. The beautiful stone walls were accented with lit torches, and the staircase drifted off to the side leading up to the dorms she was so eager to see once again.

Professor McGonagall led the students into the small chamber off the hall where they would wait to join the rest of the school in the Great Hall and be sorted.

James bounced eagerly on the balls of his feet. "Are you ready, Sirius?"

"It's going to be a Hungarian Horntail. I know it!" Sirius said excitedly.

Mia groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Oh, not this again."

"Wh-What about a d-dragon?" Peter sputtered out.

"We have to fight a dragon!" James said with a bright grin, turning to look at the short boy who cowered at the words.

"You get into Hogwarts or you burn alive!" Sirius exclaimed with a dark, amused look in his eyes.

There were other students in the back listening, all appearing equally terrified.

Mia scowled. "Will you two stop?"

"Or it *eats* you!" James added, ignoring her protests.

Remus leant in and whispered to a wide-eyed Peter, "They're taking the mickey out of you."

"Have *you* been sorted before?" James asked Remus with a devious smirk.

"C'mon Remus, you can help us take down the Romanian Longhorn!" Sirius patted his new friend on the back. "You, me, and James will take it down together. We'll be legends!"

"You guys are morons."

Mia turned at the voice to see the familiar face of the red-haired girl from the train. Severus Snape stood beside her, glowering at the eager Marauders.

The girl pursed her lips, folded her arms across her chest, and levelled James and Sirius with a condescending glare. "You're sorted by a magically enchanted hat."

"Oh yeah?" James turned and stared at her, an amused expression on his face as though she was giving him a proper challenge. "How do you know that?"

"It's in *Hogwarts, A History*," she, Remus, and Mia all said simultaneously.

Sirius and James burst into laughter just as the doors opened, and Professor McGonagall stepped back through them.

"Now, form a line," she told them, "and follow me."

The Great Hall was lit by thousands and thousands of candles floating in mid-air over four long tables where the rest of the students were sitting. These tables were covered with glittering golden goblets and plates. At the top of the hall was another long table where the staff was sitting.

The first years were led up to the front of the room so that they came to a halt in a line facing the other students, with the teachers behind them. The hundreds of faces staring at them looked like pale lanterns in the flickering candlelight. Dotted here and there, floating above the tables, ghosts shone a misty silver.

Professor McGonagall silently placed a four-legged stool in front of the students. On top of the stool, she put a pointed wizard's hat.

James and Sirius eyed the dirty, old hat disappointedly, and the redhead—that Mia knew *had* to be Lily Evans—looked incredibly smug at the sight and raised an eyebrow at James and Sirius, muttering, "I told you so."

For a few seconds, there was complete silence. Then the hat twitched. A rip near the brim opened wide like a mouth, and the hat began to sing:

*Stick me here upon your brow  
And let me sing my song.*

*I'll dig inside your tiny minds  
To see where you belong.  
Sit right down and let me see  
The puzzles in your mind,  
For you will notice there is not  
A secret I can't find.  
You might belong in Gryffindor  
And wear the red and gold.  
Chosen by brave Godric,  
Who picks the daring and the bold.  
Perhaps you'll find in Hufflepuff  
You prefer yellow and black.  
The followers of good Helga,  
Kindness they never lack.  
If you find yourself in Ravenclaw,  
You'll wear the bronze and blue.  
And see that wise Rowena  
Likes her students original and true.  
If you're destined inside Slytherin,  
Silver and green you'll don.  
Salazar made Ambition  
His House's words and song.  
Regardless of where I place you  
Hogwarts binds you all together,  
For even once outside these walls  
Your magic lives forever.*

Professor McGonagall then stepped forward, holding a long roll of parchment. "When I call your name, please place the hat on your head and sit on the stool to be sorted," she said. "Abbott, Adrian!"

A blond boy slowly made his way to the stool, put on the hat and waited for a few moments.

"SLYTHERIN!" shouted the hat.

The boy made his way to the far end of the hall where a table dressed in green and silver was filled with fellow Slytherins waiting for him with applause. Among them, Mia immediately caught sight of the pale white-blond hair of Lucius Malfoy, his prefect badge glimmering in the light. To his left and right sat Crabbe and Goyle, respectively, and across from him was another head of blond hair belonging to a girl that Mia quickly assumed to be a young Narcissa Black.

"Alton, Samantha!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

"Bagman, Otto!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Belby, Damocles!"

Mia's attention quickly fell to the boy that approached the hat. She knew his name well as she had been researching him since the summer after Dumbledore's death. With Snape on the run, Remus no longer had a Potions Master to brew his Wolfsbane Potion—Slughorn was an excellent teacher but also a bit unreliable and had no reason to be charitable to an old student, especially without Dumbledore there to lean on him. She had taken up the task of attempting to brew the potion but had been unsuccessful at it. In her endeavour to get the potion correct, she had read about its history, and the wizard who created it: Damocles Belby. Staring at him in the Great Hall, she found herself eager to pick his brain over the coming years in an effort to secure the helpful elixir for her friend.

Eventually, the hat yelled, "SLYTHERIN!"

Mia smiled as she noticed who was next. "Good luck, Sirius."

"Luck?" Sirius grinned at her. "I don't need luck. I've got determination on my side."

"Plan on tricking the Sorting Hat in order to get into Gryffindor?" James snickered.

"That sounds very . . . *Slytherin* of you," Mia teased.

Sirius turned, stepping a little too close to her as though he were trying to be intimidating. Unfortunately, all it did was remind Mia of an older Sirius who was waiting for her somewhere in the future. "Just for *that*, kitten, I'm getting into Gryffindor just to spite you."

"Black, Sirius!" Professor McGonagall called, and they all watched as Sirius strutted forward, a smirk still on his face when the hat fell over his eyes.

Despite knowing the result, Mia watched nervously, waiting as the Sorting Hat took its time. Sirius did, indeed, look determined, and she could only imagine the mental argument he was having with the hat, refusing to be placed in the Hogwarts House of his ancestors.

"GRYFFINDOR!" the hat eventually shouted, and the table on the far left exploded with cheers.

"HA!" Sirius said with the brightest smile Mia had ever seen as he turned and pointed at her and then silently did what she figured was an "I told you so" dance on his way to the Gryffindor table.

Mia chuckled. "I'll never hear the end of this, will I?"

Remus grinned wryly. "Unlikely."

"Brown, Alice!" became the next Gryffindor to join the table, and Mia smiled at the young girl's resemblance to Neville Longbottom. The fact that the girl's last name was Brown made Mia wonder if she was related to Lavender.

"Carrow, Alecto!"

Mia narrowed her eyes, knowing the name well. The Carrow twins were Death Eaters that had evaded Azkaban after the First Wizarding War and spent the last year of the Second Wizarding War tormenting students as teachers inside the sacred walls of Hogwarts.

It was no surprise when the hat called out, "SLYTHERIN!" for the sister, and then again as her brother Amycus followed.

"Catchlove, Greta!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Evans, Lily!"

The redhead stepped forward and smiled nervously as she sat on the stool.

There was barely a second after it had touched her dark red hair, the hat cried, "GRYFFINDOR!"

Lily took off the hat, handed it back to Professor McGonagall, then hurried toward the cheering Gryffindors. As she went, she glanced back at Snape with a sad little smile.

James scratched his head. "Huh, pegged that one as a Ravenclaw."

Mia rolled her eyes. "You said on the train that she was probably a Slytherin."

"Nah. She knew about the hat like you and Remus."

Remus eyed James with a smile. "That make us Ravenclaws, too?"

"Hope not. You two leave me alone with Sirius? Who'll keep us in line?"

Mia scoffed when James winked at her. "If that's even possible."

"Fawcett, Julia" became the newest Ravenclaw, and "Gudgeon, Davey" was sent to Hufflepuff.

When an anxious-looking, lanky boy stepped forward, Mia smiled sweetly, patting his shoulder and offering him silent support. Despite his nerves, "Longbottom, Frank" was sent to the Gryffindor table without hesitation.

"I'm nervous." Remus swallowed, staring at the stool with a look of trepidation as his turn to be sorted grew closer. "That's not very courageous of me, is it? I shouldn't even be here."

Mia laced her fingers through his, offering a gentle squeeze of encouragement. "It takes a great deal of courage to see the world in all its tainted glory, and still to love it."

Remus looked back at her and smiled, surprised. "Oscar Wilde. You read Muggle literature?"

"I do. But he was actually a wizard."

"Really?" Remus asked excitedly.

"Lupin, Remus!" Professor McGonagall called out, and Remus turned, making his way toward the stool, taking a seat as the hat was placed on his head.

The Hat barely even touched him before it shouted out, "GRYFFINDOR!" and the large table of lions roared with cheers, none louder than Sirius who eagerly welcomed his new friend to the table. Mia applauded with everyone else, smiling brightly at Remus.

"Macdonald, Mary" followed Remus into Gryffindor, and soon after, a familiar head of straggly, waist-length, dirty-blond hair called "Maestro, Pandora" was sent to Ravenclaw.

Despite knowing the outcome, when "Pettigrew, Peter" was called forward, Mia prayed to Merlin that he would be sent to Slytherin or even Hufflepuff—or better yet, *home*. But Peter joined Sirius and Remus at the table with a smile, and Mia frowned.

"Care to wager how long it takes the hat to stick me in Gryffindor?" James asked with a grin, practically vibrating with excited anticipation.

Mia laughed at her brother. "Something tells me it'll be instantaneous."

James grinned smugly. "Bloody right."

"Potter, James!"

In record time—Mia was not even sure the brim came *close* to James's head—the hat cried out, "GRYFFINDOR!"

She smiled, watching as her brother darted down the steps and rushed into the applause that fuelled him, turning back to grin up at her.

"Of course," came a bitter voice from behind her.

Mia turned and peered at Severus Snape, who had his arms folded over his chest whilst he glowered at the Gryffindor table. "There's nothing wrong with Gryffindor."

Snape scowled at her. "Says another future little lion."

"My mum was a Slytherin," she said with a shrug. "Just because it's tradition that they sort us into separate houses doesn't mean that it's correct. They try to divide us this way because it's tradition, but we all mingle in the world once we leave Hogwarts. You can still be friends with her, you know."

"No idea what you're talking about," Snape said with glaring eyes that focused on the Gryffindor table where Lily sat, purposely ignoring the ruckus that James and Sirius were causing beside her.

Mia shrugged. "If you say so."

The Gryffindors continued celebrating—egged on by Sirius and James—so loudly that Professor McGonagall had to pause the Sorting to throw a few sternly worded threats to her own House if they did not calm themselves. When she returned to stand beside the stool, she looked down at the parchment in her hands in irritation before calling out, "Potter, Mia!"

Mia muttered a polite, "It's actually pronounced My-uh," to Professor McGonagall as the hat was dropped on her head. The last thing that she saw before the hat fell over her eyes was the expectant expressions on the faces of James, Sirius, and Remus all waiting eagerly for her to join them at the Gryffindor table.

"Hmm . . ." whispered a voice in her ear. "Well, this is interesting. Wasn't expecting someone like you, Miss Granger."

*Potter*, Mia silently corrected.

"Ah, but you know you can't keep secrets from me. I can see every little puzzle inside your mind. Past, present, and future. Although for you I suppose all three are the same, aren't they?"

Mia impatiently sighed, thinking, *Just put me in Gryffindor, please.*

"Are you sure? It seems Ravenclaw was an option your first time around. You've got a clever mind indeed, very brilliant and talented, too. You'd do well in Ravenclaw."

*I wouldn't be challenged in Ravenclaw*, she mentally countered, determined not to end up anywhere but Gryffindor.

"No, no, you don't absorb knowledge for the fun of it, you like to use it, don't you? You take what your mind absorbs, and you use it. Very resourceful. Very cunning. Very ambitious."

Her eyes widened as she caught on to what the hat was insinuating. *Don't. You. Dare. I do know where you are kept. Might be a little sad if you're too close to Fawkes when Burning Day approaches.*

"Was that a threat? How very daring of you, Miss . . . Potter."

*Yes. Daring! And very brave of me, if I do say so myself.*

"Better be . . . . GRYFFINDOR!"

Mia let out a long sigh of relief, and she rushed away from the hat, still shocked that she had almost ended up in Slytherin this time around. Draco would faint if she ever got the chance to tell him.

She ran into a hug from James that awaited her at the Gryffindor table where her fellow lions were applauding her wildly. Taking a seat beside Remus, she stared across from her where Lily Evans gazed up at the Sorting Hat as "Snape, Severus" was placed in Slytherin.

Lily lowered her gaze sadly to the table.

Mia glanced up to watch Snape slowly make his way to Slytherin; an empty space was made beside Lucius Malfoy, who patted him on the back in congratulations.

Eventually, the final students were called to be sorted, "Shingleton, Gaspard" went to Gryffindor, "Stebbins, Rikard" was placed in Ravenclaw, "Tuft, William" joined the Gryffindor table, and a beautiful "Zabini, Elora" fell swiftly into Slytherin.

Albus Dumbledore had gotten to his feet. He was beaming at the students, his arms opened wide, as if nothing could have pleased him more than to see them all there. "Welcome! Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Zowzy! Biggly! Gimble! Bazinga!"

The students chuckled, save for the Slytherins who all irritably rolled their eyes and sneered.

Dumbledore—clearly unaffected by the attitudes of the Slytherin students—continued his speech. "A large welcome to all new students. May you find Hogwarts to be your home and sanctuary, a place of safety and familiarity in a world that can otherwise often prove strange and unfamiliar. Though, I will not deny that Hogwarts can be strange indeed. Now, before we send you off to bed, tuck in, and enjoy this wonderful feast!"

The golden plates in front of them were suddenly piled with food: roast beef, roast chicken, pork chops and lamb chops, sausages, bacon and steak, boiled potatoes, roast potatoes, chips, Yorkshire pudding, peas, carrots, and gravy.

Everyone immediately dove in, loading up their plates.

Mia had spent years at this table eating many meals, generally surrounded by Harry and Ron who often choked on bites and made messes. She groaned, unable to think about dealing with that again as she looked over at Remus, James, and Sirius—all who were keeping themselves miraculously clean as they ate.

She gaped at the sight. "Merlin, the three of you actually have table manners?" Of course, she knew that James did, though she had worried he would somehow turn into a pig once around boys his own age.

Sirius eyed her curiously. "What did you expect?"

"From eleven-year-old boys?" Mia asked, laughing. "I expected you to be shovelling your plates down your throats by the truckload."

"Glad to surprise you?" Remus asked, the look on his face telling her he was trying to decide whether or not to be offended by her assumptions.

"Peter, wipe your face, mate," James called down the table. "You're lowering the bar we've apparently raised for ourselves."

Between bites, the boys quickly began discussing Quidditch, and even Remus joined in, tossing a smirk to Mia before speaking, clearly finding it humorous that she had assumed he did not like the sport simply because he loved books as much as she did.

Ignoring their conversation, Mia gazed across the table where the redhead in front of her picked sadly at her food. "Hi. I'm Mia Potter."

The girl gazed up, and her bright green eyes sparkled. The colour made Mia's breath hitch in her throat as her heart desperately called out for her best friend, for Harry.

"Lily Evans."

Mia collected herself and cleared her throat before speaking again. "I wanted to apologise for my brother and my friend." She gestured to James and Sirius who, despite having had manners five minutes ago, were now using their spoons to launch peas into one another's open mouths. They had surprisingly good aim.

Rolling her eyes with an embarrassed sigh, Mia turned back to Lily. "I'm not sure what happened, but I think they were rude to you and your friend on the train, and I would like to apologise on their behalfs."

"They were." Lily scowled down the table, glaring at James and Sirius before turning back to Mia. "But Severus can take things a little too seriously from time to time."

Sirius turned and smiled. "Someone call me?"

"Eat your treacle tart, Sirius," Mia ordered, and he bowed his head in feigned reverence, returning to his plate.

"Did you see the ceiling?" Alice smiled as she looked up in awe. "It's so beautiful."

Lily's solemn expression faded, and she smiled as her attention turned upward. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Are you a Muggle-born?" Mia asked Lily—already knowing the answer—using her knowledge to press for an open conversation with the girl who would grow up to be her best friend's mother.

"Yes," Lily admitted. "Something wrong with that?"

Mia frowned at the girl's tone. Clearly Lily had already been dealing with prejudice in the Wizarding world, and Mia knew exactly how that felt. "Not at all. I'd love to learn more about Muggle-borns if you're ever interested in sharing. I've read a bit about the Muggle world myself, but I've always wanted a Muggle-born friend."

Slowly, the visible tension in Lily's posture faded, and she tentatively smiled. "Really?"

"Friends?"

"Sure!"

"What about the rest of you?" Mia asked the other first years at her table. "What are your families like?"

"Pureblood," Alice admitted with a shrug. "I've got an older brother who graduated from Hogwarts last year."

"Same here." Frank Longbottom smiled. "Pureblood, I mean. I've got no brothers. It's just me and Mum."

"I'm pureblood, too." Mary Macdonald joined in on the conversation, switching her seat from where she had been on the other side of Gaspard and William. The two boys did not look phased by the shifting, too caught up in looking at Chocolate Frog cards.

"Me, too," Peter chimed in.

"You're *all* purebloods?" Lily asked with furrowed brows, looking like she suddenly felt very out of place even more than she was.

Sirius looked over at Lily. "It's not all that it's cracked up to be, Evans. Trust me."

"Why's that?" Lily asked.

"Because most pureblood families have dwindled down so much that if they want to *stay* pureblood, they end up marrying their own cousins," Mia said, chuckling as Sirius nodded his head with raised brows.

Lily gasped. "Are you serious?"

"No, *I'm* Sirius." Sirius grinned. Remus and Mia groaned, but he ignored them. "And yes, it's true. My parents are second cousins. It's a flip of the Galleon whether or not purebloods come out crazy, but it makes for good-looking blokes like me." He winked at the small grouping of girls at the end of the table. Alice and Mary blushed, but Lily looked annoyed, something Mia appreciated.

"There are *some* pureblood families that don't care about blood status, though," Mia insisted, looking at Lily. "Like mine. The Potters are perfectly normal witches and wizards."

"Mia, look!" James yelled, excitedly.

Everyone turned to watch as the heir to the House of Potter, the only son, descendant of the great Ignotus Peverell—and future father of The Chosen One—balanced his wand on his forehead.

Mia stared at him in disbelief and let out an embarrassed sigh as glanced back at Lily.

"Your brother?" Lily asked with a raised brow.

"Yes."

"He's . . ." Lily looked at James, who was being cheered on by Sirius and Peter.

"He grows on you," Mia promised.

"I'm sure he does." Lily watched as the wand fell from James's forehead, hit the table, and shot red sparks upward into his face. James gave a shout and fell backward off his seat, his glasses going with him.

"Bloody hell!" James yelled as he retook his seat, slipping his wand back into his robes and looking at his broken spectacles with consternation.

"Give them here." Mia reached out, annoyed. James, however, ignored her expression as he placed his broken glasses into her hand and watched as she said, "*Oculus Reparo!*"

"Little sister to the rescue!" James beamed at her, taking his mended glasses.

"You're *younger?*" Alice asked Mia.

Mia rolled her eyes. "By barely a minute."

"You're twins?" Lily asked in patent disbelief.

"He got the Potter looks, I got the Potter talent." Mia grinned smugly.

"*I'm* talented," James insisted.

Mia stared up at him incredulously. "Says the boy who dropped his wand while balancing it on his face."

"In James's defence," Sirius interjected. "He had it up there for like a whole minute before it fell."

Mia scoffed, stabbing her fork into a carrot with a little more effort than was necessary. "I'm so glad that I'll be sharing a room with girls."

"You're really going to leave me alone with them, aren't you?" Remus looked up at her, shaking his head as though she had just betrayed him, though a small smirk played across his lips.

"You'll survive," Mia promised him. "If you manage to keep them in line, there's a Chocolate Frog in it for you."

"Deal." Remus's happy expression disappeared suddenly, and he clutched at his side, wincing.

Mia immediately frowned at the sight, something inside of her hurting for him. "Are you all right, Remus?" she asked quietly with concern, trying her hardest not to sound as though she were pitying him. She knew that the older Remus hated being pitied more than almost anything.

"Yeah. I, uh . . . I was sick last week." Remus frowned through the lie. "Might be coming back a bit."

"Do you need any . . . ?" Mia began but was cut off as Professor Dumbledore stood to speak once more.

"Ahem! A few more words now that we're all properly fed. There are some start-of-term notices. First years should note that the forest is forbidden to all students. Mr Filch,

the caretaker, would like me to remind you all that magic should never be used in the corridors between classes. Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their House teams should contact Madam Hooch."

"I'm trying out!" James insisted.

"You can't, you're a first year!" Mia said.

"We'd like to welcome a new addition to the staff," Dumbledore went on. "Professor Fenwick, who will be teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"Place your bets, everyone," a vaguely familiar voice called out, and Mia turned to see the red hair and freckled faces of two older boys. One carried a parchment in his hands, the other collected coins in his upturned hat.

"Bets?" Mia asked, regarding the twins who slightly resembled Fred and George.

"See how long this professor lasts. No Defence teacher ever makes it past a year," the twin collecting the coins said.

The twin with the parchment grinned. "They say the position is cursed."

"That sounds like rubbish," Peter spoke up, rolling his eyes.

The twin with the hat full of coins scrutinised Peter with a look. "Hear that, Gideon? Ickle firsties know better than us."

"I heard that, Fabian," the twin with the parchment said. "Care to put your Galleons where your mouth is?" He narrowed blue eyes at Peter, who instantly began to stutter.

Mia smiled at the sight. Gideon and Fabian Prewett: Molly Weasley's younger brothers.

Dumbledore was still speaking, oblivious to the gambling happening at the Gryffindor table. "Lastly, all students should be aware that Professor Sprout has successfully transferred and planted a Whomping Willow on the grounds. All students should avoid the tree at the cost of life and limb. Whomping Willows are sentient trees, and prone to irritable bouts of violence."

At the announcement, Mia's gaze darted immediately to Remus, who sat staring at his now empty plate with wide eyes, taking in slow deep breaths. She wanted to reach across the table and take his hand in a comforting way, but she could not let him know yet that she was aware of his secret and the real reason the Whomping Willow had been planted.

"A tree is violent?" Lily asked.

"Very. I've read about them," Mia said.

Sirius let out a barking laugh. "Of *course* you have, kitten."

"Now, off to bed with you all!" Dumbledore clapped his hands together and instantly all the dirty, empty plates vanished from in front of them.

"All right first years, follow me!"

Mia looked up to meet the familiar face of a young Kingsley Shacklebolt. It was odd to see the Minister for Magic this young, herding around a group of eleven-year-olds, but the shiny prefect badge on his robes made it all the more real.

As the students stood and headed for the door, each led by their prefects, Mia caught the glares that passed between Kingsley and Lucius Malfoy. She could not help but see the amazing parallels to the future. Kingsley Shacklebolt, future Minister for Magic and Order member, and Lucius Malfoy, Death Eater and Voldemort's right-hand wizard.

"Keep up now, don't get lost!" Kingsley yelled over his shoulder as the Gryffindors made their way through the entrance hall and toward the large staircase. James and Sirius were at the head of the group, trailed by Peter. Mia stayed behind, reaching for Remus's hand as he struggled going up the stairs, obviously in pain. "The stairs move frequently so keep that in mind, especially when you're running late to class. The professors aren't lenient, not even our own Head of House, and she knows all too well how easy it is to get stuck on the stairs. Or in the stairs, if you're not too careful."

"What do you mean 'in the—' Ow!" Frank yelled as his foot fell through the vanishing step.

"Trick step. It catches all the first years eventually," Kingsley said with a low chuckle as Frank blushed beet red.

Mia remembered Neville's run in with the same trick step. *Like father like son*. She smiled, hoping that she could bring memories of Frank and Alice to Neville when . . . *if* she ever returned to her timeline.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### *Kind to Me*

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*Oh, why you look so sad? Tears are in your eyes  
Come on and come to me now. Don't be ashamed to cry  
Let me see you through 'cause I've seen the dark side too  
When the night falls on you. You don't know what to do  
Nothing you confess, Could make me love you less  
(I'll Stand By You - The Pretenders)*

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**September 2nd, 1971**

The morning after the Sorting Ceremony was spent at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall—new and returning students eagerly devouring breakfasts alike.

Mia smiled affectionately at her brother, pushing his hair back in an attempt to make it sit flat, much like their mother always did. James retaliated by messing up his hair worse than ever and grinning defiantly at his sister. Peter clung to Sirius's side the whole morning until the owls arrived to deliver the post.

All the children had written home the night before, so James and Mia were not surprised to receive letters from their parents who were excited over them both being sorted into Gryffindor. Each parent took a moment to offer words of advice for the coming year, and there was even a little note at the bottom of each letter from Tilly, who proudly praised the young Potters, writing about how she *knew* they would get into Gryffindor because they were so very talented and brave.

The reading was interrupted when a bright red envelope fell to the table in front of Sirius, dropped by a large Eagle owl that attempted to bite the boy as he reached for it, snatching a sausage off of his plate before taking flight again.

"Bloody owl." Sirius stared down at the letter in front of him with a sigh. "Well, I can't say this was unexpected."

"What's the matter?" James asked. "Wait . . . is that what I think it is?"

Mia shook her head, disgusted with Walburga Black. "A Howler."

"What's a Howler?" Lily asked, taking a seat beside Mia and looking across the table, curiously noticing the way Sirius was glaring down at the red envelope with disdain.

James and Mia each winced, waiting for the oncoming storm, while Lily looked on eagerly. The rest of the table politely turned their heads away, though Sirius was already getting curious looks from the nosy neighbouring tables of Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs.

"Screw this," he growled and reached for the letter, tearing it open in bold defiance.

A roar of sound filled the entire Great Hall, and the enraged voice of a wailing Walburga Black deafened the large room:

*"SIRIUS ORION BLACK! YOU DESPICABLE EXCUSE FOR A WIZARD! BRINGING SHAME ON THE HONOUR OF MY FATHER'S HOUSE! YOU HAVE BROUGHT DISGRACE UPON YOUR FAMILY! HOW DARE YOU BREAK TRADITION!"*

Mia scowled at the familiar screams, her body tightening in response to years of having had to listen to the woman's derisive remarks.

Sirius sat firm, however, glaring at the crimson Howler with pure hatred, while all the rest of the students shrank from the noise as if they were hearing their own parents.

*"THANK SALAZAR THAT WE STILL HAVE YOUR BROTHER TO CARRY ON THE PROPER TRADITIONS OF THIS NOBLE HOUSE. YOU HAVE BEEN NOTHING BUT A DISAPPOINTMENT SINCE YOUR BIRTH! IN FACT, I WISH YOU'D NEVER BEEN BORN, YOU WRETCHED LITTLE—"*

"*Incendio!*" Mia snapped with a flick of her wand.

Instantly, the red envelope burst into flames, the screaming voice fading away in smoke as the envelope curled and fell into a small pile of ashes.

James, Lily, and the other Gryffindors stared at Mia with wide eyes, clearly shocked to have seen her accurately cast such a spell, but she did not care. Her gaze, instead, fell upon Sirius who continued to look down at the remnants of the letter as though it were still yelling at him.

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Students eventually left the Great Hall for classes, but whispers followed Sirius for the rest of the day. Mia and James were there to glare at people who stared at him, especially the Slytherins who knew the Black family and had found the scene hilarious. Somehow, in

the aftermath of the event, very few remembered that Mia had performed magic even before she had stepped foot inside a classroom.

When Remus joined his friends for class, looking the worse for wear even though he had slept in, Mia smiled and quietly filled him in on what had happened at breakfast.

As they took their seats in Charms, the young Gryffindors silently encircled Sirius with James and Mia on either side of him; Remus and Peter taking the seats in front and behind him respectively. Sirius said nothing to his friends to let them know he was grateful, but he did turn to Mia and offer a small smile.

Distracted by the unsavoury morning events and Sirius's smile, Mia was not paying attention when Professor Flitwick asked the first question: "Can anyone tell me what the differences are between a charm, hex, jinx, and a spell?"

Mia knew the answer. She had spent six years at Hogwarts and was known as the brightest witch of her age. She had left her sixth year with top scores and received eleven O.W.L.s. during her fifth year. However, she had not been fast enough on this first day of Charms.

Lily Evans was faster.

Her hand shot up in the air in record speed, and she shook it desperately, sitting on the edge of her seat.

James and Sirius chuckled at the scene, and Mia stared at the girl from behind, horrified. *Good God, is that what I look like?* She quickly made the decision to relax and take her time, lowering her hand.

Her over-eagerness to prove her talent and intellect was what got herself, Harry, and Ron off to a rough start, and she was supposed to be *enjoying* this life. Mia nodded quietly to herself, deciding she would lay low. While she still planned on performing to her usual standards during lessons and exams, she knew she had nothing to prove to anyone else.

## September 5th, 1971

Days went by, and the students fell into a comfortable routine.

Lily showed great talent in Charms, while James and Sirius both excelled at Transfiguration—which was sometimes hard to believe, considering they looked to be rarely paying attention and were constantly getting into trouble.

Unsurprisingly, Remus was excellent in Defence Against the Dark Arts, and Mia sat staring at him during the entire class with a knowing smirk on her face.

Surprisingly, Peter was half-decent at Potions, but he was instantly topped by Lily Evans and Severus Snape, who became Professor Slughorn's favourites.

Herbology was a nightmare for everyone when Lily accidentally put too much water in the pots containing the blossoming bouncing bulbs, resulting in a class-wide mud fight led by James and Sirius. Almost everyone laughed and enjoyed themselves, except for Lily, of course, and Remus, who had been excused from class because he was sick.

Mia frowned from the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall as her brother and friends ate dinner. It was a lazy Monday evening, and the sun had just set. A full moon hung in the sky, and she worried about Remus, knowing that he was spending his first night alone in the Shrieking Shack.

She excused herself early from the meal and sneaked back to the dorms where she dug into her trunk and pulled out a small bag of Chocolate Frogs that she kept on hand, just in case.

She found her way into the hospital wing where she smiled at Madam Pomfrey.

Madam Pomfrey looked up. "Miss Potter, are you feeling well?"

"Yes. I'm adjusting," Mia said, knowing the mediwitch was probably curious. "I was just wondering if Remus Lupin was cleared for visitors. I know he was sent here with a stomach ache a few days ago."

She said the words, but let her eyes do the talking for her. She hoped that Madam Pomfrey would understand.

If the mediwitch caught on, she refused to acknowledge anything specific about Remus or his current condition. "No visitors tonight, dear. Perhaps tomorrow."

She understood. Because she knew that Remus was not in the hospital wing at all, but in a shack beneath the full moon, somewhere between Hogwarts and Hogsmeade.

"Would it be all right if I left something for him?" she asked, holding out a handful of Chocolate Frogs. "These are his favourite. They'll make him feel better."

Madam Pomfrey inclined her head. "I'll take them, dear. It's very kind of you to think of him."

"He's . . . my friend." Mia smiled sadly and turned to walk away.

The following day, Remus was still missing from class, recovering in the hospital wing. He re-joined his friends that night for dinner, taking a seat directly next to Mia who smiled sweetly and filled his dinner plate for him while he lifted his arms on the table and rested his chin between his palms.

She gently brushed the fringe from his forehead.

He looked up at her gratefully as he reached into his pocket to pull out a Chocolate Frog card, placing it silently in front of her.

She looked down and saw the bold face of Godric Gryffindor staring up at her. The bottom of the card in handwritten ink read: *Thank you.*

Mia smiled at him. "You're welcome."

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### **October 4th, 1971**

Despite finding herself bored with the actual class work since she knew it all, Mia kept herself busy by taking care of her brother and friends.

James and Sirius had already received detention once for being caught out of bed after hours, attempting to find the kitchens to sneak snacks back into the dorms. Remus did his best to stay out of trouble, but James and Sirius were relentless in trying to get him and Peter involved in their escapades.

Mia was slowly building friendships with her roommates—Lily, Mary, and Alice—who were far less annoying than Lavender and Parvati.

During the approaching full moon, Remus fell ill once again, and Mia's heart clenched inside of her chest as she watched the boy descend into sickness. She felt helpless and anxious, and, when he disappeared to the hospital wing early Sunday morning, it took

hours of pacing back and forth outside the headmaster's office before Mia finally said, "Acid Pops!"

The gargoyle retreated, allowing her to walk up the spiral staircase.

Dumbledore greeted her with a smile. "Good evening, Miss Potter. How can I help you this night? I hope it's nothing to do with the circumstances surrounding your presence here in 1971? I've had little time to arrange a secure investigation of your Time-Turner."

She paused, caught off guard by his words. Had she already forgotten that Dumbledore promised to look into the Time-Turner and potentially send her home?

"No, sir, I did not imagine you had already done so. It's fine. I'm growing accustomed to this new life that I've been . . ." *Forced—no—tricked into.* She ignored the terms that floated across her mind. ". . . presented with. I'm doing what you said. Following the rules that Remus left me."

"Yes, your future Mr Lupin. I've noticed you've taken quite a shine to *another* Mr Remus Lupin here at Hogwarts. I can only assume they are one in the same."

She nodded with a sad smile. "They are, Professor."

"As much as I caution myself about knowing more about the future, I cannot deny that it gives me great relief to have a bit of knowledge concerning this one particular student," he said, sharing in her expression.

"That's actually the reason I've come tonight, sir," Mia said. "I know."

"You *know*?"

"I know the real reason the Whomping Willow was planted this year, sir."

"I see."

"I'd like to request permission to stay with him. Not in the shack, of course," she said quickly. "But before and after. In the future, I've taken care of him. I know how to heal his wounds and what potions he needs to let the pain pass by easier." She wished she knew the one that would make the most difference, the Wolfsbane Potion, but that would not come to exist for several years.

Dumbledore momentarily lost that constant twinkle in his eyes. "There is no cure for lycanthropy, Miss Potter."

"No. But . . . he's my friend, and knowing what I know . . . I can't let him be alone." She looked down. "It's painful."

"You have a good heart, Miss Potter, and good intentions. But, regardless of your presence, young Mr Lupin will experience the pain of his transformations." Dumbledore spoke clearly, with great sympathy in his voice. Mia knew that he had been the whole reason that Remus was even allowed to attend Hogwarts. He had a personal investment in the boy.

"I meant it's painful for . . . *me*," she said anxiously and then jumped to clarify, "to know that he suffers alone."

"I see. I suppose you have a way to inform him that you know of his condition?"

"Yes, sir. In my original timeline I'd figured it out on my own," she said, remembering the essay that Snape had forced her to write, purposely hoping that someone like her would figure out Remus's secret and publicly out him. But she had kept that secret for nearly the entire year. "I assume I'll just go along similarly to the way I did before."

Dumbledore smiled gratefully. "Then you have my permission to visit him during times when he is ill."

She sighed in relief. "Thank you, Professor."

"Unfortunately, Professor Sprout has already escorted young Mr Lupin beneath the Whomping Willow for the night. You are, however, welcome to wait for him in the hospital wing. Give this note to Madam Pomfrey, which will explain your presence. I give her permission to assist you with any potions you might have need of in order to help Mr Lupin recover more easily."

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### **October 5th, 1971**

Several hours later, Mia awoke in the hospital wing, having been offered a bed by Madam Pomfrey to wait out the long hours until the moon finally set and it was safe to have Remus brought back to the infirmary. She nervously waited for the mediwitch to levitate him into a nearby bed, and, when her gaze finally fell onto his broken and bleeding form, she covered her mouth to stifle the sob that threatened to escape her.

"I thought you'd seen this before, Miss Potter?" Madam Pomfrey asked.

"I . . ." Mia frowned and wiped the tears from her eyes. "I have, it's just . . . He's so young. It's not fair."

She made her way to the side of the bed, looking down at an unconscious Remus. In the future, he would be able to wake himself shortly after sunrise, but now, being so small and so young, the pain was too much to bear. She shook herself and stiffened her spine. "He needs a Calming Draught while I heal his wounds."

"It's on the table, dear." Madam Pomfrey pointed, and Mia nodded, reaching for the phial. After tipping the potion down Remus's throat, she examined the small scars scattered around his face, noticing that they were not from Moony's claws, but more than likely from the wolf throwing himself against the shack in frustration. Some even still had splinters in them that Mia slowly and carefully removed.

After Madam Pomfrey gently levitated and flipped Remus's body, Mia turned her attention to the deep wound that ran the length of his back along his spine, knowing this was where his skin split open during the transformation. Lifting her wand, she syphoned off the blood silently before repairing the skin. She did her best to remain emotionless despite the fact that it reminded her of the immediate aftermath of war.

"You're quite skilled at that, Miss Potter. May I ask if you were a Healer in your previous life?"

Mia frowned, thinking of the war. "No, just . . . skills I had to pick up over the years."

"Perhaps with this second chance at life you've been given, those skills could be put to good use in a career," Madam Pomfrey offered with a kind smile.

"I'm grateful that I have years to think about it," Mia admitted. Remus's letter told her to live and enjoy her life. She would do so by not worrying about the future. At least, no more than she needed to.

"He should wake soon," Madam Pomfrey cautioned as she watched Mia apply drops of Dittany to the marks on Remus's face. "There's more Calming Draught and Pain Potions should you have need. I'll leave the two of you alone."

Being alone, waiting for Remus to wake up, Mia recalled the first time she had helped to heal her friend.

*"It's all my fault," Hermione cried into her hands. "I should have asked Snape to teach me before—"*

*"I think everyone was a bit busy, yeah?" Tonks cut her off and gave her a sad, crooked smile.*

*"I should have learnt how to brew the potion. Now Remus is suffering." Hermione wiped her eyes. She had looked into the potion, of course, but with tracking down her parents—only to find the Obliviation irreversible—she had been too distracted to brew anything, let alone brew a potion that could prove lethal if improperly done.*

*"That is not your fault," Tonks insisted, her tired eyes dark.*

*She and Hermione had been up for hours, listening as the wolf in the basement below howled and threw himself roughly against the metal bars of the cage that kept him locked inside. Even Padfoot had not been able to keep him calm all night.*

*Teddy had caught a small cold, causing Remus to worry and stress, which apparently made the wolf inside of him as anxious as ever. Sirius had wanted to take him somewhere to spend the full moon outdoors where he could run off his energy, but there was not any place secure enough, and there was no way of knowing if Moony would try to make his way back to Tonks and Teddy, hurting anyone in his path on the way.*

*During the night, every time he let out a loud growl followed by a painful yelp, Tonks and Hermione jumped and closed their eyes tightly.*

*"You think he's up yet?" Hermione wondered, looking as the light from the morning sun streamed in through the cracks in the curtains.*

*"Almost," Tonks said with a sigh of relief. "I thought I'd give him an hour after the last of the howling stops. Give him a chance to recover his modesty before I go down. It's nice of you to come and help."*

*"Remus has always been there for me when I've gotten hurt." Hermione shrugged, remembering how she had woken up after the battle in the Department of Mysteries at the end of fifth year, and it had been Remus by her bedside, offering to take care of her while still quietly grieving over the death of Sirius.*

*"All right, let's head down."*

*As the two witches made their way into the basement of Grimmauld Place, Hermione was instantly met with the smell of blood and sweat. She frowned as Tonks walked ahead to make sure Remus was at least clothed.*

*Padfoot was asleep in the corner, looking worse for wear, having spent the entirety of the night trying to keep the werewolf in check.*

*Hesitantly stepping forward, Hermione eyed the cage at the end of the room where Tonks, wand at the ready, inclined her head to her. Remus had instructed them to be on guard. He stated that, even after*

*transforming back to his human state, the wolf might linger beneath the surface. There was no way to tell what the lack of the Wolfsbane Potion would do.*

*"Remus?" Hermione whispered as she approached the open door of the cage.*

*Remus's eyes, she was surprised to see, were golden as he deigned to register her presence. When he made eye contact with her, he growled low and dangerous.*

*Padfoot, instantly awake, snarled in warning.*

*Hermione looked over her shoulder at the dog before returning her attention to Remus. She kept her distance and knelt on the floor without making any sudden movements. "Tonks, roll him the phial of Calming Draught. He's Remus, but the wolf is still on edge. The draught should bring him down," she explained and watched carefully as Tonks pulled a small phial out of the bag that Hermione prepared, rolling it forward to Remus, who stared down at it.*

*"Remus, take the potion," Hermione instructed, tilting her head to the side and exposing her neck as a sign of submission.*

*His lupine eyes appeared to glow for a moment at the sight before changing to the usual soft green irises. He let out a wince of pain and reached immediately for the phial, tipping its contents down his throat, coughing, and then collapsing on the ground.*

*"Hold him while I tend to his back," Hermione said to Tonks as they both moved swiftly into the cage and over to Remus's body.*

*"Hello, love." Tonks sat down by his head, stroking her fingers through his sweat-soaked hair and pulling gently on his shoulders to show the fresh wounds on his back to Hermione, who quickly removed the blood and healed the skin.*

*When Hermione finished, she signalled to Tonks, who turned Remus back over and smiled into her mate's eyes. "C'mere and let me clean up that beautiful face."*

*Remus frowned, struggling to keep from sobbing through the pain or falling unconscious. "It hasn't been this bad in years."*

*Tonks kissed his forehead. "The wolf's worried about Teddy is all. It's to be expected. Mum fire-called this morning, by the way. He's already feeling better."*

*Remus let out a sigh of relief, wincing in pain when Hermione mended another wound.*

*Hermione whimpered. "I'm so sorry, Remus."*

*"Not your fault," he said, reaching out and taking her hand. For some reason, the gesture looked like it brought him more comfort than it did her.*

*"I should have learnt the potion when I had the chance."*

Remus shook his head. "There's nothing to apologise for, Hermione. If anyone can figure out how to properly brew Wolfsbane Potion for me, it'll be you. I know you can do it." He smiled over at her but then hissed as a new painful sensation rocked its way through his body.

"I'm going to go get more Pain Potion for you." Hermione moved to stand

Tonks shook her head and stepped out of the way. "You stay. I got it." She walked past Padfoot, motioning for him to follow. When the dog hesitated, she sighed. "C'mon. You need rest too, y'know." Tonks took the stairs up, two at a time, Padfoot slowly following after her.

Hermione studied the beaten man in front of her, feeling awkward. He was shaking from the pain. Biting her lip, she moved forward almost on instinct to run her fingers soothingly through his hair just as Tonks had done.

He sighed with evident relief, his voice breaking a little when he quietly said, "Thank you, Hermione. You've always been . . . very . . . very kind to me, in regards to my condition."

She frowned, wiping a falling tear from her eye. "You've never deserved anything less than kindness, Remus," she whispered and sat in shock as he broke down at her words. The man let out a quiet sob and pulled his arms around her waist, his shoulders shaking. Her eyes widened in surprise that he would show her such vulnerability, but she continued to stroke his hair, whispering words of comfort.

A soft swear on the stairs alerted her to Tonks's return, and Hermione stiffened for a moment, realising her position might look incredibly inappropriate in front of Remus's wife.

Tonks, however, did not appear to care in the slightest. Instead, she looked grateful and relieved as she approached, handing over the phial of Pain Potion.

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Remus opened his eyes, his gaze landing on the chair beside his bed where Mia sat. He looked tired and confused, which she fully expected.

"Mia," he whispered hoarsely.

She smiled at him affectionately. "Hello, Remus."

He looked around slowly, panic rising in his eyes. "Wh-Where am I?"

"In the hospital wing. Do you need another Pain Potion?"

"What are you doing here? Why are *you* here?" He moved to sit up, but the action was clearly painful. He let out a quiet cry, one hand instinctively reaching around to his back.

She took a quick look while he was distracted, glad to see that the wound had healed cleanly, but the scar was still red, and the skin was pulled tight. It looked uncomfortable, to say the least.

When he returned his focus to her, he jolted, clearly unaware that she had come so close. To prevent him from hurting himself more, Mia placed her hands gently on the exposed skin of his shoulders. "Calm down, Remus, I'm taking care of you."

He pulled away from her, wincing as she touched him. "What? No, I'm fine, just a little sick is all. I don't want you to catch anything."

"I'm not going to, and you're not sick."

He looked up into her eyes, terror recognisable in his own.

"Remus, I know."

"You . . . *know*?"

His bottom lip began to quiver, and suddenly, Mia realised his age. This certainly was not the grown man that had been a symbol of strength for her. And that older Remus had been known to break down post-transformation, crying into her arms. This was a terrified, eleven-year-old boy who had never known kindness in regards to his condition, aside from his parents. However, Mia was convinced he had suffered at home, as well.

"I know about your lycanthropy," she said clearly with as kind a tone as possible.

"I don't know what . . ." he began but gave up when the tears welled in his eyes. Covering his face with his hands, he asked, "How?"

Anywhere she touched, he tried to pull away, but Mia refused to let him. She soothed the skin of his arms with gentle caresses and smoothed his hair away from his forehead with her fingers.

"I read books, I know the signs, and I'm even smarter than you," Mia said affectionately. "I figured it out last month when you were sick during the full moon. It's why I left you the Chocolate Frogs. I know they make you feel better."

She frowned when she reached up to run her fingers through his sweat-soaked hair and he flinched.

Remus whimpered, his head still in his hands as he cried. "You should go. I . . . You weren't supposed to know. I'm going to have to leave. No one was supposed to find out."

"No one's going to find out," Mia promised. "I brought my suspicions to Dumbledore, and he's given me permission to be here with you each month, before and after your transformation."

"You're . . . you're not afraid?" Remus slowly lowered his hands to look at her, shocked.

"Of *you*?" Mia smiled. "Why would I have reason to be afraid of you, Remus?"

"I'm a monster!" he shouted, eyes flashing gold.

Mia growled angrily, and the ends of her hair sparked with riotous magic. "Don't you dare! That's my *friend* you're talking about! You are a survivor of a situation that someone else put you in." Tears formed in her eyes as she related to her own words. "All you can do is follow the rules, keep people safe, and try to find some semblance of happiness in the process."

He shook his head. "There's no happiness in this, Mia."

"There *will* be," she promised him as she thought of Tonks and Teddy. "And until you figure it out, it's my job to help make it less painful. Do you need another Pain Potion?"

"Did . . . Did *you* heal me?" he asked, reaching behind his back to touch the scar. "Madam Pomfrey did it last month, and . . . it feels different."

"I'm a very fast learner."

Remus frowned. "I don't want your help. I don't want to hurt you."

"And *I* don't want you to hurt longer than you're forced to," she said, not taking no for an answer. "You let me take care of you and be there for you so you don't have to be alone. In exchange, I promise to never be in harm's way when you're close to your transformation. It's not like I plan to follow you beneath the Whomping Willow."

His eyes widened. "You know about that?"

"Once I told Dumbledore what I'd figured out and that I wanted to help, he explained everything to me."

"I'm . . ." Remus looked down, suddenly appearing embarrassed and self-conscious. She knew the look. She saw it constantly anytime people brought up Harry's past or Ron's family. It was the look someone got when they thought they were being pitied. "I'm not another lost stray like . . . like Sirius."

Mia smiled down at him. "No, you're not. Sirius is a lost pup who needs a good home." Sirius was wounded and beaten, and it had taken him weeks to properly bounce

back after his mother had sent that Howler the morning after the Sorting. "You're a boy who happens to be a werewolf who needs a good friend."

"Why are you so . . ." Remus began, trying to look for the right word, ". . . *kind* to me, Mia?"

She swallowed the whimper that threatened to crawl its way out of her throat. Scooting over, she took a seat beside him on his bed, gently putting an arm around his shoulders. He shivered at the touch, and she could see him trying to hold onto his strength, trying not to show weakness.

"You've never deserved anything less than kindness, Remus."

He let out a quiet sob and wrapped his arms around Mia's waist, his shoulders shaking as he cried against her.

Her eyes softened at the boy exposing his vulnerability for what, she assumed, was the first time. It felt to her like he had opened up his heart right there. She promised herself that she would treat it well.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### *Our Job*

---

*Something's wrong, sbut the light  
Heavy thoughts tonight  
And they aren't of snow white  
Dreams of war, dreams of liars  
Dreams of dragon's fire  
And of things that will bite  
(Enter Sandman - Metallica)*

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**December 18th, 1971**

Snow blanketed the grounds of Hogwarts whilst the students gathered their trunks together and prepared to spend the Christmas holidays at home. Few children remained at school, though the weather was perfect for snowball fights. Gideon and Fabian Prewett had even created a school-wide competition that ended up with seven Slytherins—and four confused Hufflepuffs who got caught in the crossfire—in the hospital wing. James, Sirius, and Remus had come out on top in the first year division of the games, but all three boys nearly got frostbite because of it. Mia refused to participate. Three of the Marauders, however, caught her giggling over the top of her book as she sat nearby when their fourth—Peter—was buried beneath a sheet of fresh snow that fell from the roof.

It was the day after the last full moon of the year, and Mia thought Remus was looking surprisingly healthy, considering. Somehow, over the months, being able to be there for him before and after the full moon appeared to make his recovery much easier. It also helped that she knew how to treat his wounds and what potions worked best to get him through the pain. He had put weight back on, and the colour had returned to his face.

Christmas was approaching, and the holidays had never felt better for her.

"Sirius, why are you still in your pyjamas?" Mia asked as she descended the staircase from the girls' dormitories. "We need to leave for the train soon."

"*Mum . . .*" Sirius said the word with a scowl on his face, "told me to just stay here."

He had sent letters home, specifically to his father and brother, leaving Walburga out of the equation after the Howler she had sent him months ago.

Mia knew that Orion Black wrote back once a month, requesting reports of Sirius's classwork and asking if he was in need of anything; the parchments looked more like a supply order form rather than a letter from a parent to a child. Regulus wrote back once, telling Sirius to stop writing to him, and calling him a blood-traitor. The words had clearly been fed to him by Walburga, who probably threatened Regulus with the same treatment as his older brother if he did not cut ties with his only sibling, but the effect had been the same regardless of the intent. Sirius had lashed out at the breakfast table, retreated into himself for several days, and then acted out in class, ending the week with detention.

It was not a surprise that Sirius was not wanted home for Christmas.

"Is your family going somewhere for the holidays?" Remus asked as he came down the stairs with his belongings in hand.

Sirius shrugged bitterly. "If they are, they haven't clued me in on their plans."

"Ridiculous. They shouldn't be angry with you over something you couldn't control," Mia said, though she knew that Sirius had desperately wanted to be in Gryffindor and had likely requested it of the Sorting Hat.

"Who cares?" He crossed his arms over his chest, reminding Mia of his older self being forced to stay trapped inside Grimmauld Place while the rest of the Order was free to come and go as they pleased.

Mia frowned and sat beside him on the sofa. "*You* do."

"Like hell!" Sirius snapped.

Despite his bitter mood, he reacted to her sitting next to him as he always did. He tilted to the side, landing his head in her lap and silently reached his hands up to grab at her fingers and place them on his head.

Mia smiled and began petting him affectionately.

"I'm better off on my own," he said with a sigh.

"Come home with us," Mia suggested as she stopped petting his head.

Grey eyes opened in wonder as he stared up into her face. "Really?"

She grinned, excited. "Absolutely! You'll spend Christmas at the manor. You need a proper Christmas, Sirius. I won't stand for you just sitting in the common room on your own. Remus, you're still coming too, right?" she asked, suddenly feeling guilty for not inviting Sirius sooner.

She had written home earlier that month asking if Remus could stay. He had told her that he believed his parents had both grown accustomed to not having their life revolve around his symptoms and were now nervous about having to go back to the way things had been before Hogwarts, if only for a short holiday. Mia's parents had been more than happy to invite Remus into their home, something he was clearly both nervous and excited about as he claimed he had never stayed with friends anywhere outside of Hogwarts.

"Of course. Trying to complete a collection?" Remus chuckled. "You going to ask Peter to go home with you next?"

"Absolutely not!"

Both boys widened their eyes at her tone.

"I just mean," she said, trying to recover from her mistake, "Peter and I aren't close like I am with the pair of you." She knew that both Remus and Sirius were aware that there was no love lost between her and Peter. She was never exactly rude to him, so they never made a fuss over it.

"I can only stay until Christmas Eve, though," Remus reminded her. "My parents will be home by then."

Mia inclined her head. "Of course."

James grinned as he slid down the railing of the stairs that connected the common room to the boys' dormitories. "You'll be happy to know, dearest sister, that I have everything packed, and I didn't use your bloody checklist to do it," he smugly informed her.

"You have all your clothes?" Mia asked with a raised brow. She had made the list for a reason. She saw how frustrated their mother had been in the days leading up to the first of September. James's trunk had been a nightmare.

"Yes," James answered.

"You packed all the books you need to finish your homework?"

"Yes, I did."

Mia looked him over carefully. "Jamie?"

"Mia?"

"Where's your wand?"

Three seconds passed before his nose twitched, he cursed under his breath on a groan, and quickly ran back up the stairs.

"Keep your wand on you at all times, James Charlus Potter!" Mia called up after him.

Remus laughed. "How are the two of you related?"

"Pretty sure Mum accidentally hit him with a Confundus as a baby," Mia said cheekily.

From the top of the stairs echoed a loud, "Ha! Found it!"

Mia patted Sirius's head once more and shoved at his shoulders to get him off of her. "Go get ready."

Sirius rolled off of her, throwing his head back to get the hair out of his face, and yelled, "James! Come help me pack!" as he made his way toward the staircase.

"Thought you said you were staying here?" James raised a brow as he twirled his wand in his hand, hopping down the steps.

Sirius winked at Mia but was quickly thumped in the head by James, who had been trying to stomp out Sirius's bad habit of flirting with her.

"Your *lovely* sister," Sirius said as he turned back to an unamused James, "has invited me home with you for Christmas."

"Wicked!" James grinned. "We can go flying in the orchards, and you can help me set it up for Quidditch! Why didn't *I* think of inviting you?"

"Because *you* are apparently a terrible friend," Mia said, looking up at her brother with a smug grin.

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James helped Sirius pack his trunk, and the boys quickly made their way down to the entrance hall where the students would be loaded into carriages and taken down to Hogsmeade Station.

"Sirius, look." James chuckled as he walked to the foot of the staircase, watching as Severus Snape walked ahead of them side-by-side with Lily Evans.

Sirius looked up and held his breath while James fired a jinx at Snape's feet, making him trip mid-sentence.

"Sev? Are you okay?" Lily knelt at her friend's side with a frown.

Snape growled. "Fine."

"My turn," Sirius snickered and sent the same jinx the moment Snape regained his footing. The boy fell forward once more, this time landing with a loud thud and a slew of mumbled swears.

Lily furrowed her brow. "Sev?"

"I'm fine, Lily!" Snape snapped at her angrily, and she took a step back from him, appearing hurt by his tone.

"I've got a good one. *Locomotor Mortis*," James whispered, flicking his wand just so.

Snape's legs snapped shut together. His eyes went wide at the sensation, and he bunny-hopped forward twice, trying to hold his balance before he tumbled forward into a line of Hufflepuffs, knocking them down like a row of dominoes.

James and Sirius burst into hysterical laughter.

Lily descended upon them.

Sirius jumped out of her way, having seen the kind of damage that she could do with magic when she was actually *trying*. The last thing he wanted was to be caught in the wake of an accidental outburst.

She poked a slender finger at James's chest, bright green eyes narrowing as her fury was aimed at him. "You!"

James smiled innocently. "Me?"

"Him?" Sirius also feigned ignorance.

"You ridiculously stupid, ignorant . . ." Her hair began to spark like Mia's often did, and Sirius braced for impact. "Toerag!"

Her scream gained the attention of every other student in the entrance hall, Snape and the tumbled Hufflepuffs included. Before James could say another word, Lily propelled the flat of her hand to the round shape of his cheek. The sound of her slap echoed off of the walls as she turned on her heels and stormed out of the castle.

Sirius stared at the scene, completely gobsmacked.

"Did Lily Evans just smack you?!" Remus demanded, eyes wide at the sight of James holding a hand to the side of his face.

"What?!" Mia shouted as she ran down behind Remus. She turned and glared at Sirius. "What the hell happened? What did you do?"

"Me?" His eyes went wide at the accusation. "If *I* did something, Evans would have smacked *me*! No, she hit *James*." He pointed at his friend, who stared off in the direction Lily had left, his hazel eyes wide and his hand still fixed to his reddening cheek.

Mia frowned. "What did you do, Jamie?"

"What's a toerag?" Sirius asked, feeling a modicum of respect for Evans for creativity. Then again, maybe it was a Muggle thing.

Remus tried, and failed, to stifle a laugh. "Lily called James a toerag?"

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"Look, dear, there's Mia!"

Mia could hear her parents the second she stepped foot off the train. She smiled at the sight of them both.

Her father was not even trying to be quiet when he said, "That must be the Lupin boy. You don't think . . . she's too young for a boyfriend."

"I think it's cute." Dorea teased him. "You behave. Mia says they're just friends."

In the hopes of cutting off the conversation before Remus heard—though he likely already had thanks to his enhanced senses—Mia rushed into her father's open arms and hugged him tightly.

When he released her, Mia turned back and smiled at Remus. "Mum, Dad, this is Remus."

"Glad to have you, son." Charlus grinned and extended his hand to the boy. "Charlus Potter. This is my wife, Dorea."

Remus smiled slightly and reached his hand out to take Charlus's. "Remus Lupin, sir. I really appreciate . . . I mean, I am very g-grateful," he stammered a bit before inhaling a deep breath to calm himself. "My parents wanted to say thank you, for letting me stay for a few days."

Dorea beamed brightly. "You are more than welcome, dear. The more the merrier!"

"Oh!" Mia blushed when she realised that she had forgotten to send a last minute owl home. "I, umm, is it okay if Sirius stays with us for the holidays as well? His mum, well . . ." She did not want to divulge all of Sirius's concerns to her parents, so she looked

up at her mother and tried to explain in not so many words. "He got sorted into Gryffindor."

Dorea frowned in obvious understanding. "Oh, dear."

Charlus chuckled. "Shame for Slytherins."

The moment Sirius approached, Dorea pulled him into a swift hug, beaming. "You lovely, little rebellious lion! I hear you're coming to stay with us for a few weeks? What a wonderful Christmas surprise!"

"Really?" Sirius asked with a raised brow and a smile plastered on his face.

"Of course, love! The more the merrier!" Dorea repeated her words from earlier.

Charlus turned his attention to Mia. "Where's your brother?"

All three children groaned.

Mia rolled her eyes and gestured to the train. "He'll be a minute."

Charlus opened his mouth with a curious expression when a loud shout came from the train: "Let go of my trunk, Potter!"

"The screaming redhead is Lily Evans," Mia told her father. "Jamie fancies her."

The boy in question was trying to carry Lily's trunk. "I'll carry it for you," James insisted. "Your hands are delicate flowers, you shouldn't have to worry about this big trunk. Want me to carry your bag, too?"

He smiled, touching his cheek when Lily ripped the handle of her trunk out of his hands.

"Get away from me, you prat!" she shouted, storming away as quickly as possible, her long red hair flowing behind her.

"Write to me? Owl me? Floo me?" James called desperately after her, waving his hands.

"Argh! Go away!" Lily's voice echoed in the distance.

"Mum!" James rushed into his mother's arms. Charlus stared down at his son with laughter in his eyes after watching the scene.

Dorea, on the other hand, looked horrified. "James? Is everything all right?" she asked as she examined his cheek since he could not stop touching it.

James beamed brightly. "Everything's grand. I'm in love!"

"Oh, dear." Dorea sighed again.

"I think it's *cute*." Charlus echoed Dorea's words from earlier, chuckling quietly as his wife glared at him.

"Just ignore him," Sirius encouraged the parents. "We had to spend eight hours on the train listening to his nonsense."

"Goodness, James, darling, did someone give you something?" Dorea felt his forehead. "Mia, was he poisoned?"

"Unfortunately not." Mia stared at her brother, still lost in the midst of his stupidity. "This is all him."

"She hit me," James said dreamily, staring up at his father with a proud look on his face as though he had just won the Quidditch Cup.

Charlus blinked, holding back another chuckle. "Who hit you? That little redhead?"

"Smacked him hard, too." Sirius barked out a laugh. "It was hilarious."

"Yeah." James smiled, not catching on that he was being teased. "Did you see her eyes when she did it? Prettiest shade of green I've ever seen in my life. Mum, can we go to Diagon Alley? I want to get her something for Christmas!"

Dorea frowned, concerned. "Umm . . . maybe later, dear. I'd like to get you four home, maybe put a charm on your face." She turned James's cheek to examine it closely. "Your eye looks a little swollen."

"You think it'll bruise!?" James asked excitedly and pulled away from his mother as though she had already raised her wand to put a glamour on him. "I'll wear it like a badge of honour."

"Eight hours, you say?" Charlus asked, looking down at Sirius.

Sirius smirked. "I almost wished I'd gone home to my parents, sir."

Charlus laughed. "That bad?"

Mia rolled her eyes. "I almost went home with Sirius to his parents."

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The Potters and accompanying strays waited in line for the station's Floo to open, and one by one, each of the children arrived through the fireplace in Potter Manor, followed by both parents. Sirius looked unaffected by the surroundings of the house, but Remus's eyes were wide.

Mia smiled at his look of wonder that nearly matched her own the first time she had arrived inside the manor. "Come on Remus, Sirius, grab your trunks, and I'll show you to your rooms."

Sirius raised a brow. "Grab my trunk?"

"You plan on sleeping in the drawing room?"

Sirius looked around. "No, I mean . . . I thought you had house-elves."

"Unfortunately, we do." Mia seethed, and James laughed. "But that doesn't mean you can't take care of your own things."

Mia was already not looking forward to a fight with Tilly—who still spoilt James to a ridiculous point—but she would be damned if she saw Sirius take advantage of Tilly's need to pamper.

"Mia has issues with the elves," James explained with a wry smile.

Sirius looked at Mia, completely confused. "You don't like house-elves?"

"I'd like it if the elves were able to choose for themselves whether or not they wanted to be tied down to a family," she tried to explain but knew it would be for nothing. She'd had plenty of these arguments with an older Sirius Black. "And I'd like it if the elves were paid for their hard work."

"Paid?" Sirius let out a loud, disbelieving laugh. "Are you taking the piss?"

"She's *really* not." James shook his head. "Come on, Remus, I'll show you your room. These two are going to be a while."

"Mia, that's what elves are for," Sirius explained as James and Remus vanished down the hallway.

"They are living creatures and not property that can be used and abused, Sirius!"

"They abuse back just as good as they get. My mother's elf is a rotten little sponge that acts just like her. Curses, spits, and bows at the same time."

Mia grumbled and looked away from him. The image of Kreacher popped into her head too easily, especially as she recalled him calling her "Mistress" and "Mudblood" in the same sentence.

"Maybe if *someone* treated them properly," she mumbled under her breath.

"Why the hell would I treat something properly that called me a 'beastly little ingrate?'" Sirius asked.

"Ugh, I am *not* having this argument with you again, Sirius Black!" Mia snapped at him, heat rising in her chest that she knew could trigger a panic attack at any moment.

He blinked at her in confusion. "What do you mean *again*?"

"I . . . I mean . . ."

*Shit.*

How was it that he had the ability to make her forget what year she was living in? It was those grey eyes. They looked the same. In thirty years, those eyes would still be the same—the same infuriating, unnatural shade of grey that caused her to lose herself.

"Just drop it. I don't want to talk about it anymore." She reached for the handle of her trunk, carrying it off toward the hallway.

"Young Miss!" Tilly popped into the room with wide blue eyes and an excited smile. "Tilly is so happy you is home! Tilly will take Young Miss's trunk. Young Master tried to sneak his trunk upstairs." She eyed Mia as though she knew she was behind it. "Yes he did, but Tilly caught him. Now Young Miss will give Tilly her trunk, and Tilly takes care of it."

"*See?*!" Sirius pointed at the elf.

Tilly turned her attention to Sirius and examined him very closely. "You is Young Master Black, yes you is?"

"Yes, I am," Sirius said.

Tilly continued to stare at him. "Young Master Black takes his *own* trunk." She turned away from Sirius, taking Mia's trunk down the hallway.

"Oh, I should have mentioned," Mia said with a smug grin. "Your family was apparently really mean to Tilly. So I guess you'll have to carry your own trunk."

Sirius should have been offended, but in the end, he laughed. "Anyone who doesn't like the House of Black is okay in my book." He grinned defiantly at Mia and gripped the handle of his trunk, following after the house-elf.

The excitement of being home for Christmas lasted the entire evening. Tilly had made all of Mia and James's favourites, which happened to also be all of Remus and Sirius's favourites. The manor was decorated with a brightly coloured Christmas tree in every room, faerie lights twinkling from within, and mistletoe hanging over Charlus and Dorea's room. The guests were given a tour of the manor, and the boys spent hours before bed flying out back over the freshly fallen snow that covered the orchard and gardens.

It was perfect.

But nothing is ever really perfect.

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"No! No! It's a fake! Please! We've never been inside your vault . . . It isn't the real sword! It's a copy, just a copy!"

Sirius's heart pounded when he was awakened by screams. He leapt from his bed and looked out of his door just in time to see James rush down the hallway.

"What's going on?" Sirius demanded, panicked.

Remus popped out of another door. "Was that Mia?"

"What's wrong with her?" Sirius asked as he rushed after his friend, tugging on James's robes as the three boys approached the double doors at the end of the hallway.

"Move!" James shouted and burst into the room.

Sirius looked to see the girl thrashing and crying in bed.

Without another word, James crawled into the massive four-poster, pulling her into his arms. "Mia? Mia, love, it's fine. You're safe," he whispered over and over until her cries quieted.

Sirius stepped inside, looking down at his friends, scared and worried. Despite the life he had back home at Grimmauld Place, he had never heard screams like *that* before. "What happened?"

"She has nightmares," James explained. "Mia, you're safe. I've got you."

"Is she okay?" Remus asked, standing behind Sirius.

"I don't know." James frowned. "I knew she had nightmares, and I didn't even think to check and see if she was okay at Hogwarts. Has Evans, Brown, or Macdonald said anything to either of you?"

Sirius shook his head as he stepped closer. "How often does she have them?"

"Almost every night." James sighed, looking like he was doing a good job of berating himself. Sirius knew how protective his best friend was of his sister. "She's probably been having nightmares all year, and I didn't even think to talk to her roommates about it."

"Jamie?" Mia whispered, her eyes fluttering open.

James held her close. "I'm here, love."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to . . ." She started crying again, but James quickly wiped the tears with his pyjama sleeves and kissed the top of her head.

"No, no. You don't get to apologise. It's *my* job. *My* job to keep you safe."

Mia let out a quiet sob and clung to her brother.

Something inside of Sirius felt like it came to life in a singular moment, empty and wanting and lost all at once. "*Our* job," he whispered through the darkness

Mia sat up, looking at Sirius and Remus standing at the foot of her bed. She did not look embarrassed to have them there. Instead, she let out a sigh of what sounded like relief.

Sirius walked to the other side of her bed and reached out, tucking a curl of her hair behind her ear. "It's *our* job. *Our* job to keep you safe."

"Sirius?" she whispered.

"Hey, kitten. Scoot over will you?" He smiled and crawled into the bed beside her, flopping his head on her lap like always.

She laughed through her remaining tears, smiling down at him and running her fingers through his hair.

James narrowed his gaze at his friend. "*We're* supposed to be making *her* feel better, Sirius."

"No." Mia smiled up at her brother. "This helps." She beamed down at Sirius who was happily staring up at her.

"You boys should go back to sleep," she said, looking guilty.

"We're not leaving you alone," Remus stated firmly. "You going to make room for me? Or do I have to sleep on the floor?"

Sirius chuckled and scooted closer to Mia, making room.

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**December 19th, 1971**

Mia's eyes opened as the light from the nearby window flooded her room. At night, the cold and dark memories plagued her nightmares, but in the morning, warmth enveloped her entire being.

She looked down at the mess of long, silky, black hair against her stomach. She chuckled softly at the feel of Sirius's arms wrapped around her waist, using her body as a pillow. She watched closely as he took slow, shallow breaths, and felt additional ones behind her. Craning her head upward slightly, she noticed that somehow during the night, she had navigated herself onto Remus's chest, bracing against him with one of his arms wrapped around her shoulders.

She smiled and leant into the embrace, a sense of peace gliding over her even as she thought of the future. A future where Remus would be ostracised from society, forced into poverty due to prejudice and fear. Left in loneliness for years and years whilst looking for some semblance of family. A family she knew he would eventually get, but not until he had suffered a great deal.

She wrapped her left arm against his, squeezing his hand gently. She would make it up to him somehow.

She was determined to love him enough so that he could get through the years of loneliness and pain that lay ahead of him.

A light snore from below brought her attention back to Sirius as he turned his head to face her, still asleep. He almost looked innocent like this. She smiled and reached her right hand out to run her fingers through his black hair affectionately. She could not imagine this boy, this *sweet* boy, would grow up to spend twelve years in the hell that was Azkaban. Innocent of any crime, put away without a trial, all while mourning the deaths of his friends. His soft skin was blemish free now, but she knew it would eventually be covered in scars, tattoos, and lines marking the years that would be stolen from him. Sure, he would eventually be free, but the veil would take him from her. She would call him back, but it would still be one more year stolen from him.

She was determined to love him enough so that he could get through those years of suffering and anger that were ahead of him.

"You look comfortable," an amused but tired voice came from the door where James stood, smirking. He yawned and made his way back to the bed, shoving Sirius's legs before retaking his place beside Mia, snuggling into her right side, using her shoulder as a pillow.

She smiled and rested her cheek on the top of his messy head of hair and blinked away the tears forming in her eyes.

In one hand she held Remus close to her, lacing her fingers through his. She wove her other hand through Sirius's hair, comforting them both as he slept.

A painful realisation came to her: she could somehow make Sirius and Remus's lives a little better by being there, but she had no hands left to grip tightly to James.

*Nothing you do will change what is meant to be.*

No matter how hard she tried, she would not be able to save her brother.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### *Little Lions*

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*Hit me with your best shot*

*Why don't you bit me*

*With your best shot*

*Hit me with your best shot*

*Fire Away*

(Hit Me With Your Best Shot - Pat Benatar)

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**February 28th, 1972**

It was as if Charlus Potter had convinced his wife that children causing mischief was a rite of passage. James, Mia, and Sirius returned to Hogwarts after the Christmas holidays, new gifts in hand that had been delicately wrapped and given to them Christmas morning. Each with a very careful warning in Charlus's firm script:

*Don't. Get. Caught.*

In the two months since they had been back in school, James and Sirius had not been caught out of bed after hours once. That was due, in large part, to the fact that James now possessed the most fantastically charmed Invisibility Cloak.

When her brother had opened his gift Christmas morning, Mia simply stared at it. That very cloak was the cause of a lot of trouble with her, Harry, and Ron. Though, more times than she could count, it had gotten them *out* of trouble as well.

James had been floored by the present and used it nearly every night since returning to Hogwarts.

Dorea, likely saddened by the thought that Sirius might not have presents come Christmas morning, dug through her old Black family heirlooms—ones that had, in all probability, been looked over properly by a Curse-Breaker. When morning arrived and no gifts had appeared overnight for Sirius, Dorea handed her small gift to him with a bright smile.

He had looked shocked, clearly not expecting anything, let alone something that had belonged to his family. The small penknife fit perfectly in his hand, and he grinned

brightly when Dorea explained that it was enchanted to be able to unlock any door and untie any knot.

Thus far, Sirius had used it to break into Filch's office four separate times.

Mia's gift confused her at first when she opened the small package containing a beautiful small hand mirror. That is, until she pulled it from the box, revealing its twin beneath it. She brightened, recognising the gift immediately; the last time she had seen the mirrors, one of the two belonged to Harry, and it was broken.

After thanking her parents, she gave the second mirror to James.

She had woken up every night over the Christmas holidays with her brother, Sirius, and Remus in her bed—all having arrived to the sound of her screams, at least until Remus left to spend Christmas with his family.

James had taken her aside before leaving for King's Cross Station. "Take the mirror and talk to me every night before bed. That way I know you're okay. And if you're not, you can come and sleep in my bed."

Since returning to school, she had called her brother through the mirror several times each week. Nights when the nightmares became too much, Mia would descend the staircase from the girls' dormitories and make her way up the boys' quietly, slipping into the room shared by James, Sirius, Remus, and Peter, and crawl in beside her brother, who kept the nightmares at bay.

Each morning upon waking, James would give his sister his Invisibility Cloak so she could slip back into her own room, unnoticed by snoring roommates.

Having to sneak around at night made Mia feel weak, especially since it was to keep a *dead* woman from haunting her thoughts. This weakness was why she had ultimately stopped contacting James at night a little over a month into the new term. He would ask her about it every morning, and she would lie, feeling guilty for making him worry over her. But a harsh reality check would hit her from time to time: James would not be around forever. She would need to sleep on her own at some point.

"Morning," Mia said with a yawn as she reached the Gryffindor table for breakfast.

James stared at her, or actually, stared at her hair.

She knew it was an especially spectacular mess—at least twice as voluminous as normal and looked tangled beyond repair. The dark circles beneath her eyes looking back

at her from the mirror were nearly purple from exhaustion, and she was struggling just to reach for something to eat.

"You look awful, Mia."

"You flatter me, big brother." Mia narrowed her eyes but dropped the attitude when James poured her a glass of pumpkin juice and slid a plate of toast in front of her. She let out a soft sigh and smiled at him gratefully.

"He's right; are you okay?" Sirius asked, sitting down beside her. "Your hair is . . . less puffskein nest and more ball of tangled yarn." He grinned and poked the knotted mane on top of her head.

Mia growled, swatting at his hand, moving out of his reach as he tried to continue petting her wild, messy locks. "Don't touch my hair, Sirius. I woke up late and didn't have time to charm it properly."

"Why'd you sleep in?" James asked pointedly. "Were you . . . ?" he began to ask as he did every morning, but Mia shook her head.

"No. Lily, Alice, and Mary kept me up all night giggling over a bunch of nonsense."

Though Lily was more prone to serious conversations than Mia's other two roommates, she would still join in on ridiculous conversations about boys. It annoyed Mia to no end. Mostly because, for the first time ever, she actually wanted to join in.

In her original timeline, she had not even *thought* about boys in such a way until at least third year—the embarrassing exception being Professor Lockhart, and even then it was barely a passing thought. Ginny once explained to Harry and Ron that Hermione was far too sensible, but all other girls were normal.

"Did Evans mention me?!" James asked with a bright smile.

"I don't know, I tried not to pay attention," she lied.

In truth, no, Lily had not asked a thing about James. The only name Lily had mentioned was *Remus*, and even then it was under a blushing whisper that grated on Mia's nerves. It was not until Alice giggled about James, and Mary started talking about Sirius's beautiful eyes that Mia had had enough and stormed out of the dorm and down the stairs to get a head start on her homework, something she had not done—or needed to do—since they came back from hols.

"Morning." Remus approached with a yawn, his face was pale and he looked just as tired as Mia felt.

She knew the full moon would rise the following night, and Remus needed his energy. Despite not feeding herself, aside from the few bites of toast that James had sent her way, she immediately went into precise, practised actions. She poured pumpkin juice into a tall glass and set it in front of Remus before reaching across Sirius for the large platters of bacon and sausage, loading Remus's plate with protein and fresh fruit. Once filled, she set it down in front of him.

She hardly noticed it when Remus fixed *her* breakfast in simultaneous silence. He poured her a small cup of tea, adding one cube of sugar, and pushed it across the table. The two worked in tandem, as he casually reached over her arms to set a bowl of porridge down in front of her.

"Sorry," Remus muttered as he spotted a raspberry in the midst of the fruit topping of the warm porridge, settled in the midst of blueberries. He reached over and plucked away the offending fruit, tossing it into his mouth.

As the two began to eat, the rest of the group stared in absolute silence.

"What?" Remus and Mia muttered at the same time.

James blinked. "That's . . . creepy."

Sirius laughed. "You've never seen it before? They've been like this for months."

Remus and Mia promptly rolled their eyes and ignored the continued jokes and stares as they turned back to their food. When Mia casually touched a piece of the toast that James had given her, Remus reached over Peter's seat, snatching up a jar of marmalade and scooting it across to her without even looking.

James looked positively perplexed by the behaviour. "You two develop mind-speak or something?"

Mia smirked, swallowing a bite of her toast. "Don't be jealous, Jamie. Just because Remus is my best friend doesn't mean you're any less my big brother."

"What the hell does that make me?" Sirius pouted.

Mia stared at him incredulously. "Usually? A pain in my arse that has somehow been tethered to me for eternity."

Sirius winked at her, not bothering to flinch when James reached across the table to thump him on the side of the head. "I didn't know you cared, kitten."

"What about me?" Peter asked, his tiny, watery eyes meeting Mia's blinking gaze.

She returned her attention to her food, ignoring him. *If you can't say anything nice . . .*

"I still think the breakfast thing is creepy," James remarked. "How come Remus can't get his *own* bacon? There's a plate right in front of Peter."

"Because he likes it undercooked," Mia replied matter-of-factly. "The plate in front of Peter is too burnt."

"Why don't you let me or James make your tea?" Sirius asked with a raised brow. "Last time one of us did, you didn't touch it."

"Because she doesn't take milk in it," Remus explained.

"How do you even *notice* things like that?" James asked.

At the same time, both Mia and Remus just shrugged.

James and Sirius had little time to come up with more questions or jokes at the pair's expense because, right then, Frank Longbottom stumbled over to the table looking worse for wear.

"Frank? Are you all right?" Mia looked up at the boy with concern.

He tried to smile but it did not reach his eyes. "I'm fine, thanks, Mia."

"You are not. What happened?"

While the Marauders had banded together due to circumstances that first day on the train, their bond had solidified due to sleeping arrangements. Frank, on the other hand, roomed with the other two Gryffindor boys in their year, Gaspard and William, who had apparently been best friends since they were toddlers. Not wanting him to be friendless and left out, Mia had extended a hand of friendship to Frank.

Frank sighed loudly. "Some first year Slytherins hit me with a nasty charm when I caught them picking on some Hufflepuffs," he admitted, his face turning red. "I told the snakes to leave them alone, and they turned on *me* instead. I thought they'd maybe try a hex or two but didn't think one would actually stick."

"Which one?" Sirius asked.

"They stunned me."

"What?" Sirius snapped. "Those rotten, low-life snakes!"

"They *stunned* you?" Mia's eyes widened. She felt her own temper flaring, and Sirius's seething just egged her on. "Merlin, that's a *fifth year* spell! How did they even know how to do that?"

"Once I woke up, I overheard them bragging that Malfoy and Mulciber have been teaching all of the first year Slytherins advanced hexes and jinxes," Frank said bitterly.

"You should tell Professor McGonagall," Lily said as she sat down on the other side of Frank. Keeping her attention on her friend, she purposely ignored Sirius and James as though they were not even there, despite James smiling brightly at her.

Sirius growled. "No way. What we *should* do is get even!"

"Yeah," James agreed, bringing himself back to the conversation when Lily refused to acknowledge him. "You shouldn't have to take that crap from them. C'mon, Frank. You, me, Sirius, Remus, and Peter are going to go show those serpents why lions are the kings of this castle!" He stood up, turning his attention to the gang of Slytherin first years that were sitting at the other end of the Great Hall.

"You idiots are going to get points taken away from us!" Lily hissed. "If you get away with that, you'll still end up hexed. Frank just said that the Slytherins are using *fifth year* spells!"

But nothing Lily said deterred the boys.

James led the charge beside Sirius, followed behind by Frank who looked ready to redeem himself. He might have been as clumsy a child as Neville, but he had taken to Gryffindor courage almost immediately. With James's influence, he was also unfortunately taking to recklessness with ease as well.

Mia sighed and stood up when she saw Remus follow after the others. "I better go and help them."

"Mia!" Lily scolded her.

"He's my brother, they're my friends. I don't let people hurt my friends," she said firmly, and then she felt a dangerous chill run over her skin as she added, "ever."

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"Lost, little lions?" Amycus Carrow asked as the group of Gryffindors approached the end of the Slytherin table. He sat there snickering with his small gang that included his twin sister Alecto, Elora Zabini, and Severus Snape.

Sirius narrowed his eyes at him. "Shut your mouth, Carrow."

"Piss off, blood-traitor," Alecto hissed. "Everyone knows that you're nothing but a disgrace now, Black. Ruined your family name."

"My family name was shit generations before I came along. In fact, I'd gladly trade names with you, except that everyone knows all Carrows are coat-tailing morons."

Alecto appeared enraged by the comment, but her brother—and obvious little leader of their gang—stayed in his seat, glaring up at Sirius.

"I'd rather be on the coat-tails of something *proper* than sitting in the filth with blood-traitors and Mudbloods," Amycus sneered. Alecto laughed, Elora Zabini rolled her eyes as though she were bored of this confrontation already, and Snape averted his eyes from the Gryffindors entirely.

A memory of Draco came to the forefront of Mia's mind.

*"No one asked your opinion, you filthy little Mudblood!"*

Though it currently did not show, she had the slur carved into her skin. By the end of her time at Hogwarts, Hermione had grown numb to the sound of the word when it was thrown at her, but something about this moment brought it all back up. It could have been the fact that she was young again, experiencing unstable emotions as her body fought to catch up with time and her own memories, or it could have been that Amycus was just a boy and already so filled with hate, much like Draco had been when he had first began bullying her. Just twelve years old and already prejudiced.

It was more likely, though, that it riled something up in her because, for the first time ever, the derogatory term was not being thrown at *her*, but at the table across the Great Hall where Amycus glared at the back of Lily's head.

Mia was not the Mudblood, here. Harry's mother was.

Fury built swiftly inside of her, and the memories of hate and anger and war and death all came to the forefront in one moment—egged on by the dangerous look in Sirius's eyes—and she finally snapped.

"You watch your fucking mouth, Carrow!" Mia stepped forward, pushing herself between James and Sirius, both of whom stared at her with wide eyes.

Amycus glared at her. "Or what, Potter?"

"You don't want to test me," she threatened, thinking of Marietta Edgecombe, Rita Skeeter, and Dolores Umbridge. She had been unforgiving during her original timeline, but now she knew what some of these children would grow up to be capable of.

Elora narrowed her eyes, suddenly interested. "Don't threaten us, Potter."

"We're not threatening," James said. "We're returning the favour. You lot hexed Frank first, without reason, too."

"Longbottom?" Snape drawled, rolling his eyes. "As if we'd *need* a reason. He hexes himself by accident twice a day."

"Get bent, Snivellus!" Sirius growled.

Snape's words were laced with sarcasm as he shot back, "Clever retort, Black."

"I'm serious," Mia told Amycus, and she watched closely as his hand hovered over the side of his robes. She could feel Remus right at her back, his breath on her neck and his hand on her shoulder. Without turning to look, she could not tell if he were trying to hold her back or stop himself from attacking. "You pull a wand on any of us again, and you'll regret it."

James glowered. "Forget wands, one more word . . ."

"Just one?" Snape's upper lip curled. "Surely you can count higher than that."

And, just like that, Sirius lunged over the top of the Slytherin table.

In all likelihood, the fight lasted for less than a full minute. Wands were drawn, though Sirius was more than happy to handle things "the Muggle way," as he so liked to call it when he threatened physical violence. Advanced hexes were thrown from the Slytherins; Mia, being fully developed in her magic, tried to non-verbally counter the spells without drawing attention to herself. Unfortunately, it was when Frank got involved that things went completely south.

The problem was that the only charm Frank Longbottom had properly mastered was a Wand-Lighting Charm, which would not have been helpful in the fight anyway. But instead of saying "Lumos," like he *meant* to, Frank flicked his wand forward and said "*Fumos*," accidentally casting a smokescreen spell.

A defensive cloud of smoke poured out of Frank's wand, covering the fight completely. Unable to see and aim wands properly, the Slytherins made to retreat, but the Gryffindors followed Sirius's example and went "full Muggle."

When Professor McGonagall stormed into the Great Hall and cleared the air of the smokescreen, she was left with four Slytherins and four Gryffindors on the ground. Sirius had Snape by the collar on the floor. James was struggling against Alecto Carrow and Elora Zabini—who were pulling at his hair—refusing to hit either of the girls. Remus pinned Amycus against the back wall, his forearm to the Slytherin's throat. He growled as he held

back Mia, who was seething and trying to reach around Remus to scratch Amycus's smug face. The Slytherin spat toward Mia, causing Remus to turn on him instead. Frank stood in the middle of the floor with wide eyes, tightly gripping his wand that was still pouring smoke.

"Mr Longbottom!" Professor McGonagall shouted. "Put your wand down!"

Frank suddenly snapped to and dropped his wand, which fell to the floor and set off sparks. Thankfully, the smoke stopped.

"What on earth? All of you stop this moment!"

One by one, each Gryffindor stepped back, though it took Mia's help to get Remus off of Amycus. Sirius and Snape jumped away from each other, glowering, while the two Slytherin girls let go of James's hair and he pouted, rubbing his head.

"Shameful, each of you! Fighting like common thugs in the Great Hall! Mr Malfoy!"

"Professor?" Lucius Malfoy approached the scene slowly, having been sitting on the other end of the Slytherin table during the entire ordeal.

"Are you a prefect or are you not? A fight breaks out at your own table, and you sit idly by?"

"Forgive me, Professor . . ." Lucius stared at the young Slytherins, and they all averted their gaze. It was clear that the *fighting* was not the problem in the blond's eyes, but the outcome. "I'll be certain to be quicker on my feet next time."

"There will not *be* a next time. Twenty points from each of you! Mr Malfoy, I expect your first year charges to be escorted to your Head of House for proper discipline."

"Absolutely, Professor." Lucius dipped his head and walked away, the first year Slytherins following behind him and out of the Great Hall.

Professor McGonagall turned on the Gryffindors. "As for *you*. I expect better from my own House. Detention, all five of you, this Saturday!" she said and stormed away.

James looked around. "*Five?* There's six of us."

"Peter stayed back at the table," Remus said and gestured to the other side of the room where Peter swallowed as five pairs of eyes narrowed in his direction.

Sirius's mouth fell open in shock. "That little shit."

"Some Gryffindor." Mia rolled her eyes, still fuming. Realising that she was still gripping Remus's arm, she slowly released him, clearing her throat. "Sorry about that."

He grinned at her, his eyes momentarily flashing gold. "You're fun when you're all angry and riled up."

For the first time, Mia felt a strange bit of exciting adrenaline flood her chest at the sight of it. Normally, when she saw the gold in his eyes, it was in anger or stress, the wolf trying to break through Remus in a moment of emotional weakness. He looked anything but weak right now, though; he looked . . . thrilled. The grin he gave made her cheeks warm.

James laughed, breaking her from her daze. "Mia said, 'Fuck.' That was almost worth the detention."

"I did not!" The warmth fell from her cheeks as her face paled. She had rarely ever said that word, least of all in public! The occasional mild swear here and there, of course, but she had never been one to resort to crude language.

Sirius beamed at her, a look in his eye similar to the blush-inducing one in Remus's. "You absolutely did. It was fucking brilliant."

She put her hands on her cheeks, embarrassed. "I really said that?"

Remus chuckled. "You did."

"Oh Merlin . . . I blame *you*!" She removed her hands from her face to point at Sirius. "You're the one teaching us all foul language!"

Sirius laughed joyfully, holding his hands up in surrender. "Oi! I'm going to start blaming *you* every time I hit someone, then. You're violent, you are."

"Keep it up, Sirius. You got me detention. I've never been in trouble my whole life until I met you." Which was the worst lie she had ever told. She had been in detention before, but never for something like this. It was always for getting caught with Harry outside of the castle or teachers misinterpreting their efforts to save the world as causing trouble.

"You're welcome."

She huffed, folding her arms across her chest as she pinned Sirius with a stern look. "Excuse me? Welcome for what?"

His grin grew when she growled at him. "For fixing your boring life."

"Maybe let's stop talking, Sirius," Remus offered with a chuckle. "Mia can be a little scary sometimes."

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**March 4th, 1972**

"I'm gonna hex Peter next time I see him," James said firmly as he stood in the trophy room with the other three Gryffindors, each with a worn rag in their hands, cleaning and polishing every surface, medal, cup, crown, and prize until they gleamed brightly.

They were supposed to have been separated for their detention, but Filch was not around to supervise, as he had been called away to deal with something on the third-floor corridor, mumbling ". . . bloody Prewett brats."

Frank had been excused from detention due to his cauldron melting the day before, where he ended up in the hospital wing with bandages on both hands.

"I'll do it," Mia offered. "Peter already knows I don't like him."

"Why *is* that?" Sirius turned around from the other side of the room to look at Mia, who was busy polishing the last Quidditch Cup to have been won by Gryffindors. "What'd Peter ever do to you?"

Mia glowered, wanting to stomp her feet in frustration. "I don't have to like everyone, you know. Besides, he didn't stand up for his friends."

"Yeah," Remus said thoughtfully, "but you've *never* taken a shine to Pete."

"I . . . I don't know," Mia snapped, not wanting to talk about it.

It was one thing to ignore the short, watery-eyed boy or set him up for a little jinx from time to time, but the boys were asking her to divulge the origin of her distaste for Peter Pettigrew, and she could not do it. Thinking about her hatred for the boy only brought up a sickening anger inside of her. Everything was Peter's fault. James and Lily's death, Harry becoming an orphan, Sirius getting locked up in Azkaban, and Remus being left alone for twelve years.

"Did he do something to you? Say something?" James asked, his gaze filled with sudden concern.

"No. He just . . . I don't know. I don't trust him," she said with a tone of finality, hoping none of them pushed the issue any further.

After what felt like minutes of absolute silence, Sirius walked the length of the room and rested his head on her shoulder. "I think you've only got room in your heart for the three of us, is that it?"

She laughed, hitting him in the face with the dirty rag in her hands. "*You* barely fit. If Remus and James get any taller, you're the first one to get the boot."

He grinned at her. "Ouch. I see how it is."

"I can only handle the three of you. Four would be a nightmare. And I can barely keep you and James in line." She pointed a scolding finger at Sirius. "Thankfully, Remus happens to be mature enough not to get caught up in your nonsense."

"You know he's right here in detention right with the three of us," James pointed out with a chuckle.

Sirius threw his dirty rag at Remus. "Hey, Lupin, want to come down off that pedestal Mia's put you up on?"

Remus's face turned red, and he smirked. "Shut up, *Black*."

"That's not a very mature thing to say, Remus," James teased. "Sounds to me like you're getting caught up in our nonsense."

James and Sirius broke out into laughter, and Remus narrowed his eyes at his friends. While they were distracted, he reached for his wand. "*Vermillions!*" Red sparks shot out, snapping against Sirius's backside like an electric shock.

Sirius gave a yelp and jumped in the air. He glared and then raised his own wand, sending the charm right back at his friend. "*Vermillions!*" The red sparks shot forward, hitting Remus right on the tip of the nose.

"Ow!" Remus growled in response and raised his wand again. "*Vermillions!*" The red sparks flew at Sirius, who tried running from them, but in the end, they snapped him on the side of the head.

"See, Mia?" James pointed out. "Remus is just as bad as the rest of us."

Mia glared at Sirius and Remus. "Stop provoking one another. We're supposed to be in detention!"

"Stop telling us what to do!" James laughed and aimed his wand at her. "*Vermillions!*"

She watched in shock as the red sparks shot from James's wand hit her forehead. "Jamie! I can't believe you!"

"You hexed your own sister?" Remus teasingly glared at James. "*Vermillious duo!*" Red sparks emitted from the end of his wand toward James, but then diverged midstream like a fork in the road, one spark hitting James in the leg, the other one hitting Sirius in the back.

"Ow! *I* didn't hex Mia!" Sirius shouted.

Remus laughed. "No, but you had that coming anyway."

Mia stomped her foot. "This is ridiculous! It's not even a hex, it's a charm. You three knock it off!"

"Not until *you* admit that Remus is *just* as bad as we are!" James grinned and moved around the room with the other two boys, each constantly throwing the same charm over and over, snapping the others repeatedly.

Mia folded her arms in a huff. "I will do no such thing."

"He's attacking us right in front of you!" Sirius pointed out, and Mia only smirked in reply.

"I happen to think you deserve it."

"Oh, just because you're in love with him—" Sirius began with a roll of his eyes but was unable to finish that sentence.

"*Vermillious trio!*" Mia said loudly, and the sparks flew out of her wand with an incredible strength, separating into three distinct paths, each headed for a boy's backside, snapping them hard and loud like a whip. They all yelped, turning wide eyes back at Mia.

"Whoa," James muttered.

Sirius gaped at her. "That was . . ."

Remus grinned. "Impressive. *Vermillious!*" A small spark flew at her, and Remus chuckled when she yelped as the snap hit her on the nose. He smiled at her with mischief in his eyes. "I don't know, maybe they have a point about me."

"What is going on in here?" Professor McGonagall demanded as she appeared in the doorway.

"Nothing, Professor."

They all looked down, avoiding the gaze of the intimidating witch. When she seethed and turned on her heels to leave the room, Remus, standing next to Mia, looked up. Their gazes connected, and when gold met brown, they both grinned, blushing.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

### *Make the Oath*

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*Got a secret  
Can you keep it?  
Swear this one you'll save  
Better lock it, in your pocket  
Taking this one to the grave  
(Secret - The Pierces)*

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**June 20th, 1972**

"Please take care of yourself." Mia frowned as she stood in front of Remus, staring worriedly up into his soft green eyes. "And write to me if you need . . . *anything*."

The term ended with nothing more exciting than exams, Quidditch finals, and the end-of-year feast. No three-headed dog, or devil's snare, or giant chessboard, or flying keys, or dead troll, or Voldemort. Just a typical year of school. The biggest announcement by the end of the term was that the Slytherins had won the House Cup. It was not surprising, considering how many House points were taken away from Gryffindor thanks in part to the newly-minted Marauders and the Prewett twins.

"You worry too much. The past year with you . . ." Remus reached out and tucked a curl behind her ear. She beamed as she remembered that, at the beginning of the year, he had been too terrified to even shake her hand in introduction. It was amazing to see the changes that had occurred within the young werewolf. "Mia, I've honestly never felt better."

"Still," she said, fussing with the collar of his robes to keep her hands busy. "Don't think asking for help makes you weak or cowardly."

"Remus!"

He turned at the sound of his name being called out just in time to be approached by a man and woman that Mia assumed were his parents. Suddenly, his confident disposition faltered in the face of his family, and she caught the change immediately.

"Hi, Mum," he said quietly.

The woman wore Muggle attire. A light brown, modest dress that was obviously handmade. Her sandy hair matched Remus's perfectly. While she was still in her early

thirties, Mrs Lupin had clearly suffered through the years, as lines of stress encircled her beautiful eyes that were as green as Remus's.

Mrs Lupin slowly approached her son, reaching out as though she wanted to hug him, but she stopped mid-motion and patted him on the shoulder.

Mia watched the interaction carefully, sad to see the distance at which Remus was kept by his own mother.

A nervous-looking man stood an extra foot behind Mrs Lupin, bags under his eyes and his hands in his pockets. A good ten years older than his wife, Mr Lupin looked like a man who could have once smiled as brightly as Mia knew Remus was able to, but she doubted that Mr Lupin still had the ability or the will to even try.

Though Remus took after his mother in appearance, Mia could see the shabby, lonely disposition of an older Professor Lupin in the visage of his father standing before her.

It was painful to witness.

Remus's parents stood nervously, both obvious in their need to get out of King's Cross as quickly as possible.

Mia could not stand the tension, so she smiled up at Remus's mother. "Hello."

Remus flushed, embarrassed. "Oh, sorry. Umm, this is my friend Mia Potter. Mia, these are my parents." He gestured to them both, looking like he wanted to take someone's hand. Instead, he ran a nervous hand through his hair.

"It's such a pleasure to meet you, Mr and Mrs Lupin." Mia extended her hand which was taken immediately. The fact made her want to narrow her eyes at the couple. They had so easily offered their hands in introduction to a strange girl, but neither had properly hugged their son after not seeing him since Christmas. No wonder Remus was so terrified when she first met him on the train.

Mrs Lupin smiled kindly to her. "My boy wrote home telling me about his wonderful new friends."

The words were tense and matched the look on Mr Lupin's face perfectly. It was clear by their posture that both of his parents wanted to leave, but the fact that Remus was not moving apparently forced them to make awkward conversation.

Mrs Lupin's voice lowered to a whisper as she said, "I . . . I can't tell you how much I appreciate you keeping his . . . illness . . . Your discretion is—"

"It's nothing, Mrs Lupin. Remus is my friend," Mia said brightly, reaching out and curling her arm around Remus. "I would do *anything* for him."

Both Mr and Mrs Lupin gaped at the sight. Mr Lupin looked like he was on the verge of a panic attack, while Mrs Lupin looked as though she would burst into tears at any moment.

Remus winced, clearly noticing the shift in his parents. "Mum . . . Please . . . please don't cry." He sighed and attempted to offer a comforting hand to his mother as he often did with Mia when she cried. He stopped, looking as though he thought better of it, especially when Mr Lupin gave him a pinched look from behind his wife's shoulder.

"Honestly," Mia assured Mrs Lupin with a smile, "Remus has probably done more for *me* this year than I've done for *him*. Can't tell you how many times he's saved me." She chuckled softly and reached up to brush Remus's hair from his face, purposely touching him as much as possible; she felt the need to prove to the Lupins that it was safe—that *he* was safe.

Mia could not understand any of it. From what Future Remus—as she had named him in order to separate them in her mind—had told her, his father once worked for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. She knew the circumstances surrounding Remus's initial infection had been due to his father's stance on werewolves, but she had assumed, after his son being one for eight years, he would have seen for himself that Remus was not dangerous outside of the full moon.

Mr Lupin remained distant, staring at her as she continued to lavish friendly affection on his son.

Mrs Lupin, on the other hand, appeared to break through the wall that separated her from her child, and she smiled, approaching Remus and pulling him into her arms for what was clearly the first time in many years.

Remus's eyes widened, but he refused to hug the woman back, especially with Mr Lupin staring at them from behind, shocked at the display. Eventually, it was too much to bear, and Remus conceded, hugging his mother back tightly.

Mia smiled sweetly, trying to keep herself from crying at the sight of Mrs Lupin joyfully weeping on Remus's shoulder while he patted her on the back.

Mr Lupin cleared his throat. "Love. We, umm . . . We should go."

Remus broke away from the hug first, looking at his mother with a sad smile before she turned to Mia. "Please know you are welcome to our home anytime, you sweet girl!"

"Maybe not *anytime*, Mum," Remus said, looking exceedingly uncomfortable.

"Well, no, obviously, but she understands."

Mia smiled at Remus's mother. "I understand."

Mrs Lupin stared at her like she'd just seen magic for the first time in her life. "You truly do, don't you? Where on earth did such a kind girl come from?"

"Mum!" Remus looked down, embarrassed.

"Mia!"

Mia turned and spotted her parents waiting down at the end of the platform—James and Sirius standing next to them. She waved and then turned to say goodbye to the Lupins.

"It really was lovely to meet you both."

Mia reached up to hug Remus tightly, glad that he did not hesitate to hold her close to him with a level of comfort that was noticeably absent when he had hugged his own mother. He buried his nose in her curls, and she could hear him breathing in her scent. Mia hoped that it would help get him and his wolf through the long summer his parents had planned.

He had told her recently that the small village that they lived in the past few years had been compromised. Rumours of a werewolf roaming the village had reached the ears of the Lupins, and before anyone could become suspicious of Remus, they planned on relocating.

Mia would not see Remus again until the first of September. Thinking of that caused her to frown as she pulled away from him. "Have a good summer, Remus. I'll miss you."

"Have a good summer, Mia." Remus kissed her cheek before turning and walking away with his parents.

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**September 22nd, 1972**

"Remus." Mia frowned down at her friend. "The full moon is tomorrow; you really should be back in bed resting."

"Can't rest. Quidditch," Remus said half-heartedly, vaguely motioning his hand in the direction of the Quidditch pitch.

Although they had been back in school for a few weeks, the summer had done a number on Remus. Somehow, being separated from Mia and the rest of his friends, coupled with needing to move and be around his nervous parents—mostly his father—Remus had reverted a bit back to the nervous and stressed out boy that Mia had met the year before. His face was once again pale, and he had lost the weight that Mia had taken such effort the prior year to put on his skinny frame. The only difference was that he now stood a good two inches taller than her.

"James and Sirius will understand," Mia argued.

Remus rolled his eyes as he rested his head against the cold bench in the Gryffindor stands, letting the frosty metal cool the skin of his face. He said that the approaching moon sometimes made his skin feel like it had the worst sunburn—hot and itchy.

"No, they won't. They'll say I'm a bad friend for not watching them try out. They've already taken the mickey out of me for not trying out myself."

Mia felt a breath of protective anger fill her lungs. "They're being mean to you?"

She had spent the summer worried for all the boys. Remus was practically missing, considering that he and his family were always on the move. He answered her letters when he could, but between relocating and dealing with the summer moons, he was ill more often than not.

James had crashed his broom during a particularly bad windstorm at the beginning of summer, breaking his left leg and hitting his head. Unable to heal it at home due to the specific way the bone broke, the Potters had to go to St Mungo's where James spent the night, prematurely ageing his worried sister.

Sirius had been another issue. Though he spent the first two weeks with the Potters, he had returned to Grimmauld Place and then remained there without a single owl sent to his friends the rest of the summer. When Mia and James finally reconnected with him on

platform nine and three-quarters, the only thing Sirius would say was, "I don't want to talk about it."

Her boys were making it increasingly difficult for her to take care of them.

"I don't need you to protect me, Mia," Remus said irritably.

She glared at him, shocked by his tone. "Don't get snappy with me, Remus Lupin. I know that's the wolf coming out."

Sighing in frustration, Remus threw an arm over his face. "I'm sorry. I just . . . I miss enough of my life one day out of the month, never mind the lead-up to the moon and then recovering. I don't want to have to constantly hide away in my room."

"You shouldn't have to." Mia brushed her fingers through his hair, and he opened his eyes, squinting against the sunlight as he looked up at her. "I just don't like seeing you in pain."

"Worry more about your brother being in pain." Remus sat up, gesturing to James doing loops on his broom in the centre of the field. "Four Galleons says he loses his glasses and crashes into something."

Mia smiled, allowing Remus to divert their conversation. She looked to where Sirius sat on his broom near the end of the field, vertically balancing the Beater's bat on his head—just as James had done with his wand. "Another four says Sirius hits himself with that Beater's bat."

"Two Galleons says Peter falls off his broom."

"Only two?" Mia scoffed as she looked at the short boy, struggling on his broom that barely hovered more than ten feet from the ground. "That's easy money for you, Mr Lupin. You should have bet me twenty."

Remus laughed and then a cold breeze passed through the stands, causing his body to shiver and tense in obvious pain.

"That's it. Lie down," Mia ordered, patting her lap.

"Lie down?" He eyed her beneath furrowed brows. "I'm not *Sirius*. I don't need you to pet me."

She ignored him, his brusque tone, and his attitude. "If you refuse to go inside, then I insist you lie down out here. There's plenty of room on the bench. I'll rub your shoulders, too, if you like."

Remus raised a brow, contemplating her ultimatum for a moment before he sighed and leant backward, dropping his head onto her lap as though it were a pillow. Placing his arms on his chest, he laced his fingers together. "I'm *not* doing this because you're right."

"Of course not, love." Mia smiled and dug her fingers gently into Remus's shoulders.

"You *didn't* win this argument," he insisted.

"Wouldn't think of it."

"I'm doing this because no bloke in his right mind would ever turn down a shoulder rub from a pretty girl."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, please."

"Please, what?" he asked, cracking open one eye and looking up at her.

"I'm already going to rub your shoulders, you don't have to . . . to . . ."

"To what?"

"I don't know. Act like Sirius?" She shrugged, frowning.

By the time the war ended, she had been more concerned with other things than how she looked, but being back in her awkward, younger body—even with her teeth prematurely fixed—brought up old self-esteem issues that she was forced to relive. She was well aware that her hair had always been a bit out of control, though Tilly had helped teach her spells to calm it into soft curls versus the bushy mess it often resembled. She had never developed the same curves that Lavender had, and her eyes were not as mesmerising as Lily's were.

"You don't have to lie to me," she said quietly.

"What did I lie about?" he asked, offended.

"For one, calling me pretty."

"Mia—"

"Don't, Remus," she cut him off quickly. "Please. Just . . . lie down and let me help you."

"But I—"

Her eyes pleaded with him. "Remus . . ."

"Well, look at this sight," James said as he, Sirius, and Peter walked into the stands, their clothes covered in sweat and dirt, brooms slung over their shoulders. "Remus doesn't do a thing, and he gets special treatment."

"Yeah, I took a Bludger to the back. Where's *my* massage?" Sirius asked, grinning when Remus growled in response.

"You two go rub each other," Mia suggested to James and Sirius with a laugh.

James chuckled. "Sirius isn't really my type."

"James *wishes* he was my type," Sirius said.

"So?" Mia looked up at the boys. "Did you make the team or what?"

"Sirius and I made the reserve player list." James seemed to be happier about being allowed to have his broom at school than to actually have an official position on the team. No longer in the running to be the youngest Chaser in centuries, he had calmed down in reference to his future Quidditch career.

"Better than nothing." Sirius smirked and then looked behind him. "Right, Petey?"

Peter pouted, struggling to hold onto his gear. "It's not my fault I fell off my broom," he said, rubbing his backside.

James and Sirius shared another laugh while Mia grinned, passing two Galleons into Remus's open hand.

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### September 23rd, 1972

"Hey, where's Remus?" James asked as he entered the common room, catching Sirius and Peter in a game of Exploding Snap. Sirius laughed as a card blew up in Peter's face.

"Hospital wing," Sirius answered without looking up from the game. "Headache again."

"Again? He's always either going home to visit his sick aunt or in the infirmary." James frowned. "You'd think Madam Pomfrey would give him something better than a simple Pain Potion."

Sirius shrugged, more concerned with beating Peter for the tenth time in a row than whatever was happening with Remus. Sirius had his own secrets about his family and did not care to readily share them with his friends; he gave Remus the same respect.

"My point," Peter said with a grin as he tapped one of the cards that Sirius put down.

Sirius huffed and threw James a dirty look for distracting him from the game. Irritable over the loss of one point, he purposely threw down a manticores card, knowing it was already set to go explode.

"My poi—ouch!"

Snickering, Sirius shuffled the cards left in his hand. "My point."

"Mia said it's something called chronic migraines," James went on, gesturing to Peter's hand and silently giving him tips on the game. "Says Muggles get them a lot. Makes them sensitive to light or something. Probably why he stays in the infirmary when he gets them."

"We can get *Muggle* diseases?!" Peter exclaimed loudly and dropped all of his cards, a look of horror and disgust on his face. Two of the cards exploded in a puff.

"Of course we can, Pete." James rolled his eyes, waving away the smoke. "You've had the flu before, yeah?"

"Yeah. That's a *Muggle* illness?"

"Some of theirs we can't catch, and some of ours they can't get. Muggles can't catch dragon pox," Sirius explained as he gathered up what cards were unsinged, a bit put off by the tone in Peter's voice.

"Lucky them."

Sirius laughed at his friend. "Yeah, their pox is called chicken."

"What do they do with chickens to get sick from them?" Peter asked, looking disgusted.

"What do *we* do with dragons?" Sirius countered with a wry grin.

"Can you two shut up for a second?" James groaned, looking stressed out. "What's our Potion lesson this week?"

"Sleeping Draught," Peter said. "Remember? Frank messed his up the first time and had to be sent to the hospital wing for a Wide-Eye Potion."

"Does the Sleeping Draught contain aconite?" James asked quickly.

"Aconite? You mean monkshood?" Sirius looked up at his best friend with raised brows.

He knew James was not the best at Potions, but he was no Frank. Poor bloke had to sleep in the common room for a week because his roommates said that whatever potion he had spilt on himself clung to his skin and made their whole room stink. James had offered to let Frank sleep on the floor in their room, but he said the sofa in the common room was fine.

"No way, mate." Sirius shook his head, worried that James would accidentally poison himself. "That stuff's toxic. We're not allowed to use it yet. Why do you ask?"

"Because I found Mia making a list in the library," James whispered, taking a seat beside him. "I was under the cloak and meant to play a prank and move her things anytime she looked away. But then I saw a list she was writing. Had aconite on it."

"You think she's making a poison?" Peter asked, intrigued.

"Of course not!" James snapped.

"Maybe she's just skipping ahead, you know she likes to read," Sirius suggested, patting Peter on the shoulder to calm his nerves. They weren't exactly friends, but he did not think that Mia would poison Peter just because she didn't like him much.

"I don't know, some of the books she was reading. They, erm, looked like they were from the Restricted Section. *Big* potion books," James said and gestured their size with his hands.

"So ask her."

James frowned at Sirius. "I can't get up the girls' dormitory stairs."

"And why would you want to, Potter?"

They all looked up to see Lily Evans descending the stairs; her usual expression of contempt reserved only for James turned momentarily to indifference.

James predictably blushed. "Evans, I . . . I . . ."

"Evans, is Mia up there?" Sirius asked, patting James on the back. "We need to talk to her."

"No." Lily shook her head. "She went down to see Madam Pomfrey a few hours ago."

"A few hours ago?" James snapped back to reality. "What was wrong with her?"

"Same as usual I, suppose. She gets really bad headaches during, well, girl stuff."

"What girl stuff?" Peter asked, confused.

Sirius sighed, embarrassed for his friend. "Shut up, Pete, you wouldn't understand. She do that often, Evans?"

Lily narrowed her eyes at him. "About once a month like the rest of us."

"Not *that*. Honestly, how am *I* the most mature person in the room right now?" he asked, genuinely confused. James and Peter both shared a look of bewilderment, clearly trying to figure out what Lily had meant in the first place. "I mean how often does she go to the hospital wing?"

"Oh." Lily looked suddenly guilty. "About every time. She's been going there since last year. Said she gets really bad headaches when it happens."

James frowned. "How bad?"

"She usually spends the night there. Why? You didn't know she had migraines?"

"Migraines?" Sirius asked. "The Muggle headache?"

"Yeah," Lily confirmed. "She has to take a Sleeping Draught and a Pain Potion to get through the night when it happens."

"Thanks, Evans." James dipped his head to her, giving a knowing look to Sirius while Peter sat there restacking his set of cards, already done with the conversation. "I think I'll go check on her later. See if she's okay."

Lily frowned as she made her way to the portrait door. "You're welcome. Tell her I hope she feels better."

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## September 24th, 1972

"Sirius! Sirius, wake up, you prat!"

"What. The. Fuck. Potter?" Sirius groaned into his pillow, his long black hair tangled around his head the same way his bedsheet was tangled around his leg. He kicked that leg out, hoping to connect with James in retaliation for sticking his bony finger in Sirius's ribs. "Go back to sleep."

"Wake up, arsehole!" James smacked him on the back of the head. "Where's my cloak? You had it last when you sneaked into the kitchens two days ago!"

"It's in Pete's trunk, mine's full. Where're you going with the cloak anyway? What time is it?" He blinked away his sleep and looked at the window. "Shit, is it even dawn yet?"

"I'm going to the hospital wing," James said. There was a loud creak that Sirius knew was the sound of Peter's hand-me-down trunk opening. Peter gasped awake at the noise.

"You think something's up?" Sirius asked, sitting up.

"My sister's reading restricted potion books, making lists with poisonous ingredients, and she and Remus just happen to both get sick every month with the same Muggle illness?" James scoffed. "You don't find that at all suspicious?"

"Maybe they're off snogging," Sirius suggested, equal parts amused and annoyed at his own suggestion as it put an odd image in his head that he was not sure he liked very much.

"What the hell!?" James snapped, his eyes wide.

"What? It makes sense. They're always together."

"You need to stop talking. It's bad enough that you both are constantly snuggling up with her. Are you two coming or not?" James asked with a shout, kicking Peter's bed.

"It's not even six in the morning!" Peter whinged.

"Exactly," James pointed out. "I want to catch them doing . . . whatever they're doing before they have a chance to come back to the tower. If they're really sick in the infirmary, then they'll both just be asleep."

"Fine, but if I'm waking up this early, you owe me breakfast. And I don't mean wait until the table is full, I mean, you go down to the bloody kitchens and then bring it *to* me. In bed. On a silver tray." Sirius continued to grumble out requests—and addendums to said requests—as they slipped the cloak over themselves and left Gryffindor Tower.

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"What happened?" Mia gasped as Madam Pomfrey set a bloodied Remus down on the bed. He had never looked this bad before, not even after the first moon she had seen him through in this time. He was pale and sallow, looking worse than usual. In addition to the long wound that opened across his back, he had four long deep slashes that covered his chest.

"It looks like he clawed himself up pretty badly this time." Madam Pomfrey sighed as she helped Mia close the wounds quickly.

"Oh, Remus." Mia frowned, blinking away tears. "Where's the Calming Draught?"

"Right here, dear." Madam Pomfrey placed the phial in her hands. "And the Pain Potions are in the drawer as usual; he'll need a Blood-Replenishing one as well when he wakes," she insisted before stepping out of the room.

"Come on, love," Mia whispered to Remus as his eyes began to open. "Drink this for me." She held the phial to his lips and let the liquid slip down his throat.

He coughed and reached out, gripping her arm to steady himself. "Mia . . ."

"I'm here," she promised him, kissing his forehead. "I'm going to fix you all up."

Remus turned his head away, but she still saw his eyes were wet as he tried to hide his face from her. "It's getting worse."

"It's because you're growing up. Hitting a growth spurt. You're a good two or three inches taller this year than last." She reached for the Pain Potion. "Not to mention . . . other changes, I assume."

Remus closed his eyes and clenched his fists. "I hate my life."

"Don't say that." Mia frowned, handing him the Pain Potion and letting him drink it on his own, which he did begrudgingly. She cupped his jaw. "Here, let me look at your face. These don't look too bad. I can use Dittany and they won't even scar."

"I'm so tired, Mia. I don't want it to hurt anymore. My skin breaks open, my bones shatter, and I lose my . . . myself." He refused to make eye contact with her, turning his head away from her gaze once again.

It had only been a year ago that he had opened up and let her see the vulnerable parts of him, but things were different now. As uncomfortable as the words were, she knew was right, they *were* growing up, and she did not just see Remus as her best friend anymore. There was something . . . something *else* lingering just beneath the surface. Something that she could not quite place. Remus must have sensed it too because he was pulling away from her and had been for some time. She wondered if it was just a boy thing—as she recalled Harry and Ron behaving differently at this age as well—or if Remus's wolf had something to do with it.

"You're in there still. I promise you," Mia whispered. "You're not alone in this."

"I *am* alone! I'm *always* alone!" Remus shouted and threw the empty phial across the room. "I go out to the shack alone, I transform alone, and I tear myself apart because of it! I wake up alone in the shack and start the long walk back to school alone before I usually collapse outside of the Whomping Willow. Alone."

"I wish I could be there with you," Mia admitted, trying not to take his anger personally.

Remus growled. "Don't be stupid, Mia. I'd kill you."

"I'll figure something out. I promise. I'll make this better for you, love. I'm . . . I'm going to try and find a potion to help. I don't know how to make it yet, it'll take some research, but I will."

"Nothing's ever going to get better, Mia." Remus sighed. "Just let me sleep. Leave me alone. Please." He closed his eyes and covered his face with his hands.

Mia took a moment to wipe at her eyes before asking, "Do you want the Sleeping Draught?"

"Yeah. Thanks." Remus reached out as she put the phial into his hands, but he refused to meet her gaze before tipping the draught down his throat and letting sleep take him quickly.

Madam Pomfrey approached with a frown a few minutes later. "He's out?"

"Yes."

"Poor thing. Breaks my heart every month. To think a sweet boy like that has to endure so much pain all because some sadistic creature decided to turn a four-year-old boy into a werewolf."

"He's never known anything but pain."

"I don't think so. You and those boys of yours show him love and friendship." Madam Pomfrey smiled. "And, as much as it pains me to say, even a bit of fun and mischief."

"He deserves better than this."

"On *that*, Miss Potter, I will agree with you. Are you staying longer?"

Mia looked up pleadingly. "If that's all right?"

"Of course, dear. I have to run some errands. If he wakes, you know where the extra potions are," she said, gesturing to the cupboard in the corner before walking out the door of the infirmary.

Just as the doors closed, there was the sound of scuffling in the corner of the room.

Mia jumped from her chair, wand aimed forward. "Who's there?" She narrowed her eyes but saw nothing. When no one responded, Mia took a deep breath and whispered. "*Expelliarmus!*"

Suddenly, there was a shimmer of silver as three wands shot toward her, pulling the Invisibility Cloak with them. The wands filled her hand, the cloak falling to the floor at her feet, and she looked up to see a hunched over James, clumped together with Sirius and Peter, all looking shocked and terrified.

"Jamie! How long have you all been there?"

James ignored her as he stepped forward, snatching up his cloak from the floor before moving to the bedside and staring down at his sleeping friend. "Is Remus all right?"

"Bloody hell . . . Look at him." Sirius's wide eyes moved over Remus's body.

Mia cursed under her breath for not changing the blood-stained sheets that clung around Remus's waist, revealing his bare chest that was covered with the fresh wounds from the night before.

Peter gaped at the sight. "Looks like he got chewed up by something."

"Jamie." Mia turned on her brother, panic in her voice. "How long have you been there?"

"I don't know." James shook his head and then glared up at her. "How long has my best friend been a werewolf?"

"Mia, *is* he okay?" Sirius inquired, still staring down at his friend, looking sick at the sight.

"He's fine right now," Mia whispered, ignoring James's outburst and favouring Sirius's concern. "He needs rest."

"Is he . . . Merlin, they *let* him into Hogwarts." Peter grimaced, and before he had a chance to blink away the look of disgust on his face, Mia had him at wand point, a look of absolute loathing in her eyes.

"Mia!" James shouted.

"Why *shouldn't* they let him into Hogwarts, Peter? Should they have cast him out? Maybe even locked him up? Like an animal?!" She growled, standing at the foot of Remus's bed, effectively separating Peter from the rest of them. "Who would be next, Peter? Round up all the Muggle-borns?"

"Whoa!" Sirius stepped forward defensively in front of Peter, something that made her blood run cold. "Mia, Pete didn't mean anything by it. Right?"

"R-Right," Peter mumbled nervously.

"See?" Sirius slowly approached her with calm grey eyes, reaching up and helping her lower her wand. "It's all right, love. We're just shocked. Remus is our friend, too. How long have you known about him?"

Mia frowned, letting her anger dissipate and be lulled away by Sirius's gaze. "Since first year. I read about it, saw the signs, went to Dumbledore and asked permission to help him recover each month. He can't be around humans when he changes because the wolf takes over, but I'm there before and after, to help with the pain and to heal his wounds."

"What happened to him?" James asked, concerned.

"He's basically locked up when he transforms," she explained as she moved, walking over and pulling out clean sheets from the cupboard by the bed. She pulled the top sheet off of Remus, keeping the one below to preserve his dignity. After tossing aside the blood-stained sheet, she draped a soft clean one over his sleeping frame. "Since he's alone, he lashes out and attacks himself in frustration."

"He told me he got those scars from camping trips with his dad," Sirius remarked. "Said he fell off a mountain last summer."

She turned and eyed the boys. "You can't tell anyone."

"Of course not," James agreed.

"No, I mean it." Mia grew serious. She trusted James and Sirius, of course, but Peter was still there, and it was taking every last inch of humanity inside of her not to curse him. "I want . . . I need you all to take a Wizard's Oath."

"Whoa." Sirius's eyes went wide. "Mia, you can't just take our words for this?"

"No. I'm sorry, not with *his* reaction." Mia's eyes turned to Peter, and she narrowed them into slits. "Remus trusts me to take care of him and to keep his secret. I know you all love Remus, but I can't risk anything happening to him. If people found out that he was here, they'd take him away."

"Done." Without needing her to say another word, James held up his wand. "I, James Charlus Potter, swear upon my wand and magic as a wizard never to reveal to anyone that Remus Lupin is a werewolf without his permission."

The wand glowed red for a moment before returning to normal, sealing the oath.

Sirius stepped forward without hesitation. "I, Sirius Orion Black, swear upon my wand and magic as a wizard never to reveal to anyone that Remus Lupin is a werewolf without his permission."

"Peter?" Mia eyed him carefully as his gaze turned to the floor, hesitating.

"What the hell, Pete?" James snapped. "Do it!"

"I-I . . ." Peter stammered nervously.

Mia stepped forward in a predatory manner that Remus and his wolf might have appreciated. "Make the oath. Or I'll figure out a way to Oblivate you." She could see James and Sirius stare at her from the side. "We're only second years; I wouldn't trust me to remove just this *one* memory."

"I love it when she's scary." Sirius exhaled with a grin, and James made a face.

"I, Peter Evan Pettigrew," Peter said quietly, gripping his wand with white knuckles, "swear upon my wand and magic as a wizard never to reveal to anyone that Remus Lupin is a werewolf without his permission."

Once the oaths were complete, the room fell silent, and Mia closed her eyes, listening closely to Remus softly snoring behind the four of them.

James nervously adjusted his glasses and finally broke through the quiet. "What do you need aconite for?"

Mia slowly tilted her head toward her brother, scowling. "You snooped through my things?"

James looked down guiltily. "Accidentally."

"Aconite is also called wolfsbane. I can't cure him, but I think if I try hard enough, I can come up with something to help him."

"What can we do?" Sirius demanded.

Mia shook her head. "Nothing. Just keep the secret." She glared at Peter and repeated, "*Keep the secret*. Educate yourselves about his condition. Be his friends, and don't treat him any different. He hates pity."

James frowned. "That's it? He's been alone through this since he was four?"

"A werewolf named Fenrir Greyback attacked him. Remus's dad was working at the Ministry, and Greyback had been arrested on suspicions of killing Muggle children. Remus's dad knew that Greyback was a werewolf, but because the Ministry doesn't know how to properly keep a registry, his name wasn't on it, and he was set free. Mr Lupin

said . . . some awful things about werewolves in general; Greyback infected Remus in revenge."

Sirius shook his head. "And I thought *I* had a fucked up childhood."

"His parents did the best they could after." She was still a bit uneasy with Mr Lupin's continual prejudice against werewolves and fear of his own son. "They didn't think he'd be able to come to Hogwarts, so they taught him as much as they could at home."

"Always knew he was ridiculously smart for a reason," James said.

Sirius asked, "So how *did* he get in?"

"Dumbledore."

"Hagrid's right." James grinned. "Great man, that Dumbledore."

Mia smiled at her brother. "We should leave. Let him get some rest."

The four made their way to the door of the infirmary, but not before Mia readjusted Remus's sheets and blankets, setting another Pain Potion on his side table in case he woke up. She smiled down at him, sad that she had somehow failed to keep the other boys from knowing his secret, but resigning herself to the fact that she knew from her original timeline that they had eventually discovered it.

"Hey, Mia?" Sirius asked as they left the hospital wing. "You say he can't be around humans, right?"

"Right."

There was a long pause while Sirius contemplated something. Then, he visibly brightened. "What about other animals?"

Mia grinned.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

### *Toujours Pur*

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*I'm so sick,  
Infected with where I live  
Let me live without this  
Empty bliss,  
Selfishness  
I'm so sick  
(I'm So Sick - Flyleaf)*

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**April 25th, 1973**

It only took five days for Sirius's world to go to shit.

He had not been eager to return to Grimmauld Place for the holidays but, for the first time since he had been shipped off to Hogwarts, his parents were abnormally insistent that he come home.

His father had suggested that he come back the summer before, and he had, only to have Walburga lock up their Floo Network and restrict all use of the owls, thus cutting him off from his friends in the hopes that he would figure out his priorities in regards to his family. That, of course, had not worked in the slightest. So when Sirius and Regulus arrived home in late April, he was prepared for a battle against his mother.

A battle that had not come right away.

While his parents prepared him and Regulus for the upcoming engagement party for Narcissa and her fiancé, Lucius Malfoy—the *actual* reason that he had been brought home for holidays—Sirius thought of new ways to remind his family that he was *nothing* like them.

His first night home, he charmed his standard green and silver bedspread and matching curtains to reflect his Gryffindor pride, changing them into deep crimson and a brilliant gold. He had also taken the few photos he had of himself, James, Remus, and Peter—courtesy of Mia—along with some Muggle posters he managed to procure, and placed them on his wall with a *modified* Permanent Sticking Charm.

The photos had not triggered a reaction in his parents.

The *posters* on the other hand . . .

"What have you done?!" Walburga screamed when she burst into his room to witness him on the bed, lazily flipping through a magazine as if he had not a care in the world.

Sirius offered her an innocent look. "What's that, Mother? I haven't done anything. I'm just sitting here, enjoying my lovely holiday with my delightful family. Relaxing for a bit and reading. Do you know what a motorcycle is?" he mused aloud as he returned his attention to the magazine.

"You ignorant and ungrateful child, what are *those*?" She pointed to the canopy of Sirius's bed.

He turned his attention toward the ceiling, following her shaking index finger, as though he were unaware anything was, in fact, on the canopy of his bed.

Sirius smiled and turned slowly back to her. "Why, dear Mother, they appear to be large photographs of women in various degrees of dress, or *undress*, depending on how you want to see it. Bikinis." He grinned as he relaxed back on his pillows to stare up, letting out a happy sigh. "Muggles come up with the best things ever."

She tried to remove the offending material, but Sirius was well-versed in Sticking Charms. He had been enjoying himself far too much to admit that he did not know the counter-spell to remove them even if she threatened to Avada him.

She swore he would be punished for it, but Sirius was no longer afraid of the back of her hand. She could try to hit him all she liked, but he would never again back down.

It was with this same cocky ego that Sirius entered Malfoy Manor, five feet behind his properly dressed family. Walburga was in a finely made purple gown on the arm of his father in traditional—yet stylish—black dress robes with his long ebony hair tied back with a leather thong. Regulus—ever the doting son—held Walburga's other hand, dressed to match Orion perfectly.

Sirius, however, strolled into the manor wearing black jeans, dragonskin boots, and his hands in the pockets of his long, open robes. His hair was left messy and down, hanging nearly to his shoulders.

"Cygnum." Walburga smiled as they approached her youngest brother, who stood proudly beside Abraxas Malfoy.

A cookie-cutter version of Sirius's mother in appearance, his uncle, unsurprisingly, barely smiled at her presence. His scowling attention was all for Sirius. "I see you're

allowing the boy to dress himself these days. Are you suddenly destitute, sister? Have all your house-elves died, leaving him to his own devices?"

"The *boy* has a name," Sirius muttered under his breath.

Walburga ignored Sirius entirely, as well as any conversation pertaining to him. "Narcissa is as lovely as ever. She'll make a fine wife for your boy, Abraxas." She turned her attention back to Cygnus and sighed dramatically. "Shame, of course, that you were forced to break tradition and marry your daughters off out of order. Any word yet on dear Andromeda?"

Cygnus's jaw tightened, and his nostrils flared. "Still missing."

"Not that this isn't all fascinating," Sirius interrupted loudly, and all of the adults turned and gaped at him for speaking out of turn, "but can a bloke get a drink?"

"You ungrateful little—" Cygnus began, but suddenly a hand fell on his shoulder, silencing him.

"Let the boy be. How many of us were perfect little noblemen at thirteen? I'll get the little whelp out of your hair."

Sirius grinned up at his uncle Alphard, who moved past both Cygnus and Walburga to put an arm around him.

"You dote on him too much, Alphard." Walburga scowled but said nothing more.

Alphard chuckled deeply as he walked Sirius over to the bar, silently motioning to the house-elf behind it with two fingers. Sirius memorised the movement when the house-elf reappeared with two glasses of firewhisky. He made eye contact with the creature, gestured with two fingers the same way his uncle did, and the elf sneered at him before walking to the other end of the bar.

"You're going to give them heart attacks, you know."

Sirius snorted. "The elves?"

Alphard gave him a look. "Your parents."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Well, that's the plan. I figure if I time it right, they'll all drop dead at once, and you and I can take over the family. We could flip a Galleon for all the vaults and properties, Uncle. Or duel to the death, leaving one victor standing. Do you think you could take me?"

Alphard genuinely laughed and slid one of the small glasses toward him. "Here, *boy*. Drink up."

Grinning, Sirius looked down at the glass. "Firewhisky?"

"Your first?" Alphard asked, and Sirius nodded. "A momentous occasion, then. What should we drink to?"

"This sham of a marriage?" Sirius suggested.

"Be careful, Sirius," Alphard quietly advised. "Do not think yourself to be untouchable."

"You *know* this is wrong," Sirius ground out, taking his first sip of firewhisky, which burned going down. He coughed loudly, and Alphard patted him hard on the back. Sirius cleared his throat and let the warmth from the drink settle over him before he took a second hesitant sip that didn't burn as much. "Cissa's going to be miserable."

"Matches made this way are traditional. You'd do well to keep your opinions quiet on the matter. Your cousin will do what she's been raised to do. It's not in her nature to stir things up. Unlike yourself. I hear you're making a name for yourself at Hogwarts. You and that Potter boy."

"James." Sirius nodded. "He's my best mate."

"Be careful," Alphard warned. "Your parents have eyes everywhere. You won't be a boy much longer. That drink in your hand is the first of many, and once they realise you're approaching manhood, they'll be making more detailed plans for your future."

"What do you suggest?" Sirius asked, feeling his stomach churn at the thought of letting his parents sell him off the way Cygnus was doing with Narcissa. Then again, it might have just been the firewhisky. "Go along with them? Let them force me into a sham of a marriage like Cissa? Shit, I'm shocked they didn't have us marry each other."

"No, we live in a time now where the pureblood families are trying to unite together. Our world is changing, Sirius, and we all need to make decisions on how we're going to adapt to it." Alphard tilted his drink back, finishing it off. "If I go and make pleasantries with people I dislike for the sake of family, will you promise to stay out of trouble?"

"You want me to take an Unbreakable Vow?" Sirius suggested with a smirk, and Alphard laughed.

"No, I think not. I rather enjoy having you around for situations like these, and something tells me you'd end up breaking that vow all too quickly. And *then* who would keep me company?" He ruffled Sirius's hair before stepping away from the bar and making his rounds.

Sirius would have been perfectly content to remain by the bar for the rest of the night, but his focus fell across a blur of blond hair as Narcissa was pulled quickly from the large ballroom.

Curious and concerned for the one cousin he had left that was not a complete disaster, Sirius slipped into the shadows of the hallways and followed after, eagerly listening for voices.

When he came upon a door that had been slightly cracked open, he pressed his forehead against the frame and slowly opened the door just a bit to peer inside, only to find Narcissa and her intended husband face-to-face.

"All I said was that I thought it was an extreme reaction. Muggles have their own world that's separate from ours already; why even bother to have thoughts of them?" Narcissa asked coldly.

Lucius turned on her, positively livid. "You were not given to me to have opinions."

"I have not been *given* to you yet, Lucius!"

"Do you think you can get out of this marriage? I would *very* much like to see you try. Our arrangement was sealed with blood." He closed himself in on her, their noses nearly touching. "Only death will separate us now. So straighten your priorities on your own, or I will do it for you," he growled and stormed toward the door.

Sirius's eyes went wide, and he ducked away into the nearby alcove just as Lucius burst through the door, moving quickly back toward the ballroom. Inside, Sirius could hear Narcissa's sniffles.

He opened the door slowly and took a deep breath before speaking. "Cissa?"

She turned on him, quickly wiping the tears from her face. "Sirius! What are you doing back here? Get out!"

"You're not really going to marry that fucking creep, are you?" he asked incredulously.

"You're too young to understand." She scowled and made her way through the door, shoving past him. "If you were smart, you'd know better than to question *my* marriage when I overheard your mother in the early stages of planning *yours*."

"Oh, fuck that," Sirius snarled. He would make sure no other nasty pureblood family would even consider him marrying any of their girls. Trailing after his cousin, he

reached out and gently took her hand to stop her from running away from him. At her cold expression, his own softened. "Cissa, do you need help?"

"I said, leave it!" She yanked her hand away from him and rushed back into the ballroom where the entire crowd had fallen into complete silence.

All eyes stared at the fireplace where a dark-haired witch had recently stepped through; the green flames behind her had not yet died.

"Dromeda?" Sirius gasped, eyes wide.

"You didn't think I'd miss my baby sister's engagement party, did you?" Andromeda smirked at Narcissa and moved to embrace her, but swiftly, the rest of the Black family—save for Alphard, Sirius, and Regulus—stepped in between the sisters. "I see. I figured this might happen." She shrugged and flashed a small diamond ring at the crowd. "I got married. Don't worry. I didn't expect any of you in attendance."

"You did not," Cygnus growled at his daughter. "Tell me you didn't run off with that filthy—"

"Muggle-born?" Andromeda smiled almost sweetly as she cut him off. "Why, yes, I did. He's a lovely man. And to think, I'd almost lost my chance to find *real* love and happiness."

"Get out, you nasty blood-traitor! You have brought shame, shame upon the House of Black!" Walburga shrieked.

"Wait!" Cygnus seethed, glaring at his daughter. "Andromeda, I will give you one chance to fix this. Put an end to that *marriage*," he spat the word. "And you can redeem yourself and your honour by letting me arrange a proper one for you."

"What pureblood man would take a girl who's been sullied by a Mudblood?!" Walburga screeched.

"I'll take her."

Everyone turned to see Abraxas Malfoy staring ahead at Andromeda, who instantly looked nauseated.

"My own wife died some years ago, and I've been looking for a replacement. I have my heir in Lucius, but . . ." He scanned her with cold, lecherous eyes. "A man has needs."

"Sorry to break hearts, then," Andromeda said coolly, not breaking her stare away from the elder Malfoy until he sneered at her in disgust. "I didn't just come for my sister. I came to see *you*, father." She stepped forward and reached into the pocket of her robes,

pulling out what looked to be a small photo. She suddenly appeared nervous as she held it out to the man who took it and instantly froze, his face paling. "I've named her Nymphadora."

"*Crucio!*" The shout came from behind, and Andromeda fell to the ground screaming.

Sirius looked up to see his eldest cousin, Bellatrix, standing beside her new husband, the elder of the Lestrage brothers, both glaring down at Andromeda, who was seizing in the middle of the ballroom.

"Stop!" Sirius shouted and rushed forward, only to be held back by his collar by Alphard, who raised his wand.

"Bellatrix!" Alphard snapped. "This is completely unnecessary!"

"Father?" Bellatrix turned and looked at Cygnus as though waiting for permission to either continue or a request to let Andromeda go.

Cygnus glared down at the photo in his hands and shook his head.

"Uncle!" Sirius shouted, trying to somehow plead for Andromeda's life.

"Leave her," Cygnus growled. "She is no longer my daughter. Shove the blood-traitor through the Floo, and never let me look upon her again." He turned his gaze away from Andromeda and looked immediately to Walburga. "You should take to heart what has happened here. It is one thing for me to lose a daughter, but another for our House to lose its proper heir."

All glaring eyes suddenly fell on Sirius as he stood, shaking with rage.

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### **April 30th, 1973**

When Sirius and Regulus stepped off the Hogwarts Express in Hogsmeade after their return, it only took a few minutes before the brothers collided with violent intent on both parts.

Sirius had not intended to clash against his younger brother that day, but when he and his friends stepped off the train to spot Lily Evans arguing with Snape near the horseless carriages, there was bound to be drama between Gryffindors and Slytherins.

Lily looked hurt when Snape gestured back toward the train where a group of his Housemates stood waiting for him. The Carrow twins were flanked by two older Slytherins, Evan Rosier and Titus Wilkes, and off to the side of the little posse was Regulus.

Snape sighed when he returned to his friends, looking defeated as he avoided eye contact with his fellow snakes. Sirius thought the defeated look on his face was kind of funny until he overheard the conversation.

Wilkes narrowed his eyes. "Are you done playing house with your little Mudblood, Snape?"

Snape did not respond but looked properly admonished.

Sirius, triggered by the horrible word, immediately went into a frenzy. "What the hell did you call her?!"

James followed suit and moved to stand in Wilke's face. Remus, who stood just as tall as the others, immediately flanked him, pushing Rosier out of the way.

Wilkes grinned smugly. "I called the little ginger bitch a Mudblood. What's it to you, Potter?"

Sirius turned toward Snape, growling as he shouted, "She's supposed to be your fucking *friend*, you bloody coward! You going to stand up for her, Snivellus?"

"Why *would* he?" Amycus glared at Sirius even as Snape remained silent. "Severus knows better. He might only be a half-blood, but his blood is *still* too rich for the likes of her. Is *that* it, Potter?" Amycus asked, turning toward James. "Eager to dirty up your House?"

"The Potters are already filthy," Regulus said, stepping forward. Already wearing his pressed Slytherin robes with his hair neatly pulled back, he looked the absolute opposite of Sirius regardless of the colour of their hair and eyes. "Hanging around with *this* blood-traitor."

Thinking of Andromeda screaming on the floor as Bellatrix cursed her while Narcissa—along with the rest of his family—looked on, Sirius snapped and punched Regulus right in the face, feeling a crunch beneath his knuckles.

It was the worst fight since he had started Hogwarts. Five students in total ended up in the infirmary. Regulus, Peter, Snape, and Amycus were all treated for broken noses, and James fractured his collarbone. Remus was the only one to get by with nothing but a few scrapes, and he stuck around the hospital wing long enough for Madam Pomfrey to

get frustrated with Sirius and send him away. Remus was charged with escorting him to the common room as Sirius stubbornly refused to be treated for his black eye, split lip, and a burn on his neck from a wayward hex that he swore up and down he would get Snape back for.

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Mia was worried.

Sitting in the common room, biting her nails, she expectantly kept her eyes trained on the door. None of the boys had taken the carriages back to the castle from Hogsmeade Station, and the Gryffindor table had been filled with rumours of a fight that had broken out between several of their own and some Slytherins.

After some prying, she discovered that most had ended up in the infirmary, but that they would be well enough for classes. Still, she waited on the sofa, staring at the door as though she could will at least *one* of them through it to give her some reassurance that they were all fine.

She hoped it would be Remus.

He had begun pulling away from her since the first full moon of their second year. She had not been aware if James, Sirius, and Peter had told him that they knew his secret, or if the Wizard's Oath she made the three boys take included Remus in their secrecy. Either way, no one mentioned it to her again. When she arrived at the hospital wing the following month to be with Remus, Madam Pomfrey sadly sent her back to the Gryffindor common room, letting her know that Remus had requested he be left alone.

Each month during the week of the full moon, Remus retreated into himself, ignoring anything she said or did to bring up his health or condition. She tried multiple times to talk to him, pleading with him to let her help.

On a good day, he would explain, "Please, Mia, stop waiting for me. It makes the walk back to the hospital wing that much harder."

On the days after the full moon, if she asked how he was feeling, he would completely ignore her and leave the room if possible.

She knew better than to bring it up on the days leading up to the full moon. Remus was downright volatile. More than once, she saw him stare at her in a predator-stalking-his-prey way that both terrified and excited her.

Eventually, James intervened.

*"Yes, Mia, we've talked to Remus about his condition. It's . . . complicated. Can you just, I don't know, pretend you don't know that he's a werewolf?"*

*"What?" Mia asked, shocked by the request. "How could I just . . . ? Why?"*

*Her brother sighed. "It's personal. Look, you know you're one of his best friends, but you're a girl. And . . . he can't handle you as his caretaker anymore."*

"There you are!" Mia shouted, pulled from her heavy thoughts as she watched Remus help Sirius through the portrait hole.

It was late, and she had heard that most of the boys were staying the night in the infirmary. All the other Gryffindors had gone to bed, but Mia had waited up, hoping for news about what had happened.

"Hey, kitten." Sirius winced as Remus dropped him on the sofa.

"I've got some Pain Relief Potion in my trunk upstairs if you want it," Remus offered.

Sirius shook his head.

Mia frowned and sat down next to him on the couch to look at his face. "Sirius, what happened?" Without answering her, Sirius tilted forward and slowly lowered his head to her lap. "No, no. You need to get fixed up. Didn't you go to the hospital wing with the others?"

"He refused to let Madam Pomfrey touch him," Remus said irritably. "We stuck around to make sure James and Pete were fine, and then I was told to get him back to the tower before he bled all over the infirmary."

"Mia can heal me," Sirius mumbled, closing his eyes and wrapping an arm around her waist.

Mia turned to look at Remus, who watched the scene with a sad smile, as though he were remembering how good it felt when it was *him* that she took care of and healed. When he noticed her staring at him, Mia could see him put his barriers back up.

"I'm going to bed," he said. "You need help up the stairs, Sirius?"

Sirius shook his head. "Good, here."

Remus offered her a small smile. "Goodnight, Mia."

She could only smile sadly in return.

Once Remus was gone, she tilted Sirius's head to look up at her. The soft curves that he had when they first met in Diagon Alley had given way to the sharp angles that he would carry with him for the rest of his life. There in her lap with his long black hair tucked behind his ears, and his face covered with evidence of a physical brawl, she could immediately recognise the older Sirius buried behind the stare of the teenager as he snuggled her.

"What happened?" she murmured. "Alice and I were helping Frank get his trunk from the train. When I looked back, the rest of you were being restrained alongside the Slytherins."

"Snape's a bloody git," Sirius grumbled, reaching up and grabbing her hand, putting it on his head like usual.

She frowned but stroked her fingers through his hair regardless. "What did he say *this* time?"

"Nothing, not a thing. Wilkes called Lily a you-know-what, and Snivellus just stood there. Didn't even defend her. And she thinks that James is a toerag while that greasy git parades around acting like her friend."

"So you *punched* him for it?"

He shook his head. "No. I punched *Reg*."

"Why did you hit your little brother?" she asked, eyes wide. "Sirius, he's *eleven!*"

"I don't give a shit. He's a little prick, just like the rest of my family." He pulled away from her, something that he had never willingly done before. There was a lost look in his eyes as he turned to gaze into the fireplace ahead of them.

"Come here, Sirius." Mia took her wand and muttered a Healing Spell for the swelling on his eye. She moved his collar to look at the injury she could see peeking out from beneath the fabric. "I've got some Dittany upstairs if you want me to fix your lip and the burn on your shoulder."

Sirius's hand touched hers, lacing their fingers together. "Can you just stay with me?" he asked, though not making eye-contact. "Let the things scar."

She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, trying to imagine she was back home—back in 1998. It was something she rarely did these days: wish to go home. James, Sirius, and

Remus had made it easy for her to do what Future Remus's letter instructed: *Live your life. Enjoy your life.* Her boys made it a simple thing to do just that. But lately, with Remus pulling away from her, and Sirius constantly getting into fights, she was reminded that these boys would grow up to become the wounded men she had known for years.

She could see the beginnings of Sirius breaking, and it broke her heart to know his future and not be able to stop it.

She missed Sirius. *Her* Sirius.

For a moment, she could pretend that the boy holding her hand innocently in the Gryffindor common room was the man who had kissed her passionately in the caved-in passageway. She could pretend that it was the day after her nineteenth birthday, and she was at home at number twelve, sitting on the sofa in the drawing room, holding Sirius's hand. They would talk about the life debt ritual, and he would explain to her what he knew about the bond that had happened because of it. She would ask him why he had kissed her in the middle of the battle. And, if she were very, very lucky, he would say it was because he *wanted* to. Not because of magic.

Mia opened her eyes and looked over at the thirteen-year-old boy sitting next to her, nervously licking the cut on his lip as he stared off into the flames, deep in thought.

Sometimes, *this* Sirius was easier to deal with. She did not feel *much* of a magical bond with him—just an itchy emptiness that tugged needily inside of her—which brought both annoyance and relief at the same time. Annoyance, because she knew he would grow up to be that beautiful man who had kissed her until her toes curled. Relief, because he was safe. Without a mystical bond to pull him toward her, Mia could trust that *this* Sirius said and did what he really wanted to. He was honest.

"What happened with your family? When you and Regulus were gone?"

Lost in his own thoughts, Sirius shook his head and leant against her as visions of Malfoy Manor and Narcissa's engagement party ran through his head. Bellatrix had tortured her own sister with the Cruciatus Curse, and no one had done a thing about it save for him and Alphard. Even then, they had not made much of a difference.

Andromeda had been blasted off the tree the moment they got home, and Walburga made him watch her do it. Then, at wand point and with a Blood Quill in hand, he had been forced to write the words of his House—*Toujours Pur*—repeatedly until they were

carved into the flesh of his hand. The wound had only just healed, and he was happy to see it had not left a permanent scar.

"Just a bunch of typical drama," he lied. "Nothing to worry about, love. I'm fine."

"Sirius? Please don't hide things from me."

"It's just pureblood shit, Mia. My parents are apparently getting ready to plan out my whole future, wife and all." He laughed dryly and then smiled when he felt her growl in response to the news. "Don't worry, if they set up an arranged marriage, I'll just elope with James. *That'll* teach them."

"I'm sorry about your family."

"Can we not talk about them anymore?" Sirius asked, cuddling back into her side.

"Is there anything I can do to make you feel better?"

Sirius tilted his head up and winked at her. "Anything?"

She rolled her eyes in reply.

"Well, since apparently *my* ideas are all off the table . . ."

"How many ideas did you have?" she asked, looking scandalised.

"About *you*, kitten?" He gave a teasing grin. "About six hundred and forty-three."

Mia laughed but still shoved him. "Get off my lap, immediately."

Sirius gripped his arms around her waist tightly, refusing to be pried away from her.

"No, it's *my* lap! I'll behave!"

"You don't know how!"

"Then join me and start misbehaving!"

"Fine!"

He let go and sat up quickly, looking at her with wide eyes. "What?"

"Not *that*." Mia rolled her eyes. "I mean, I figured out how to cheer you up. You say Regulus has been a prat?"

"*Prick*. I said *prick*," Sirius clarified.

"Whatever. How would you like it if I help you prank your brother?"

Sirius felt himself light up like a Christmas tree. She wanted to prank with him. She wanted to prank his brother. He very briefly wondered if he could figure out how to transfigure diamonds for her. "Really?"

She shrugged, suddenly looking nervous. "Maybe just *once*."

"But you said you hated pranks. You told me and James we were childish and immature because we made Rikard Stebbins's hair vanish." He grinned at the memory.

"Because you had a childish reason," she defended.

"And you yelled at me and Peter for charming Snivellus's shoes to quack when he walked," Sirius added.

"That was stupid. He just changed his shoes. You should have put a sticking charm on them," she said under her breath, clearly not realising she had spoken aloud when her eyes widened and she looked at him, covering her mouth.

But it was too late; Sirius heard. "You want to prank with us! Mia, I'm so happy!"

"Just once!" she reiterated firmly. "And only because I think Regulus deserves it."

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

### *Marauder's Code*

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*Perfect by nature. Icons of self-indulgence.  
Just what we all need,  
More lies about a world that. . .  
...never was and never will be.  
Have you no shame? Don't you see me?  
You know you've got everybody fooled  
(Everybody's Fool - Evanescence)*

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**May 12th, 1973**

It did not take long for Mia to come up with a half-decent prank to pull on Regulus, and Sirius was thrilled that it involved the rest of Slytherin House. Though she had been fairly quiet about the details of said prank, she promised him it would be worth it, and that all he had to do to help was borrow James's Invisibility Cloak.

When it came to pranking his younger brother with Mia, Sirius had only two conditions: the first was that it was only the two of them that pulled the prank. Saying that not only because he was not in the mood to explain to his mates why Mia had thrown caution to the wind to sully her reputation as a humourless swot just to make him happy, but because the four Marauders no longer fit under the cloak these days let alone squeezing in a fifth person.

The second condition was that they set up the prank for the twelfth of May.

Mia never asked why at first, assuming it had something to do with scheduling their misbehaviour around Quidditch practice. So, immediately after dinner on the twelfth of May, she and Sirius slipped beneath the cloak and headed down the staircase, walking in the direction of the dungeons.

She had never been this close to the Slytherin common room before but remembered Harry's explanation and directions regarding how he and Ron had reached the room on their quest to interrogate Malfoy about the heir of Slytherin during her original second year. The memory of sitting in the hospital wing, Polyjuiced into a cat, made her nose twitch in irritation. As they made their way deep beneath the castle, Mia was really wishing she had the Marauder's Map with her.

She chuckled softly. "Too bad there isn't a treasure map showing a big 'X' over the Slytherin common room. That would make this easier."

"A map of the castle would make *a lot* of things easier," Sirius quietly agreed, and Mia grinned.

Eventually, they came upon what looked almost like a dead end where they met a large expanse of bare, damp, stone wall.

"This it?" Sirius whispered, making a face. "There's not even a portrait here."

Mia flashed a smug grin. "What better way to hide something than in plain sight? Most of them are absolute prats, but Slytherins know how to keep their secrets." She thought briefly of Draco Malfoy being a spy for the Order of the Phoenix for nearly three years without anyone but Snape aware of the situation. Somehow standing here outside the common room to the snake pit, she almost missed the annoying prat.

"What now?" Sirius asked, practically jumping out of his skin in excitement.

"Now, we make sure no one's inside. *Homenum Revelio*," she whispered and waited for several moments. "We're good. They must all still be down at dinner. Good thing we left early."

Sirius lifted the cloak off of the both of them. "That reminds me, if the guys ask, you and I sneaked off early to go snog in a corner."

Mia turned, gasping at him, her face burning hot. "Sirius Black! You did *not* tell Remus and Jamie you were going off to snog me!"

"You left a few minutes before me." He smirked as he wiggled his eyebrows at her suggestively. "You should know better than to leave me unsupervised for any stretch of time. I'm shocked McGonagall hasn't put a tracking collar around my neck by now."

She rolled her eyes.

"But then again, they *did* look suspicious about me heading out after you. At least *Remus* did, and I figure if they're already thinking it . . ." Sirius laughed, and Mia smacked his arm. "Don't worry about your sweet little reputation, kitten. James was too busy asking Evans if she was going to come cheer for him at the Quidditch match next week."

Mia winced. "And what did she say to him?"

"Nothing. But she dumped her mashed potatoes on his head and told Remus to find friends who weren't idiots."

Mia laughed softly. "Poor Jamie."

Sirius scoffed. "Poor *Remus*."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Evans clearly fancies him. And even if he's got it back for her, he's got the Marauder's Code to follow. Don't touch another bloke's girl," he said with a tone of finality. Mia's mouth dropped open, and her eyes widened in anger. "No, I'm not saying all girls should be in the Pussy Cat Club, Mia. You're strong and independent and can snog whoever you want, whenever you want, okay?"

"I am not snogging anyone!" she hissed. "And neither is Remus."

Sirius raised a brow. "What's that now? Oh." His eyes widened and he laughed, grinning brightly. "So, that look on your face isn't about us making up rules about dating birds, it's about Remus? You fancy Lupin?"

"Shut up. I do not," Mia growled, her heart racing. "One more word, Sirius Black, and I will march right out of these dungeons, and this prank is over."

She had no claim to *any* boy—certainly not Remus. She knew that for a fact. Tonks was his mate, though she was not even a month old in this time—a fact that caused Mia to shake her head a little—but at the same time, her three boys were just that: *hers*. And while she was more than okay knowing Lily Evans would someday marry her brother, she was absolutely *not* okay with the girl taking a fancy to *her* werewolf.

No, wait, not *her* werewolf.

"Fine, fine," Sirius agreed, pulling her out of her crisis. "But I reserve the right to make fun of you both if I ever catch him eating your face."

"Shut up, and let me concentrate," Mia said and then turned her wand on the wall in front of her, waving it back and forth as what looked like heat waves poured out of the tip, painting the wall with an invisible barrier in front of them. "There. That should do it. Of course, we won't be able to tell until some Slytherins come back."

Sirius tossed the cloak over the both of them, and they slipped back into the shadows, hiding in a dark alcove that faced the blank wall at an angle. They sat down, pressing their backs against the stones and crossing their legs so as not to accidentally knock over the suit of armour that stood in front of their guarded safe space.

"You going to tell me exactly what we're waiting for yet?" Sirius whispered.

Mia just grinned at him.

Less than five minutes later, the hallway began to fill with students dressed in black and green robes. It was as if Lady Luck decided to smile upon the two Gryffindors committing mischief. The first to appear was a smug-looking Regulus Black, flanked by his lanky cronies.

"I'll take that bet," Regulus said. "Twenty Galleons on Slytherin to win next week's match, another five if we win the Cup. And I'll give all my winnings to anyone on the team that can knock my blood-traitor brother off his broom."

From beneath the cloak, Sirius made a rude hand gesture, and Mia stifled a laugh.

"What's the password again?" Regulus asked the boy next to him.

"It's 'basilisk,' but . . ." The boy scanned the hallway. "Where's the—?"

"Did we take a wrong turn?" Regulus asked with raised eyebrows as he did a quick check of the wall, turning around to look back down the hallway.

Lucius Malfoy walked forward with Mulciber, Avery, Wilkes, and a scattering of younger Slytherins behind them including the Carrow twins and Snape. "What are you first years doing just standing around?"

"Nothing," Regulus said nervously, looking embarrassed. "I just . . . I mean . . . We can't find the entrance to the common room."

"Pathetic." Lucius rolled his eyes and turned, only to find himself in a similar position. Instead of speaking, Lucius scanned the corridor with narrowed silver eyes, his jaw tight before glaring down at Regulus. "What did you do? Where is it?"

"I don't know!" Regulus yelped.

"Should . . ." Alecto muttered. "Should we go and fetch Slughorn?"

"Absolutely not!" Lucius snapped. "You want to tell that bumbling idiot that his entire House can't locate their own fucking rooms?"

Snape rolled his eyes. "So, we're supposed to just sleep in the hallway?"

Lucius narrowed his gaze. "Unless you'd like to sleep in the lake, Severus, which can be arranged quite easily."

An hour later, not a single Slytherin had gone for help, but five had turned on one another.

Lucius Malfoy spent most of the night trying to keep his Housemates from tearing each other apart. Apparently, putting the already on edge and suspicious Slytherins into a

stressful situation with no one to take it out on but one another caused them to do just that.

Sirius grinned from beneath the cloak as he and Mia watched the wonderful entertainment.

Eventually, the two silently slipped out of their alcove and down the corridor, leaving an entire houseful of sleeping snakes crumpled on the cold stone floor outside their common room with no way inside.

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"That was bloody brilliant!" Sirius shouted excitedly once he and Mia were safely ensconced in the Gryffindor common room. "How did you do it? Was it a Locking Spell?"

"It was an adjusted Muggle-Repelling Charm mixed with a Notice-Me-Not," Mia said proudly. The smile on his face filled something inside of her up and warmed her thoroughly.

"That's amazing!" Sirius beamed. "*You're* amazing! You're pranking with us more often. We need your brains. Your clever, sadistic brains!"

He leant forward and kissed her forehead, and she smiled up at him, surprised at how Sirius was suddenly taller than she was, and how she had not noticed until now.

"I'll think about it."

"You better, kitten." Sirius grinned again and kissed her cheek.

He lingered.

The light feeling of stubble against her chin caused her to let out the smallest of sighs, but it was audible. Everything suddenly felt very warm, and Mia knew it was not just her because Sirius pulled back and dropped his excited smile, favouring a confused look instead as he stared down at her.

Mia swallowed hard and tried to not look at his lips. Those lips that were so young and untouched by time and circumstance. His innocence was still there behind his stare, and it made her smile as she forcefully pushed down the memory of an older Sirius pulling her into his lap, passionately devouring her lips with his own in the heat of battle.

Sirius cleared his throat. "Umm. Thanks," he said, breaking the strange spell that, for a moment, had them both wrapped in a cocoon of awkward tension.

"Anytime," she said with a soft smile.

"I can't wait to see Regulus's face in the morning at breakfast. To think, he's going to spend his twelfth birthday on the floor in the dungeon." He let out a barking laugh.

Mia's eyes widened, and guilt flooded her. "*Birthday!?*"

"Don't even try to feel bad for him," Sirius insisted, looking completely unrepentant. "Last November, my parents didn't send me a thing for my birthday, but Reg did. A lovely family photo where my head was cropped out and glued in place was a picture of our nasty house-elf. He deserves to be taken down a few notches, trust me."

Biting her lower lip as the guilt ebbed and waned, she finally conceded. "Well . . . he *was* trying to bribe people to knock you off your broom. Speaking of which, I don't want you and James playing in the game next week. It's too dangerous of a sport on a normal day, let alone with your own family plotting against you."

Sirius grinned and pulled on one of her curls, chuckling when it bounced right back like a spring. "Nothing's going to keep me from the sky, kitten. Besides, we're the only reserve players on the team, and at the Ravenclaw game, Smith and Morgan crashed into the stands. They're still in the hospital wing and aren't allowed to play. That gives me and James our chance to show what we can *really* do."

"Just . . . promise me you'll be careful. Jamie's my only brother, and you're . . ." *Mine*. "You're my friend."

"What are you two up to?" Remus asked as he descended the staircase from the boys' dorms, looking down at them.

Mia looked up with a blush.

Sirius grinned and shouted, "Snogging!"

Mia gasped—even as her stomach flip-flopped at the thought—and elbowed him in the ribs.

Hard.

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**May 19th, 1973**

It was a perfect day for Quidditch. The sun was shining—though there was the hint of a chill in the air—as Sirius and James caused an uproar amongst the crowd, taunting the Slytherins whilst flying overhead. Enjoying his moment a little too much, Sirius swooped down to the ground, gripping a handful of pebbles out of the dirt before taking to the sky once more. Throwing the pebbles into the air softly, Sirius gripped his Beater's bat and swung as though the small rocks were tiny Bludgers. As they sailed toward the Gryffindor stands, Sirius pulled his wand and transformed them all into roses, each landing delicately into the hands of the girls who were swooning and chanting his name.

Mia was grinding her teeth.

James, seeing Sirius's trick, swooped to the ground likewise, pulling a weed from the grass below and flying up and forward, holding it out with a grin toward Lily. "Evans! Want me to win the game for you?"

Just as sunlight struck the weed, it transfigured into a brilliant red Asiatic lily.

Lily, with no hint of malice on her face, reached up to touch the little flower, and everyone could see James hold his breath. Mia could see Lily—in the very moment that she touched the beautiful blossom—gripping her wand.

With a quickly whispered, "*Incendio!*" the flower in James's hand burst into flames.

"She's getting more creative at telling him to piss off," Remus commented with a small smirk as he sat next to Mia in the stands.

"She'll get over it one day," Mia said with a smile as she watched her brother fly away, deflated. A small shiver ran up her arms as the chilly breeze passed over her.

"You cold?" Remus asked, removing his red and gold scarf and wrapping it around her.

She smiled up at him sweetly, watching as his eyes flashed gold. Satisfaction served to warm her along with Remus's scarf as she had another confirmation on the change in their interactions.

All she had wanted to do was take care of him, but Remus—along with James and Sirius—were slowly becoming men right before her eyes, and men did not want to be taken care of, not in the way that Mia felt she needed to. It was worse with Remus, she knew, who had to compete with a primal wolf inside of him, struggling for control. When she

had stopped trying to protect him, she immediately noticed a change; especially during moments like this when the wolf inside of him was clearly trying to protect *her*—even with something as small as a long scarf against a cold breeze.

"Thank you," she said softly, watching as Remus puffed out his chest a bit in response to her gratitude.

With a roar from the crowd and Madam Hooch's whistle, the players took to the sky. James flew fast, reaching the Quaffle before anyone on either team.

"And the Quaffle is taken immediately by Gryffindor Reserve Chaser, James Potter. Potter, speeding along, makes a pass to Smythe. Smythe to Prewett, Prewett back to Potter, and right past Slytherin Keeper, Emma Vanity! Gryffindor takes the first goal of the game!" the announcer shouted.

Mia and Remus cheered from the stands, shouting James's name, and soon the entire section was screaming, "Potter! Potter! Potter!"

"Oh, his head is never going to deflate now," Mia groaned.

Remus grinned. "At least this time he'll have an ego over something he's actually done."

"Slytherin now in possession," the announcer continued. "Captain Steve Laughalot isn't laughing now as he dodges Bludgers on his way toward the Gryffindor Keeper. Laughalot shoots and misses, thanks to a hit from Reserve Beater, Sirius Black! There's nothing funny about this situation now for the Slytherins!"

"Go slower!" Mia screamed as Sirius passed by her in the stands, laughing as he did.

Sirius was in his element and had never felt more fulfilled in his years so far at Hogwarts. James rushed down the pitch, desperate to knock at least one snake off their broom. Sirius, however, was being surprisingly obedient after being ordered by their team Captain to remain close to the end of the pitch to help their Keeper block the goals; she had just been released from the hospital wing after breaking her arm a month earlier.

As a flash of gold flew across the field, attracting the attention of both Seekers, a flash of something else caught Sirius's attention across the pitch.

Light reflecting off of pale blond hair in the distance. The sun hit the hair in such a way that it was almost reflective. This surprised him because the pale blond head was turning away from the game entirely rather than focusing on it. But that was not all: the blonde in question was climbing up the stairs toward the back of the stands.

"Cissa?" Sirius muttered curiously, wondering why his cousin was even out here. She hated Quidditch, and Sirius knew that Malfoy had not played since he was a third year—having been permanently banned for too many fouls.

Sirius narrowed his eyes as he watched his cousin, and when her arms went out to her sides like she was spreading wings, he realised what she was doing.

"No!" he shouted and flew at breaking speeds, dropping his Beater's bat in the process. He leant forward on his broom to gain momentum just as Narcissa vanished over the back railing of the stands.

"Both Seekers are in a race for the Snitch—Hey is that Black? Sirius Black has broken away from formation and is heading toward the Slytherin goals, no Quaffle in his hands, and he seems to have lost his bat! Is this a new secret play?" the announcer asked. "Black rushing at speeds unheard of for that Cleansweep for sure. Black flies through the Slytherin goal and . . . and . . . over the railing of the stands?"

Sirius dove over the edge of the railing, gripping his broom and gasping when he saw Narcissa ahead of him, falling toward the earth, her body relaxed as though she was not expecting impact.

He moved for his wand only to realise he could not remember a spell to slow her down, though he knew that one existed. "Fuck! Cissa!"

Sirius stretched his arm forward, grabbing hold of the bottom of her left foot and clinging to it tightly as he pulled his broom upward, slowing their descent, but it was not enough. He lost his grip and watched as she fell, still a good twenty-five feet above the ground. In a panic, he put his feet on the edge of the broom, pushing against the handle and launching himself forward.

He reached out and pulled hard once he had a grip on his cousin, rotating backward and tugging her into his arms just as his back collided with the ground.

**May 22nd, 1973**

When Sirius's eyes opened again, his vision was blurry.

"Cissa?" was the first thing he whispered when he remembered what happened. He recalled the game, spotting his cousin, and falling forward until . . . pain. He let out a loud cough and then yelped as the muscles in his back spasmed. "Ow! Fuck!"

"Well, it's good to see you're awake, Mr Black," Madam Pomfrey said as she approached. "Though, I can't say I care for your language myself. I'll let it slip for now as long as you tell me how much pain you're in."

Sirius took advantage of the punishment-free zone and snapped, "A lot of bloody fucking pain! Shit! Arse! My back fucking hurts. What the bloody hell happened?"

Madam Pomfrey stared at him, her hands on her hips. "Are you quite done?"

Sirius thought for a moment, took in a sharp breath, and then let out one word: "Tits."

The mediwitch rolled her eyes and pinned him with a scowl. "You'll be fine. Drink this." She shoved a Pain Relief Potion into his hand, and Sirius took it without question.

The pain dulled to a gentle throb, and Sirius let out a great sigh of relief. "What happened?"

"You strained your back, pulling various muscles when you hit the ground, and fractured your pelvis, young man. You've been here for several days now, unconscious for most of them, which is good considering what we had to do to repair the muscle and bone damage. You wouldn't have liked that one bit."

Sirius groaned. "Mia's going to kill me."

She had been worried about him hurting himself at the game, and not only had he essentially blown her worries out of the water, but he propelled them into space. Although, technically, he could argue that he had not hurt himself playing Quidditch.

"Where's my cousin? Is she all right?"

"Narcissa Black? She'll be fine," Madam Pomfrey said simply and then walked away.

"Wait! What happened to her? Is she okay?" When no response came, Sirius growled. "Is anyone even going to tell me if we won the game?"

"Is that really all you can think about right now?" Mia snapped as she stormed into the infirmary, the doors slamming against the walls in her wake. James, Remus, and Peter

closely followed behind, almost getting hit with the doors in the process. "You nearly died, you bloody idiot! Have you any idea how worried I've been? How worried we've *all* been?!"

Her hair sparked as she glared at him.

Something in his chest expanded and warmed him. He loved it when she got angry.

"Miss me, kitten?"

She let out a loud scream of frustration and then stormed away, using her wand to fling the doors back open before disappearing through them.

"Oh, she *definitely* missed me." Sirius chuckled and turned his attention to his friends. "All right, first, did we win? Second, where's my cousin?"

"Well, we won," James said with a grin, running a hand through his already messy hair. "Even secured spots on next year's team as long as your back is good to go come September. Full players too, not just reserves."

"Your cousin is fine," Remus said. "Nothing a Calming Draught and Muscle Relaxation Potion couldn't fix. You, however, took the brunt of the impact."

Sirius averted his gaze for the moment, knowing that if anyone understood what it felt like to be broken in the hospital wing it would be Remus, and the thought made him feel guilty for complaining so much earlier.

"Most people think she tripped," James added. "A lot of the Ravenclaws are spreading a rumour that another girl pushed her because they're jealous about her marrying Malfoy."

"What does *Mia* think?" Sirius asked, and the three other boys raised their eyebrows in silence. "Oh, shut it. I know she's got a theory. She bloody knows everything!"

"Mia thinks someone Imperiused Narcissa," Remus whispered. "That someone *made* her jump."

"Malfoy," Sirius growled.

"Mia thought so too. But you can't prove it." Remus frowned as he picked up the empty Pain Relief Potion phial, sniffing it and snorting as though he were amused at whatever the dosage was that Sirius had taken. "Mia already went to Dumbledore. Last we heard, Narcissa said it was an accident. She's going with the tripped excuse."

"No way." Sirius shook his head. "My cousins were walking with books on their heads to balance when they were four. Narcissa wouldn't just trip. If Mia thinks someone

Imperiused her, then I believe it. And it's got to be Malfoy. He was threatening her at their engagement party minutes before her sister was tortured on the floor!"

James gaped. "What? When the hell did *that* happen?!"

"Shit." Sirius had not meant to tell anyone. "Look, it's . . . family stuff, okay." He looked away from his friends, his temper rising as he felt pity pouring off of them.

"My cousin, Andromeda, married a Muggle-born and popped a kid out, causing a fuss amongst the older folks." He grimaced, muttering "ignorant arseholes" under his breath. "That's not the point. I heard Malfoy tell Cissa to straighten out her priorities or he'd do it *for* her. Then he told her she could only end their engagement by dying."

"Aurors were called in," Peter spoke up. "Malfoy was at breakfast this morning when they came. He wasn't arrested, though."

"Your cousin was sitting with him," James said apologetically. "If he really did that to her, then he just got away with it, and Narcissa doesn't look like she's going to be accusing him of anything."

"Why'd Mia think it was Lucius?" Sirius asked. "It's obvious to me, but I'm curious."

Remus scratched the side of his head. "I'm not sure exactly. She just said that Lucius Malfoy was a monster who wouldn't think twice about turning his own wife into a puppet. Then she . . ." He looked down and sighed. "She said that he deserved what he got. I don't know what that means."

Sirius frowned, but then nodded slowly. "Probably the prank. She charmed their common room door, locked all the Slytherins outside of it. That's probably it. Oh, that reminds me, Mia mentioned the word 'map' during that prank, and it got me thinking."

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

### *Just Scars*

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*Pretty, pretty please, don't you ever, ever feel  
Like you're less than fucking perfect  
Pretty, pretty please, if you ever, ever feel  
Like you're nothing, you're fucking perfect to me  
(Fuckin' Perfect - Pink)*

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**July 17th, 1973**

The summer before their third year at Hogwarts was filled with something Mia had not been familiar with until recently: *fun*.

Sirius had recovered from what would officially be labelled a "Quidditch Injury." Despite Narcissa's insistence that Lucius was *not* behind her accident, Sirius caused a scene in the Great Hall on the last day of school by punching Malfoy in the face and earning himself a month's worth of detention come the following September. His last words to his cousin before he was pulled off of her fiancé were, "You owe me a life debt, Narcissa Black!"

Sirius arrived at Potter Manor after what could not have been more than three hours alone with his family. He boasted that all it had taken for Walburga to let him leave was threatening to owl the *Daily Prophet* and provide them with an exclusive interview about how the newly infamous Sirius Black came to his cousin's rescue while her fiancé was missing in action. He promised he would be sure to include a detailed description of what it felt like to be a hero, and that he had already forgiven Lucius Malfoy for not even bothering to say thank you. Several derogatory terms were thrown at him as well as a large antique vase before he jumped into the fireplace and vanished over to Potter Manor where he had taken up residence in a guest room for the rest of the summer.

It was not until Mia grew bored enough to go searching for the boys in late July that she stumbled upon them taking a break from one of what was probably a twelve-game Quidditch series.

James had taken Sirius through the large orchards and came out on the other side of a winding river that cut through the edge of the property line. It was secluded and

beautiful, and Mia cursed herself for not exploring the grounds earlier. She had thought to ask James why he had never shown her the river before, but Sirius was there, and it would look suspicious if Mia—who supposedly lived at Potter Manor her entire life—did not know where their land ended.

Determined to make up for lost time and last year—when she had spent an entire hot summer sweating inside—Mia asked their parents if they could have friends over to go swimming.

James and Sirius were thrilled with the idea, but Mia was not happy with their planning.

"Peter's birthday is this Friday; we should have him over for a party!" James said excitedly; Sirius appeared eager to join in on the idea of surprising their friend.

Mia had snapped out a quick, "No!"

"Why not?" James asked.

"I can't this Friday," she said before coming up with the worst excuse ever, knowing it would put an immediate end to the argument. She forced a blush across her face to appear embarrassed. "Girl stuff."

Both boys nodded quickly, awkwardly avoiding her gaze.

Mia smirked at them and rolled her eyes. "How about the Tuesday after that?"

"Why then?" Sirius asked.

"I don't know. It just feels like a good day to be with family and friends. To celebrate." She smiled and walked away.

"Fine. Fire-call your friends and tell them to be here July 31st!" James called after her. A full minute later, he shouted, "And make sure to invite Evans!"

"She's gone, mate," Sirius said with a chuckle, picking a splinter out of his hand and cursing himself for deciding to not wear gloves when flying. He made a mental note to try and sneak back over to Grimmauld Place before school started up again so he could steal something worth selling in Knockturn Alley for enough Galleons to get a new broom.

James stared off into the space where his sister had disappeared, his jaw slack. "Do you . . . Do you think Evans will come?"

Sirius smirked, wagging his eyebrows. "You think they'll wear bikinis like my motorcycle girls?"

He looked in the same direction that James was, where Mia had gone.

She had always been small and skinny, but the years had been as good to the girl. Of course, Sirius had always found her eyes to be appealing. The colour of chocolate. She was pretty when she laughed and even more when she was angry, especially with him; her cheeks reddened, and her hair sparked. One morning, a few weeks into the summer hols, he woke from a dream with the thought of burying his fingers in her mess of curls. He blamed the motorcycle magazines for putting thoughts into his head. Not that it mattered, as he refused to stop reading them.

"Mia's looking fit," he muttered out the side of a grin as he recalled the way her blouse fit just a bit better than it had a few months ago. He was completely distracted by his vivid imagination until something hard hit him on the side of the head. "Ow!"

"My sister is *not* fit!" James snapped. "And she's certainly not going to wear a bloody bikini. That's a Muggle thing."

Sirius laughed but immediately pretended to be sombre. "Evans is a Muggle-born, maybe *she'll* wear one."

His laugh returned when James's face paled, the blood presumably travelling to points further south. "Hypocrite!"

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### July 31st, 1973

"I can't believe you bought that." Mia laughed as she, Alice, and Lily sat on her bed at the manor. On the other side of the room, Mary grinned, hands on hips, wearing her brand new pinstriped bikini.

Alice gaped at it, tilting her head to the side, her cheeks pink. "Where'd you even get it?"

"Muggle part of France," Mary said and, without any hint of modesty or shame, adjusted her cleavage. "You think Sirius will like it?"

Mia seethed visibly. All the girls swivelled to look as her face turned crimson.

Mary beamed excitedly. "You fancy Sirius!"

"I do not!"

"It's all right." Mary laughed. "Look at the boy. He's bloody perfection."

Lily rolled her eyes, pulling her hair over her shoulder to secure it in a long plait. "Don't tell *him* that. His head is big enough as is. Mia, how come you never told us you liked Sirius?"

Mia watched as Lily wrapped her arms around her own pink, one-piece swimming costume. She knew her friend was feeling awkward and uncomfortable considering James had already been staring at her that morning, and that was *before* she had so much exposed skin—though not nearly as much as Mary. Mia had needed to send several owls back and forth to Lily to convince her to come, all with the promise that she would be able to keep James under control.

"I didn't *say* anything because there's nothing to say." Mia walked into her bathroom, leaving the door cracked a touch as she fumbled her way into her solid black swimming costume. She glared at herself in the mirror, frustrated that, just when she thought she had gotten over her awkward stage of life, she had been thrown back in time to relive the experience. Her hips were bony, her stomach still held a tiny bit of baby fat, and her breasts were in an awkward in-between sizes stage that made her hate every shirt that she owned.

"We're young and shouldn't be concentrating on boys right now," she said with a glower as she walked out of the room, pushing the door open for Alice, who entered it to change.

Mary shrugged, fixing her blond hair up into a high ponytail. "Why not? They look at *us* all the time. I say it's only fair that we look right back."

"They look at *you*," Mia corrected.

"Oh, they look at you too, lovely. I caught Adrian Abbott trying to look down your blouse last year in Potions."

Mia's eyes widened. "That's disgusting. He's a Slytherin!"

Mary's smile remained in place. "He's also fit."

Lily rolled her eyes. "You think *everyone's* fit."

"I appreciate beauty," Mary said with a sigh, as though she were reflecting on the great wonders of the world. Mia met Lily's eyes, and they shared a laugh. "So fine, you don't fancy Sirius. That means you wouldn't mind if I snogged him today?"

Mia paled, and her fists clenched tight as she felt that emptiness inside of her fill with something boiling hot. She tried to tell Mary to have at it and that Sirius was as good as hers if she wanted, but the words would not come out.

Mary immediately took notice, gesturing in amusement. "See? Fine, fine. Sirius is off limits."

"*All* my boys are off limits," Mia clarified, a strange sense of possession coming over her. Visions of Lavender Brown eating Ron's face, and Cho Chang breaking Harry's heart came to her, and she shook her head. Not this time.

Mary laughed, jumping on the bed so hard that she knocked Lily off the edge. "You can't keep them *all* to yourself!"

"Fine, Lily can have James," Mia agreed, and Lily scrambled off of the floor, looking at her furiously. Mia only smirked in reply but refused to take back the announcement.

"*Alice* likes James," Mary pointed out.

"Alice can have Frank," Mia insisted, folding her arms over her chest defiantly. Both Mary and Lily giggled. "What? Tell me they're not perfect for each other, and I'll take it back."

Lily raised a brow after genuinely thinking about it for a minute. "Wow, they really are."

"Who's really what?" Alice asked as she walked out of the bathroom wearing a flower-covered swimming costume.

"You and Frank, perfect for one another," Mary answered.

Suddenly, Alice blushed to the tips of her toes, and she covered her mouth. "How did you know?"

Mary's eyes widened with the greed of a girl who breathed gossip as easily as oxygen. "How did we know what, little Miss Brown?"

Alice shook her head and made to run for it, but Mary was too quick and tackled her to the ground, straddling her waist and pinning her arms down beside her head, thus preventing Alice from hiding the blush that crept over her cheeks and the silly grin forming on her face.

"No way, you're not getting away! You've got a secret, and I will find out or die trying!"

"I kissed him!" Alice finally blurted out, and the other three girls gasped.

"How about that?" Mary sat back on Alice's legs and smiled slyly. "Frank Longbottom, you dirty boy, who knew? There you have it, Lils. Our little Alice is all grown up and over James Potter. He's all yours."

"I do not want Potter!" Lily screeched loudly. "If I fancied *anyone*—which I don't—it'd probably be Remus!"

Mary grinned as Mia's jaw visibly tightened.

"Like I said," Mia twitched her nose as she spoke, "my boys are off limits."

"What about the rest of us?" Mary laughed, finally moving off of Alice and letting her up. "Are we to die as old spinster witches, just us and our kneazles?"

Mia could not help but give in to Mary's beautiful smile. "Fine, you can have Peter."

Mary shrieked in horror, and the girls all laughed. "Eww, I don't want Pettigrew! He's always just staring at me in Charms."

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"So," Sirius said smugly as he re-entered James's bedroom where the boys had been changing into their swim trunks, "the sounds were a little muffled, but what I gathered is that Evans still hates James but might fancy Remus, except she says she doesn't fancy anyone. Brown *used* to fancy James, but apparently, Frank here failed to mention that he's snogged the bird."

"*She kissed me!*" Frank yelled as if defending himself as his face turned beet red.

"Good on you, mate." Sirius winked and continued with a grin. "Macdonald wants me. Badly too, I'm guessing," he said as though that were obvious. "But Mia's *hopelessly* in love with me and determined to become the next Lady Black. James, are you going to be my best man?"

"That's my sister," James grunted, throwing a punch to Sirius's shoulder that was easily dodged.

"I'm just taking the piss out of you," Sirius said with a laugh. "Mia wants Remus too."

Remus's eyes widened. "What? You're lying."

"Stop talking about my sister!" James yelled.

Sirius walked into James's bathroom, leaving the door open as he stood in front of the mirror to run his fingers through his hair, making sure his tousled look was perfect and did not resemble James's mess in the slightest. "I think it's only fair seeing that *she* was talking about *us*. Get over it, mate. We've got bigger things to worry about."

"Like what?" James narrowed his eyes.

"Like beating the shit out of Adrian Abbott when we get back to school."

"Do I want to know?" James asked with a sigh, hanging his head in his hands.

Sirius sucked in a breath, thought about not telling him, but decided against that plan of action. "It has to do with your sister's tits."

Looking ill, James muttered, "My sister doesn't have tits," under his breath.

"They say anything about me?" Peter asked from the corner of the room.

Sirius frowned, remembering Mary shriek. He made a mental note to talk to his friends about how to actually speak to girls instead of shadowing them like a creep. "Sorry, Pete, bad luck."

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Twenty minutes later, the nine teenagers were at the river, half already in the water, taking advantage of the perfect weather. It took picturing Cormac McLaggen in order to keep the blush off of Mia's cheeks as the boys made their way through the orchard, shirtless. The other girls had not been so successful at hiding their looks of approval, though Lily had taken the high road by turning away and hiding her face entirely.

James spent his time diving off of the tree branches into the deeper parts of the river, doing back flips and cannonballs, each time surfacing in Lily's direction only to be disappointed when she was not looking at him.

Frank and Alice were on the other side of the bank quietly talking, and Mia smiled when she watched her friend reach for Frank's hand and lace their fingers together innocently.

Remus was curled up beneath the giant oak, book in hand, occasionally looking over to watch while Peter failed to keep Mary's attention as he told her the story about how he successfully brewed a Shrinking Solution even though it was a third year potion. Mary sent Mia a look that said she would *rather* hear he could perform an Enlargement Charm.

"*This*," Lily said, interrupting Mia and Mary's silent conversation with a bright smile, "is called a transistor radio." Her green eyes lit up the same way that Harry's always did when talking about Quidditch, or the way Sirius looked when plotting a devious prank.

Mia watched with an amused expression on her face, while Sirius sat down and grinned at the redhead, his arms folded across his chest.

"It's a portable device that Muggles use to listen to music." Lily glanced between Sirius and Mia, and her smile fell. "And . . . and . . . you've got magic versions don't you?"

"Yes," Mia admitted with a chuckle.

"But do go on," Sirius encouraged her. "Tell me about this thing called music," he said sarcastically. "What is . . . mooseek?"

Lily glared at him.

"You're good fun, Evans." Sirius smirked as Lily shook her head, though she failed to keep a grin off her face as she stormed away from them, rescuing Mary from Peter's stories.

Turning the radio on, Sirius's amused smile turned genuine. "Muggles are awesome."

"Have you ever listened to Muggle music?" Mia asked.

"Yes," Sirius said, fidgeting with the knobs and buttons. "Used to sneak into Muggle London when Walburga took me to Diagon Alley. There was a record store I would hide out in."

"I never knew that," Mia said with a bright smile.

"Because I just told you. Oh bugger this," he said in a frustrated voice and reached for his wand, touching the top of the radio that was previously playing static but, with a little magic, suddenly began playing loud Muggle music, clear as day.

*"Lean on me, when you're not strong . . ."*

Mia beamed, recalling listening to this song on a tape that her Muggle mother made for her, unaware that *most* electronic devices would not work around magic but especially at Hogwarts. "I love this song. It actually reminds me of you, Sirius."

Lily gasped, looking back at Sirius. "You're not supposed to use magic outside of school!"

Everyone else chuckled sweetly at her, which only made her angrier.

Mia turned and smiled at her friend. "It's more to do with the International Statute of Secrecy thing than it is the Underage Magic thing. The Ministry isn't tracking specific wands or wizards but the presence of magic in general. When a Muggle-born is at home, there's a higher chance of random Muggles that aren't aware of magic stumbling upon the secret if children are just randomly twirling their wands about. However, in magical households, magic is constantly flowing, and the ministry likely leaves it up to the parents to make sure the children aren't using their wands outside of Hogwarts."

Lily's mouth had dropped open in shock, but before she had a chance to ask more questions or to retort about unfairness to Muggle-borns, Sirius turned the radio up, drowning out her protests.

*"Please, swallow your pride . . . If I have things you need to borrow . . ."*

Sirius scoffed. "Swallow my pride? This reminds you of me? Unlikely, kitten. But since we're apparently making song dedications . . ." he said with a devious grin, and the radio glowed purple when the tip of his wand touched it.

*"Let's . . . get it on."*

"Absolutely not!" Mia scowled and tapped her wand on the top of the radio, letting the song change once more.

*"Baby, baby, don't get hooked on me . . ."*

Mia laughed. "That's better."

"Already on my way there." Sirius grinned darkly down at her and touched the radio again with his wand.

*"Touch me in the morning, and then just walk away."*

Mia scowled, folding her arms across her chest. "You're doing this on purpose."

"Am I? Is there a problem, Miss Potter?"

Mia tapped the radio again.

*"And they called it puppy love."*

She burst into hysterical laughter, loud enough that everyone turned and gaped at her. Sirius stood by, an amused expression on his face as he tried to understand what exactly was so bloody funny. Mia continued to chuckle, tipping over and holding her side tightly until Sirius charmed the song again.

*"You'll be the queen of my highway, my motorcycle mama . . ."*

Mia rolled her eyes, charming the radio.

*"You're so vain, you probably think this song is about you."*

"Are you two done doing . . . whatever is it you're doing?" Mary asked from the riverbank where she and Lily were lying out on their towels, sunglasses resting on their eyes.

"Fighting?" Mia asked.

Sirius chuckled quietly. "Foreplay?"

"Just leave the music on for more than five seconds!" Lily snapped.

"Fine. But not *this* song. She doesn't get to win." Sirius grinned at Mia and tapped the radio once more.

*"And there he was this young boy . . . a stranger to my eyes . . ."*

Mia frowned. If he was still playing the game, it suddenly was not so much fun anymore. She had known this Sirius for over two years. Still, whenever she looked into those beautiful grey eyes, all she could think of were the equally beautiful grey eyes of a man somewhere far in the future, hopefully waiting for her.

She looked away from him, something that was difficult to do since he refused to stop staring at her or step out of her personal bubble.

*"Strumming my pain with his fingers. Singing my life with his words. Killing me softly with his song . . ."*

"What's wrong, kitten?" Sirius asked. "Weren't you just smiling two seconds ago? Want me to go tell Macdonald and Evans to piss off, and let us have our fun?" He grinned and reached out, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

*"I felt all flushed with fever . . . Embarrassed by the crowd . . ."*

"I'm fine, Sirius," she lied. "Just distracted. Thinking about school. It's only another month away, and I'm going to miss this." She gestured to the river and the orchard. "It's nice to be outside without worrying about everyone else. My own little private world where everyone I want to stay safe stays safe."

"You worry too much, love," Sirius said and leant back, dropping his head into her lap like he always did.

Despite the fact that the action was as innocent as it always had been, she wore nothing more than a swimming costume and was suddenly very well aware of how fast her heart was beating.

"You bloody well need to relax, woman. The world's not going to end just because we leave your little safety bubble." Sirius pouted when she had not started petting him, reaching up and putting her hand on his head in silent demand that she play with his hair.

*"And then he looked right through me . . . As if I wasn't there . . ."*

"You don't understand." Mia frowned and pushed him away.

Standing up, she made her way over to Remus as though he were the only other person there at the river. She sighed and sat down beside him, instinctively leaning her head on his shoulder, still frowning.

"Do I need to drown him for you?" Remus asked with the smallest of smirks, not even bothering to take his attention off his book, though he tilted his head slightly to the side to gently rest it on top of hers.

"I'm sick of his optimistic view of everything. Just tells me to relax as though there's nothing wrong in the world. Like I'm supposed to ignore all the things I'm worried about."

"Sounds familiar."

She sighed. "Don't start. Sirius trying to cheer me up is in no way like me trying to do the same with you. He doesn't know me. Not like—" *like he's supposed to*, "—you."

"Fair assumption, I suppose. Except that he *does* know you. Just because he doesn't sit around and talk books and dreams and fears with you on a regular basis doesn't mean he doesn't care. He's just acting out because he thinks you fancy him," Remus admitted and then sat back, watching her very carefully.

She shook her head, feeling herself blush. "That's ridiculous."

"Not so. You look lovely today, for the record," he said, turning back to his book.

Her breath caught in her throat, and her heart rate increased. She was used to Sirius's blatant flirting, but Remus was . . . different. When their eyes met once more, she could not help but think he actually looked a little smug.

"You look nice too." Mia smiled, and Remus scoffed. "What?" She quickly noticed that not only was he the only one of them that had not stepped foot in the water the entire time, he was also the only boy who was still wearing a shirt. James and Sirius basked in their pale frames, and, despite being exceptionally lanky and in dire need of sun cream, Frank was bare as well. Even Peter had taken off his shirt, eager to show that his leftover baby fat was edging away thanks to a growth spurt that summer.

"You're staring at me," Remus commented and raised a brow.

"You're still wearing your shirt," she said.

His eyes widened, and his face flushed as he frowned. "You know why."

"They're just scars, Remus." Mia smiled sadly at him. "'Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars.'" She reached over and gently touched the side of his ribs where she knew three long, deep scars rested on his skin. "You're beautiful."

Remus's brows knit together, and he turned his soft green eyes to her, staring with a look of wonder and confusion. He looked like he wanted to say something but could not bring himself to find the courage, so instead, he broke eye contact, cleared his throat, and smiled down. "Who was that?"

"Khalil Gibran," she replied with a disappointed sigh. "Poet."

"Wizard?" Remus asked, playing their game.

Mia smiled. "Muggle."

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

### *Everyone's Dangerous*

---

*I believe I can see the future  
Cause I repeat the same routine  
I think I used to have a purpose  
But then again  
That might have been a dream*  
(Every Day is Exactly the Same - Nine Inch Nails)

---

**September 2nd, 1973**

The first few days back at Hogwarts, Remus almost felt normal.

The full moon was still over a week away, and he barely felt it approaching. Ashamed as he was to admit it, Mia had been right the year prior when she had suggested that his transformations were getting worse because of a growth spurt. Though he had grown another inch over the summer, his transformations were not nearly as bad as last year—still agonising to the point of wishing he could black out, but not nearly as torturous. The aches, pains, and nausea that came with the approach—and descent—of the moon, were dealt with, in part, due to a massive supply of chocolate that his friends had given him for his last birthday. Unfortunately, their supply ran dry within two months, but thanks to James's Invisibility Cloak and a few unadventurous nights scouring the castle that led to what Sirius dubbed "the most amazing discovery ever," Remus and his friends found the most glorious secret that Hogwarts had kept hidden: a secret tunnel leading to Honeydukes.

Well-plied with sugar and eager for the term to begin the following morning, Remus sank back into the pillows strewn about his four poster bed, welcoming the night with a book in his hands, while his three comrades were off sneaking in third and fourth helpings of dinner from the house-elves in the kitchens. It was only when he yawned, catching a faint scent in the air, that he was reminded of another unfortunate symptom of lycanthropy that had, until very recently, remained dormant.

"Jamie?" Remus heard Mia whisper softly.

He closed his eyes, letting the scent of her wash over him like the river behind Potter Manor had washed over his body once Mia finally convinced him to jump in with

her. The water then had been cold—which was helpful—but the scent in the air that now poured over him was warm. Much *too* warm. He swallowed hard and tried to remain quiet.

"Sirius?" she whispered next, and a part of him bristled as he heard her pull the curtains away from the bed across from him.

She had come looking for her brother, of course, and Remus had immediately assumed it was because of her nightmares, which grew worse upon their initial return to Hogwarts each year. He felt terrible for her and wanted to help, but—despite the fact that Sirius's bed was directly next to James's—Remus could not help but silently complain over the fact that once she had found her brother missing from the room, she had gone to Sirius next.

He heard footsteps, and his eyes widened. He had known she would not find Sirius in his bed, which only meant that she would seek *him* out next, but he was yet unprepared as her scent grew closer, so he clenched his eyes tight to try and focus on something else. It was normal for a fourteen-year-old boy to deal with arousal, especially in the general vicinity of the female population, but it was something entirely different for one who had a nervously charged werewolf inside his head.

He finally heard her whisper *his* name and groaned quietly. He forced the sound back down his throat as he tried to forget that she had called him beautiful a month ago with her hand against his scars, nothing but a scrap of cotton separating her touch against his skin.

"Yeah?" He winced as he pulled the curtains back revealing a sad-looking Mia with dishevelled hair—which was not helping his issue—fidgeting with her hands. She had dried tear tracks on her cheeks. "You okay, love?"

"Are *you* okay? Oh, are you sick? I thought it had been getting better. I'll go." She frowned and made to move.

"No, it's nothing." *Lie.* "Not wolf related at least." *Lie.* "I think I just ate too much at dinner." *Lie.*

"Oh." Mia chewed the side of her lip, toeing the floor.

"Nightmares?" he asked softly, and she hesitated before nodding. "I don't know when James is due back. Those idiots ran for the kitchen the second we got back to the dorms," he admitted, a part of him annoyed that James was not here to take care of his

sister. The wolf in him was grateful that he had been alone—the sole person left behind to care for the girl.

"I should just . . . This is ridiculous. I am this old, and I can't sleep without my bloody brother." She sniffed, looking embarrassed, and Remus knew for certain that she had woken up in tears from whatever it was that plagued her.

"Do you . . . Do you need company?" he asked, rephrasing his original *Want to climb in?* with something he felt was more appropriate. It had been a year since they had shared a bed at Potter Manor. It felt innocent then, especially since James and Sirius were both there with them, encasing Mia between them all as if to protect her from her dreams. They were barely twelve at the time. Hell, most of them still drank their pumpkin juice from straws.

But now . . .

"Is that all right?" she asked quietly.

"Come on." Remus scooted to the side, kicking back the covers and allowing her to slip beneath them. He set his book down on the bed, somehow using the pages to keep her body from touching his as she made her way beneath the blanket, and closed the curtains behind her, blocking out the light that the sliver of moon in the sky allowed into the room.

He was momentarily reminded of the many times she had crawled into his bed in the hospital wing on the mornings after his transformations, once she was finished healing his bloodied and broken body. At first, it had been healing to his soul to have her there, willingly touching him and showing kindness, but after so long, it became increasingly difficult to rely on her so much. Not only did he not want to become dependent on her, but a nagging sense of pride somewhere deep down said that he wanted her to see him as strong.

Now, with her head cradled against him, *he* was suddenly the caretaker, and his wolf gave an internal yip of approval. He remained absolutely silent, not wanting to question her about the nightmares or her dried tears. That was the comfort of their friendship. Words were never necessary.

The moment she fell into a deep, deep sleep, Remus could not stand it any longer. He leant forward and nuzzled his nose into her hair and breathed in deep, hoping that if he grew accustomed to her scent it would not feel like a craving every time she walked into

a room. He exhaled slowly with a frown when it did not work. Yearning to inhale her scent increased steadily, and he gave in to it, burying his nose in her mane of curls again.

Just then, he heard the door to the dorm room open as his three friends returned.

"Don't take it personal, Pete," James said consolingly.

"Bloody house-elf called me fat," Peter bitterly grumbled as his footsteps carried him into the bathroom where Remus heard the shower turn on.

Sirius burst into a fit of laughter. "She didn't look like she was trying to offend. Just said how no other wizard enjoyed her food as much. Ever."

"Shh!" Remus scolded quietly, kicking the curtains around his bed aside.

"What's wrong?" James asked, raising his wand defensively, squinting across the room into the darkness toward Remus's bed.

"*Lumos*," Remus whispered and held his wand up to look at James, then moved the glowing stick over the form of the sleeping girl next to him.

James raised a questioning brow and nodded with a comprehending frown as he crossed the room to Remus's bed. Tucking his wand back in his pocket, he tossed the Invisibility Cloak over Remus's trunk and smiled appreciatively.

"Thanks," he said before collecting his sister in his arms.

Sirius frowned as he watched Mia subconsciously snuggle deeper into James's embrace. "Still bad?"

"Still bad." James nodded, and Sirius and Remus watched their friend bring his sister to his bed and tuck her in quietly.

All three boys shared a look of frustration and desperation. Wizards, the lot of them, and no idea how to fix the one person they had sworn to protect.

*Our job*, Sirius had said.

And they were failing.

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### September 3rd, 1973

Mia did not know what she was thinking when she chose her elective courses for her third year. The classes offered were as usual: Divination, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes,

Muggle Studies, and Care of Magical Creatures. She was absolutely *not* going to have an exact repeat of her original third year at Hogwarts. Her life was already upturned thanks to a Time-Turner, and she was in no mood to use another one just to accommodate a full schedule.

It had been her plan to take on Ancient Runes with Remus and Lily—seeing that it was a subject she never tired of learning—as well as Arithmancy because it was the hardest, and she could use a refresher course. Despite what her friends were aware of, Mia had no need for Muggle Studies, and she laughed hysterically when she overheard the boys thinking about taking on Divination.

Sirius grinned at her. "You're not interested in predicting the future?"

"Not in the slightest, Sirius Black." Mia scoffed, as though she were offended by the question. "In fact, I might already be a Seer. Which is why I don't need to take Divination."

She smiled up at Remus, who passed her morning cup of tea across to her as she refilled his glass of juice, their tandem breakfast routine never breaking momentum as they engaged in conversation with others.

"You're a Seer? That's sexy. Ow!" Sirius winced and looked up to see James glaring at him. Brushing off her protective older brother, Sirius turned his attention back to Mia. "Come on then, love, give us a prediction."

"Fine," she agreed boldly in between sips of tea. "I predict that a girl will smack you by the end of the day."

"Ooo, I love it when girls smack me. Will it hurt?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I'll do my best."

Sirius winked. "I bet you will."

"Knock it off!" James groaned and hit Sirius again, while Remus laughed quietly.

"Hey, she said she's a Seer," Sirius said in his own defence, holding up his empty plate as a shield against James and his attacks. "I want her to tell me my future!"

Mia frowned as a cold chill filled her.

She closed her eyes and could see it so clearly. Their future, her past. Sirius and Remus standing in the Shrieking Shack, reunited after twelve horrible years apart, both looking broken and wounded beyond repair. Images of Sirius being attacked by dementors, and of an older Remus sobbing in her arms after his first full moon in years without the

Wolfsbane Potion. Memories of pulling Sirius from the veil, and of Remus crying over the thought of his child being infected with lycanthropy. A vision of them both being tortured by Death Eaters, and Voldemort with the Elder Wand aimed at her.

And nothing of James.

"Mia?" Remus whispered gently, reaching across the table to touch her hand. "Where'd you go?"

"Far away," she admitted sadly and then turned to look at James and Sirius, who looked just as worried. "Stop. I'm fine."

She finished her breakfast and pushed her plate away, but not before grabbing the last two pieces of bacon she had not finished and setting them onto Remus's plate. He looked up at her with a grateful smile but scowled when Sirius snatched one piece up for himself.

"You boys go ahead with Divination if you'd like. Write down all your little predictions and let me know what you 'see,'" she said, actually bringing her fingers up to use air quotes sarcastically. "I'll be more than happy to tell you how wrong they are."

A part of her thought how amusing it would be to really pretend to be a Seer. She would become the most famous Seer of all considering how much she knew about the future. As laughable as the thought was, it was equally dangerous. Mia could not imagine what Voldemort would do to her if he knew that she had detailed knowledge of his eventual destruction.

In the end, only Peter kept the course, which was fine with her as it was one less class where she had to look at him.

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Despite standing firm on Divination, she had still broken down when James, Sirius, and Remus had guilted her into changing her choice of electives. While she kept Ancient Runes to stay close to Remus and Lily, she now stood outside the castle near the Forbidden Forest where a large group of small pens had been put together to look like a Muggle petting zoo.

A battle-worn man leant against a large post, looking grumpy as though someone had just rained on his parade.

"I'm Professor Silvanus Kettleburn," the old wizard grumbled. "Welcome to Care of Magical Creatures. Not that you'll *actually* be caring for anything of any real interest. As the Ministry has seen fit to remind me that if one's leg is eaten by a dragon, one shouldn't then try to introduce said dragon to students."

His left leg was missing just below the knee. Unlike Mad-Eye Moody, who wore a wooden prosthetic, Professor Kettleburn appeared content to just hop around.

"It wasn't even *really* a dragon," he added with a pout as though it made all the difference.

"Merlin, *this* is where Hagrid gets it," Mia whispered to herself as the professor, with his one remaining hand, scratched at the stump where his forearm used to be.

"Oh, this?" He gestured to the elbow as the students stared. "Chimaera. Cuddly little things. They've got quite the appetite, though." He smiled wistfully as if he were remembering an old pet. "Right then, come on over and take a peek at the pens. We've got nifflers right there, a few puffskeins, some nogtails, and a knarl. Thought I'd show you lot a handful of little things to start with."

James pouted, his shoulders slumping as he made eye contact with a nogtail that purred at him. "These fluffy things are *pets*. Where're the dragons?"

"I want to see the chimaera that chewed his bloody arm off," Sirius whispered.

"I want to be in Arithmancy," Mia complained.

Remus chuckled softly and patted her shoulder consolingly.

"Professor?" James asked. "Are we going to see anything, I don't know, *bigger* than this? I heard we've just got a herd of hippogriffs brought in. And there are unicorns in the Forbidden Forest, aren't there?"

Professor Kettleburn shook his head. "Not for *you* lad. Unicorns don't take much of a liking to young men. They wouldn't like you much."

"Evans must be a unicorn." Sirius chuckled, and Remus joined in, while James glared at them both.

"As for the hippogriffs, they're being evaluated before students are allowed near them. Temperamental, if you aren't respectful of them." He dipped his chin, and Mia quietly smirked; the thought of watching either of the Carrow twins getting mauled by a hippogriff—as Malfoy had been—made her happy inside.

"So *nothing* interesting, then?" Sirius complained.

"Depends on what you'd consider interesting. I think it's interesting that you've got a niffler about to take that Muggle watch off your wrist."

"Hey!" Sirius yelled, spinning around just as the tiny animal latched its little paws on his arm, tugging at the watch that he had bought that summer. "Let go!"

Rolling her eyes, Mia approached, putting her hands under the front legs of the niffler and prying it away from Sirius, giving the boy a reproachful look in the process. "It's only a baby," she said with a teasing lilt to her voice.

"You can ask me anything you want about any creature that exists, I've basically seen it all," Professor Kettleburn said and moved like he was going to cross his arms over his chest, except he was missing one of them. "I'd rather you see with your own eyes, but the Ministry has rules in place. So, you'll just have to trust your books there and *my* expertise."

"What's the proper way to feed a werewolf?" Sirius asked, and Mia turned and glared at him after putting the baby niffler back with the others.

Remus shook his head knowingly as he approached the niffler pen.

"Let's say," Sirius continued, "that you've got a werewolf—cute little thing. And your werewolf starts getting fat . . ." He grinned and watched as Remus turned and narrowed his eyes at his friend.

Professor Kettleburn stared at Sirius. "Mr Black. Werewolves aren't *pets*."

"They did this on purpose, didn't they?" Mia asked Remus.

"Yes."

"You knew?"

He chuckled. "Of course."

"Is this the entire reason that we're even in this class? Remus, *please* tell me that we did not sign up for an entire class based on the fact that Sirius wanted to make a werewolf joke." She glared and watched as Remus turned and grinned wryly at her, silently confirming the answer she already knew. "Wonderful. I could have been in Arithmancy right now with Lily."

"You *could* be in Divination with Peter," Remus teased.

"I don't need to read tea leaves in the bottom of a cup to know that I'm going to throttle Sirius when Professor Kettleburn is not looking." She turned to glare at Sirius, who

was now asking about dragons as though purposely diverting attention from the subject of werewolves, despite the fact that he had been the one to bring it up in the first place.

"I was never allowed to have a pet," Remus said under his breath as he looked down into the pens of the small animals, all of which appeared to be scuttling as far away from him as possible. Some were quaking and looked terrified. Remus exhaled sharply at the reaction and frowned.

Mia placed a hand on his arm and smiled. "Don't take it personally. They can smell you just as easily as you can smell them. They see you as a predator." She caught his immediate horrified look and sighed. "It's not a bad thing, Remus. Predator and prey is the way life is. It's the way animals work, even magical ones."

When he still refused to take the self-condemnatory look off his face, she went on. "Do you know much about hippogriffs?"

"Just what the book mentioned," he replied, gesturing to the tome in his bag.

Mia smiled, knowing that he had already read the whole thing. Had she not known him well enough, she would have assumed he had read all of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* in order to make sure his name and address was not listed inside, but she *did* know him better and was well aware that Remus took his studies just as seriously as she did.

"Tell me some defining characteristics of a hippogriff."

Remus let out a frustrated sigh. "Why do I feel that this is one of the life lessons you're always trying to teach me?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Humour me."

"Fine. Hippogriffs are proud, easily offended. You're supposed to take extra caution when approaching them, bowing and such. They're extremely dangerous, but can be fiercely loyal and protective of . . ." He stopped and glared at her. "I am *not* a hippogriff, Mia."

"No, you're not," she agreed pleasantly. "Now, what do hippogriffs eat?"

"Small mammals," Remus answered. "Ferrets and weasels, usually."

"So hippogriffs are predators?"

"Technically," he said slowly.

"And would you say that hippogriffs are absolute bastards for being what they are?" Remus's jaw tightened, and his nose twitched. "Well look at *that*. If I didn't know any better,

I would say that you have been *easily offended*. Wounded *pride*?" She asked, and Remus growled low in response. "You know that with that glare you've got in your eyes right now, you look *extremely dangerous*. But I'm not afraid because I know how *fiercely loyal and protective* you are."

"I am *not* a hippogriff," Remus repeated, his eyes flashing gold so quickly that she knew she was the only one to see it. "Stop trying to convince me that I'm not a monster."

She met him, glare for glare, and leant in close to his face, refusing to back down. "Stop trying to convince yourself that you *are* one!" she snapped and turned on her heels, storming away from him in a flurry of bouncing, wild curls.

Remus sighed in frustration as he watched her go, annoyed that the breeze blew toward him, essentially shoving the scent of her hair in his face.

"What did Sirius do now?" James asked as he approached Remus, watching Mia stomp away from the rest of the class.

"Sirius is still over there bothering Kettleburn." Remus gestured. "What makes you think *he's* the one that pissed her off?"

"He usually is." James laughed, and for a moment, Remus joined in. "So what did *you* say to get her that mad? She normally reserves that particular scathing look for Slytherins." He leant casually against the animal enclosure, and Remus took a step away from it, watching closely as the little nogtails made their way back to the centre of the pen, one even coming up to sniff at James's hand as it hung over the fence.

"She's pissed at me."

"That is obvious," James said with a chuckle, gently scratching the nogtail on the head.

"She tried convincing me that werewolves aren't monsters," he said, trying to take himself out of the sentence by referencing the species as a whole. It did not do much for the conversation, as James just shook his head and laughed harder.

"Oh, that would certainly set her off. There are few things that'll anger my sister to the point where she looks lethal, and anyone talking poorly about *you* is near the top of that list. It's about tied with anything to do with Sirius's family, or me putting myself in danger. Remember at the river when I slipped on that rock and hit my head? She yelled at me for hours after you all left."

"That's different," Remus insisted and lowered his voice despite the fact that they were not standing within hearing range of anyone except the little nootails and niffles. "She's naive if she thinks that she can talk me out of being dangerous."

"Get over yourself, mate," James said reprovingly. "*Everyone's* dangerous."

Remus growled. "Not like me."

"No, not like you," James agreed. "Mia's dangerous because she's too smart. Girl knows hexes and charms that we're not supposed to even learn until N.E.W.T. levels. Evans is the same. Sirius is dangerous because his temper's too short. The second years have a pool going around to see how many fights he gets into this year. It's a ten Galleon buy in, if you want."

Remus shook his head.

"I'm dangerous because I don't let people know how good I am at what I do," James went on as if he were a professor in his own class. "Everyone thinks it's ego and that I'm overcompensating. I'm *not*."

Remus understood. He, James, and Sirius had practise duelled a time or two the previous years, and James always dominated the two by speed alone.

"Peter's probably the only one of us who's not a danger," James laughed, trying to break up the tense moment.

"Peter's dangerous. He's too unsuspecting not to be," Remus said with a chuckle, and James followed suit.

"Hey!" Sirius ran over to them with a grin. "Did you guys know that chimaeras purr if you scratch their belly? And they make the same noise when they're eating human flesh."

They all looked back to Professor Kettleburn who was absently scratching his arm stump again.

Just before class ended, Mia returned, and without a word to Remus, she wound her hand back and hit Sirius over the back of the head. He let out a small yelp and turned to face her while James and Remus laughed behind his back.

"I must really be a Seer. I predicted that you'd be hit by a girl today."

## Chapter Thirty

### *I Am Not Afraid*

---

*Sometimes I wish I could save you  
And there're so many things that I want you to know  
I won't give up till it's over  
If it takes you forever I want you to know  
(Save You - Simple Plan)*

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**September 3rd, 1973**

After lunch, the Gryffindors and Slytherins made their way to the first Defence Against the Dark Arts class.

Mia was practically bouncing on the balls of her feet as she walked into the room and took her usual seat beside Remus with James on the other side, and Sirius and Peter sitting behind them. Lily sat with the Gryffindors as usual—though as close to the Slytherins as was permitted, with Snape doing the same on the opposite side. Lily was flanked by Mary and Alice, who was offering a comforting glance to Frank who looked nervous, as this was his worst subject.

As Remus took his seat, he elbowed her. "What has you in such a good mood?"

He avoided talking to her directly throughout lunch. She assumed that he was worried she would bring up the subject of werewolves again, and they'd argue. She knew there was nothing she could say to change his mind about his own condition, but she was too stubborn to back down.

She had eaten in near silence, only casually talking about classes from time to time, though never with him. It was not until Sirius asked what the next class was that Mia cheered up dramatically. She was in her third year, on her way to Defence class, with Remus. Finding amusement in the little things helped to make her ignore the tension that was hovering in the near future.

A tall man with deep auburn hair stepped through the doors of the classroom, shutting them closed behind him before he made his way to the front in just a few strides as his legs were so long. He had a familiar twinkle in his eye, and when he aimed his wand at the board, a name appeared on it: *Professor Ignatius Prewett*.

"Good afternoon. Now, there's not much room in here, so everyone stand up," Professor Prewett instructed, and the students all stood from their seats. With a flourish of his wand, one by one, the desks in front of them transfigured into small wooden blocks. "Someone pile those in the corner. There will be no need for desks in this class! What you learn about Defence Against the Dark Arts is practical. You can only read so many books and write so many essays."

Sirius and James looked beside themselves with joy.

"That's not to say you *won't* have to write a couple essays." Professor Prewett chuckled, and Mia stifled a laugh as she saw James and Sirius deflate instantly. "Just not while you're in the class. When you're here with me, you will be learning to wield your wands, focus your magic, and defend yourselves properly."

Mia wondered what was happening out in the world right now. There had been reports in the *Daily Prophet* of Muggle muggings and a few attacks on Muggle-borns, and although the term "Death Eater" had not been used yet, it was obvious who was behind it all. She wondered whether Dumbledore had already formed the Order of the Phoenix yet. If so, she imagined that Professor Prewett was a member. She knew that his nephews—Gideon and Fabian—were, or would be at some point in the near future. She imagined that this immediate lesson on defence was for a reason. Things were getting bad outside the walls of the castle, and they all needed to be on guard.

"Can someone tell me what the greatest disadvantage one can have when dealing with the Dark Arts is?" Professor Prewett asked. Many hands went up in the air. "Yes, Mr Snape?"

"Incompetence," Snape drawled, staring across the aisle to glare at the Marauders.

Professor Prewett actually appeared amused by the answer and gave a throaty chuckle, which actually seemed to irritate Snape as he scowled up at the teacher. "Not quite, my boy, not quite. No. *Fear*," he explained. "Fear can be healthy when it's used properly. But fear can also be debilitating if not focused."

He turned around and gestured to a black trunk on the floor. He kicked it once, and the large chest began to shake from within. Some students gasped, others looked intrigued. Mia looked captivated with excitement.

"Who can tell me what a boggart is?" Professor Prewett asked.

Four hands jumped in the air: Snape, Mia, Lily, and Remus.

"Yes, Mr Lupin?"

Remus puffed out his chest, suddenly in his element. "It's a shape shifter that bases its form on the fear of others."

Professor Prewett grinned. "Ten points to Gryffindor."

"I've always wanted to see one of these," Remus quietly admitted to Mia, who beamed up at him proudly.

"Boggarts are usually found in dark spaces. Old dressers and wardrobes, inside cupboards, or beneath the stairs. This little bugger," the professor said with a chuckle, kicking the trunk again, "was found by my nephews while they were cleaning out the attic of a friend's house. I offered to take it off their hands. Now, when I let this creature out of its cage, what will we see?"

Lily's hand flew up quickly.

"Miss Evans?"

"We don't know, sir. If it takes the form of fear, then it will look differently to all of us."

"You're almost entirely correct. The boggart deals with individuals. So, it will focus in on one of you at a time. If you're in a group, such as you are now," Professor Prewett said, gesturing to the class as a whole, "then it'll confuse the boggart and give you a better chance of defeating it. But if it keeps its focus easily, then it will conform to your worst fears, and everyone will be able to see them. Not just you."

Several students paled, Mia included. Something deep down told her that she would not see Professor McGonagall this time, telling her that she had failed all of her exams.

"The charm that repels a boggart is simple, yet it requires force of mind. You see, the thing that really finishes a boggart is laughter. What you need to do is force it to assume a shape that you find amusing. We will practise the charm without wands first. After me, please . . . Riddikulus!"

"Riddikulus!"

"Miss Macdonald, will you come and help me in teaching the class how to focus the charm?" He smiled down at Mary, who slowly moved to the front of the class, staring down at the closed trunk. "Now, what are you afraid of?"

"Rats," Mary mumbled quietly.

Sirius, James, and Remus all shared a look. Peter looked down at the floor, utterly devastated. Mia caught the expressions and quirked an eyebrow, figuring that the boys had at least begun their Animagus training.

"All right, now, when I let this boggart out and it turns into your fear, I want you to aim your wand and envision something funny in your mind. See it very clearly, focus, and say, 'Riddikulus,' all right?"

Slowly the class moved away from Mary, but none faster than Mia, Remus, and Sirius who stood with their backs pressed tightly against the rear wall of the classroom.

Professor Prewett flicked his wand, and the latch keeping the boggart in the trunk opened. The lid kicked backward with a bang! A very large rat with small, watery eyes and long, yellow front teeth crept out. It was the size of a dog. It turned and sniffed toward Mary, who looked petrified.

"*Riddikulus!*" she finally shouted, watching as a large mousetrap appeared beneath the rat and sprung forward.

Peter gave a loud yelp and turned to vomit in a nearby dustbin.

Mia grinned vindictively at the sight but turned her attention back to the rat, which had turned into a rubber toy rat that squeaked as the metal trap continuously squeezed it.

"Well done!" Professor Prewett said with a grin, and Mary smiled. "Everyone form a line!"

They all did, save for the three frightened Gryffindors at the back of the room.

The professor gestured to Alice. "Miss Brown!"

There was a loud crack, and where the rubber rat had once sat now stood a large cockroach towering over young Alice.

"*Riddikulus!*"

The cockroach slipped on a banana peel that had appeared at its feet and fell backward onto its back, unable to right itself.

"Mr Pettigrew!"

Peter slowly stepped forward, nervously holding his wand in hand. With a crack, the upturned cockroach turned into a large cat that paced back and forth across the room, stalking with its yellow eyes turned on Peter, licking its jaws.

"*Riddikulus!*"

The cat shrunk down quickly to the size of a pygmy puff with a large red bow wrapped around its neck. It let out the smallest meow before the weight of the bow was too much and the little kitten toppled forward, smacking its small face into the floor.

"Miss Evans, you're up!"

Lily stepped forward just as the tiny kitten shifted and grew tall and large, taking the shape of a man with a white painted face, curly red hair, and big floppy shoes.

James gaped. "What the hell is that?"

"A clown," Mia answered quietly, and everyone stared at her. "It's a Muggle . . . thing." She shrugged and then added, "I read about it."

"*Riddikulus!*" Lily shouted, and the clown looked down at his chest as they all heard a ticking sound. He pulled open his large vest to reveal a clock strapped to sticks of dynamite stuck to his shirt. Suddenly, the clown exploded right in front of everyone, raining down confetti upon them all.

Professor Prewett looked impressed. Lily looked proud. James looked besotted.

"All right, Mr Potter, you're up!"

"Poor Jamie," Mia whispered to Remus with a frown. "He won't admit it, but he's afraid of snakes. The Slytherins are going to have a fit."

She sighed as she watched her brother approach the pile of confetti on the floor as it shifted in front of him. Though, instead of the large snake she had expected to see, all she saw was a set of double doors. Her mouth fell open as she looked up at those familiar white oak doors.

"Is that my . . . ?" she began with panic in her voice, and almost immediately she felt two hands on her shoulders, holding her steady. One belonging to Remus, the other to Sirius. She turned back and the looks on their faces said that they knew what was about to happen.

Mia looked on as James stared at the silent white doors, and suddenly a sharp scream echoed from behind them.

*Mia's* scream.

James stood frozen.

"Go ahead, James," Professor Prewett encouraged as the door continued to hold back the screams behind it.

"*Riddikulus!*" James finally shouted, and the scream behind the door turned to laughter.

Instead of looking proud or even smug, he spun away from the boggart with his head low and his brow furrowed in anger. Without another word, he turned and walked out of the room, not giving a passing glance to anyone as he left.

"That might do for now," Professor Prewett said as he aimed his wand at the boggart, shouting a charm to contain the creature, sticking it back inside the trunk. "Read chapter one in your books, and be prepared next class to dive into basic defensive spells. Dismissed."

Everyone turned to leave, none more eager than Mia and the Marauders who were determined to go after James, but unfortunately, the professor called out, "Not you three. Mistery Black and Lupin, and Miss Potter, will you linger for a few moments?"

They each gave a heavy sigh.

Mia turned once the rest of the students had left and the door shut them in the quiet classroom. "Sir, I think I should go after my brother."

"Can I assume that the voice Mr Potter heard beyond that door was yours?"

"Yes," Remus and Sirius answered together, both looking stricken.

Mia stared at them with wide eyes, embarrassed. "I have nightmares sometimes."

"Are these nightmares shared?" Professor Prewett asked, his focus shifting between the three of them. "Some fears are much worse than others, Miss Potter. I hadn't thought that a group of thirteen-year-olds would have more to fear than a few bugs, a ghoul or two, perhaps a banshee if we were lucky. I made a mistake in my assumption, and for that, I apologise." He touched his hand to his heart in a gesture of true remorse. "I will say the same to young Mr Potter next I see him."

Mia inclined her head. "Thank you, sir."

"That being said, I refuse to allow my students to let their fears overtake them. It was the purpose of this lesson after all." He stood and moved to the trunk. "An important talent in learning to fight the Dark Arts is observing your surroundings. Do you know what I observed today?" he asked them, and they all shook their heads. "When I spoke of my intentions to release the boggart where everyone would see it, I observed a large group of curious but nervous students. And three students..." He pointed to each of them

individually as he sat down on the shaking trunk. "Three *Gryffindors* at that, who were hiding in the back of the room, looking terrified."

Mia refused to break eye contact with the man.

"Gryffindors aren't known to back down from their fears. Being sorted with the bold into the House of the Great Godric does allow for weaknesses." Professor Prewett smiled softly. "Those include pride. I imagine each of you was not afraid to face the boggart, but more worried that others would see your fears for themselves.

"May I make a suggestion? I suggest that you face all of your fears. Both the ones you believe that the boggart will take the form of, as well as your fear of others seeing your personal phobia. Miss Potter? Do you trust these boys? Are they your friends?"

"They're my best friends," she whispered quietly.

"And do you trust them?"

"With everything." *Except the truth.*

Professor Prewett turned to the boys. "And the two of you?"

Remus dipped his chin solemnly. "I trust them."

"I don't want them to see," Sirius blurted out, a look of frustration and anger on his face.

Intuitively, Mia reached out and took his hand, and Sirius's anger melted into what looked like shame and guilt.

He laced his fingers with hers and just silently nodded. "Fine. But I don't go first."

Remus sighed. "I'll do it. They already know anyway," he muttered bitterly and stepped forward, gripping his wand.

Professor Prewett stood up, reaching for his own wand and aiming it at the shaking trunk. "Now, Mr Lupin, I want you to take your time with this. Don't just shout the charm quickly to get the boggart to go away. If I'm right . . . If I'm right, you'll each need time to focus on the image, perhaps examine your fears closer in order to conquer them, instead of hiding them away."

Remus gave a curt nod.

Professor Prewett flicked his wand, and the trunk flew open with a bang.

Nothing happened at first, which shocked Mia. She had fully expected to see the image of a moon appear in the centre of the room. She had seen Remus's boggart before,

in this very classroom, during a lesson that *he* had been teaching. Of course, now Mia knew where Professor Lupin got the idea of bringing a boggart into the class in the first place.

A low growl could be heard, and Mia's eyes widened as a massive wolf slowly crept from the trunk.

Remus looked at their professor in a panic, but the man only offered an understanding smile. "Professor Dumbledore explained your situation, and you're safe here. No one's going to find out anything that you don't want them to."

The wolf's enormous paws hit the floor, and Mia gaped at the sight. She had seen it before, of course, though it had been at night with only the moon giving light to the scene. It had also been a blur of motion when she had first seen an older Remus transform into the beast that now stood before them all.

Almost as though history were repeating itself—at least *her* history—Mia could feel Sirius move closer to her. She turned slightly to see a protective look on his face and smiled inwardly at the familiar gesture before her attention was brought back to the large werewolf that now stood face to face with Remus.

The wolf growled viciously, its golden eyes glared at Remus, who was shaking.

Mia observed silently, examining the eyes of the large wolf and the colour of its fur, completely unaware that its muzzle was drenched in blood; the crimson liquid dripped from its mouth creating a pool on the floor at Remus's feet.

"It's all right, son," Professor Prewett said, holding his wand tightly in his hand, just in case. "I'm here, take your time."

"It's beautiful," Mia whispered softly to herself as she noticed the way that the light hit the wolf's fur. A lovely colour of sandy blond, just like Remus's hair.

"Are you out of your mind?!" Remus turned on her, his own eyes flashing gold, reflecting the wolf standing behind him. He glared at her as if she were stupid, and the look took the breath right out of her. "Do you know what this is?!"

"Yes!" Mia yelled back at him.

"Do you know whose blood that is, then?" Remus growled at her, the sound almost identical to the snarling beast behind him. "Go on, Mia, take a fucking guess!"

Sirius reacted quickly by standing in front of her, but she pushed him away from her, never taking her focus off of Remus, his stare full of rage.

As if to make his point further, the boggart wolf dropped something from its jaws into the pool of blood on the floor. Everyone turned to look; and Mia gasped as she saw the glimmer of a goblin-made gold bracelet, engraved with the words of the House of Potter.

"I'm done." Remus shook his head, furious, and aimed his wand. "*Riddikulus!*"

The boggart wolf shrunk down, much like Peter's boggart cat had, into the small frame of a tiny wolf pup, the sight of which made Mia want to sob as she recalled that Remus had been bitten and turned when he was only four years old.

Remus glared at everyone before stalking toward the door.

"Oh, no you don't," Mia said firmly as she stood in his way.

"Move," Remus growled down at her.

"I am *not* afraid of you," she said, reaching up to touch his cheeks with her hands. He tried to pull away from her at first, but she held on. "No! You would never hurt me. And I am not afraid of you."

"You *should* be," Remus whispered, the expression of anger having fled his face as he looked down at her with grief as though he had already killed her—or worse, infected her.

Sirius's annoyed voice broke the tension. "If you're done with your pity party, Remus, I'd like to get my *own* over with and forget this day ever happened," he said bitterly as he approached the front of the room and glared at the professor, angry for being put in this situation. "Just do it."

Remus and Mia turned just in time to see the small wolf pup grow upward, changing into human form. Mia raised a brow as she saw Sirius standing there, face to face with himself. She stepped closer, followed by Remus, who had gripped her hand in the process, and the two lingered behind the real Sirius, staring into the visage of his boggart.

"Merlin." Sirius shook his head. "Walburga would love this."

Mia immediately noticed the differences in the boggart. Sirius's doppelgänger wore green and black robes, the Slytherin crest embroidered on the lapel. His hair, while still long and black, was neatly kept and tied back with a leather thong, much like the one Regulus wore. He also had a sneer on his face that immediately reminded Mia of a young Draco Malfoy.

Then, the boggart of Sirius raised his wand with a vicious smirk. As the robes came up over his arm, Mia saw the outline of something dark and black against his skin. She gasped, realising immediately what it was, but she had no time to say or do anything as the boggart silently mouthed, "Avada—"

"*Riddikulus!*" Professor Prewett shouted, and the boggart exploded into a thousand wisps of smoke.

Sirius stood there, staring ahead with wide, terrified eyes.

"I'm sorry, son." Professor Prewett shook his head. "Boggarts do not have the ability to cast spells, but . . . Habit I suppose, defending against curses."

Mia rushed forward and flung her arms tightly around Sirius who, unlike Remus, immediately held her against him, burying his nose in her hair.

"You boys did good work today. I'd like to work with you individually on a few things. I think it's important. As for you, Miss Potter, I'll be on the lookout for a new boggart so you can finish the lesson. In the meantime, I hope you're able to talk about those nightmares to someone. It's not good to let fear fester."

"Thank you, Professor," Mia said, though she certainly did not mean the words.

As soon as the three left the classroom, Sirius muttered, "Mia? What was your boggart going to be?"

She did not want to tell them, but they had both opened up, letting her see the weakest parts of themselves: their deepest fears. Fears she knew were unnecessary.

Remus was not a monster, and Sirius was not a Death Eater. But she could not help but frown, knowing their eventual fates. Remus would, in fact, be labelled a monster, cut off from society and forced into poverty because of his affliction. Sirius would eventually be labelled a Death Eater, framed for the murder and betrayal of his friends. Their deepest fears would haunt them for years to come.

"My boggart would have been the two of you," she said, "telling me how much you hated me."

Sirius and Remus had equal looks of confusion on their faces, and she could tell they thought her fear was stupid.

"That's . . ." Sirius began.

"Impossible," Remus finished, taking her face in his hands just as she had done to him earlier. "Mia, you're my best friend. I could never hate you. I actually can't think of a single thing you could do to ever make me hate you."

"He's right. Why the hell would you be afraid of something so . . . stupid?" Sirius asked, and Remus let out a sigh of frustration.

Mia didn't even flinch at them.

"Because you're *that* important to me. Because . . . I'm terrified to think that in twenty years you'll both be gone, everything will have changed, and you'll just . . . hate me." She shook her head and growled, "Look, fine, it's stupid, I get it."

Sirius offered a small grin. "At least you realise that, kitten."

Of course, she would not tell them the whole truth. Her boggart *would* have been the two of them standing in front of her, but instead of the thirteen-year-old boys who now walked beside her, they would appear as near forty-year-old men, and at their feet would be the body of a twenty-one-year-old James Potter, eyes blankly open—whom Mia had failed to save.

## Chapter Thirty-One

### *Ours*

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*I'm goin' home, gonna load my shotgun  
Wait by the door and light a cigarette  
If he wants a fight well now he's got one  
And he ain't seen me crazy yet*  
(Gunpowder & Lead - Miranda Lambert)

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**November 3rd, 1973**

It had taken days for the Marauders and Mia to get back to normal after dealing with the boggart. None of them talked about what had happened—especially James, who had gone on pretending as though the entire class *hadn't* seen inside his deepest fears.

Regardless of what occurred, Mia still quietly slipped into the boys' dorm late at night, crawling into James's bed and holding onto her brother tightly to drive away her nightmares. Nightmares that were now plagued with visions of *him* dead instead of the usual images of Bellatrix Lestrange torturing her. Sometimes the nightmares would shift, and she would see Sirius and Remus being tortured all over again in the Forbidden Forest. She would get up quietly, so as not to wake her twin, and peek in on her other boys because she needed to see them with her own eyes to make sure they were safe.

The mood stayed with her for well over a month; the parallels between this year and her *original* third year that took place in 1993 were eerily similar: Sirius had spent his first month in detention with McGonagall, reminding Mia that it was in her *original* third year that the older Sirius Black escaped Azkaban. Remus put a great deal of effort into his studies, meeting one-on-one with Professor Prewett. The way he carried himself made her smile and think of the brilliant Professor Lupin she had met long ago, who raised her study of Defence Against the Dark Arts to a higher level than ever before.

Anytime she looked at James, she would frown and the happiness in her life would be sucked out of her as if a dementor was nearby. In fact, it was in her *original* third year when she had first come face to face with the dark creatures. Mia wished that she could conjure her Patronus to cheer her up without anyone noticing.

"Hogsmeade!" Sirius shouted with a grin as he plopped himself beside James at breakfast the first weekend of November. "All right, mates. Do we have our lists?"

Mia raised a suspicious brow. "Do I want to know what you four are up to?"

Sirius grinned at her. "Just a little project, kitten."

"Sirius found a secret passageway into Hogsmeade last year," Remus said with a chuckle. "He wants us to go looking for more while we're down there today."

"Oi! That was a Marauder secret! Remus, you're the worst secret keeper ever!"

Surprised by how his words triggered something deep down inside of her, Mia snapped, "He is not! In fact, Remus should *always* be your secret keeper." She eyed Sirius and then let her gaze linger on James before drifting to Peter. "Always."

Peter whispered, "I'm good at keeping secrets."

Mia internally grimaced, remembering the words which had been exchanged between Harry, Peter, and Sirius that fateful night in the Shrieking Shack.

"Oookay." Sirius raised a brow at the strange turn the conversation had taken. "Back to the plan. Are you all in?"

"I've got something to do first," James said and stood up.

Immediately, the boys groaned at the movement, clearly knowing what he was planning as he pulled his legs over the bench and began walking down the length of the table.

"This is going to be ugly." Remus shook his head and looked away.

Sirius, on the other hand, was watching eagerly with a devious grin on his face. "Who wants to bet he'll end up wearing whatever it is she's eating?"

"Beautiful morning, isn't it, Evans?" they could hear James declare down the table. "Not *nearly* as beautiful as you."

Mia winced and covered her eyes and waited for her brother to blow it.

"So, how about you let me show off that pretty face of yours in Hogsmeade, yeah?"

There was a loud crashing noise followed by a small round of laughter and applause as James walked back to his seat looking utterly devastated. A bowl of upturned porridge rested on top of his head, the warm milk leaking down his face.

"Could have been worse," Sirius suggested.

James pouted. "*How?*"

"You could have asked her last night. She had soup for dinner."

Remus, Mia, and Peter stifled their laughs as James slowly removed the bowl from his head and manoeuvred his wand to Scourgify his hair. It ended up looking worse once it was clean, sticking up straight in the back.

Sirius shook his head and sighed loudly, drawing all attention back to him. "Now that your weekly emasculation at the hands of Evans is complete, can we go back to our Hogsmeade plans?"

"You going to Hogsmeade, Black?"

Mia turned to spot a fourth year Ravenclaw grinning down at Sirius. Much to her annoyance, Sirius turned on his seat and grinned up at the girl.

"What's it to you, McKinnon?" Sirius asked, looking the girl over.

Mia clenched her fists tightly.

"Oh, I was just wondering who was going to walk me all the way down." McKinnon pursed her lips, and Sirius's gaze immediately drew toward them. "It's an awful long way to walk by yourself. You wouldn't happen to already have a date, would you, Sirius?"

"Well, I was planning on spending the day with these sad sods." Sirius gestured to his friends, all of whom now looked mildly offended over the fact that he had been an arse about this trip for weeks only to ditch them now for a pretty skirt. "But what kind of gentleman would I be if I let a pretty girl walk alone?"

"See you outside then." The blonde winked at him and sashayed off.

Sirius turned back and grinned at his friends. "Change of plans, mates. I've got a date!" he said excitedly and stood up from the table, patting James on the back before rushing out of the Great Hall, leaving a quiet table behind.

Every third year Gryffindor girl was staring at Mia. A few other tables had turned to gawk at the scene as well. It was not every day a fourth year asked a third year to go to Hogsmeade, but then again, this was Sirius Black. Even a few passing Slytherins had been watching from the side-lines.

"Who was *that*?" Alice whispered to Lily.

"Marlene McKinnon," Lily replied stiffly. "She clearly didn't know better."

"She obviously doesn't know Mia," Mary added as she stabbed her fork into a piece of fruit on her plate, glaring at McKinnon from behind as though she would jump to attack if Mia would just ask her to.

Mia shrugged her shoulders, looking at her plate but no longer having the desire to eat. "It's fine. Sirius is perfectly capable of taking care of himself. He's free to date whoever he wants. I would have just assumed he would have enough class to stick with someone his *own* age," she said, but then quickly tried to bite back the hypocritical words.

"She's a slag," Mary muttered angrily. "I saw her snogging a fifth year Puff not three days ago in an empty Charms classroom."

Mia scowled, feeling like all the blood was rushing to her head. "I said it's *fine*. Sirius isn't my boyfriend or anything."

"You should come to Hogsmeade with us girls." Lily smiled at Mia brightly, reaching over and taking her hand. "We're going to go to the Three Broomsticks to get a butterbeer, and then maybe stop by Honeydukes. No, Remus," she said when he turned in her direction. "You can get your *own* chocolate; you'll be down there yourself!"

Mia pushed her plate away from her entirely. "I'll think about it, Lily."

"Okay, meet us out front if you're up for a girls' day. I have to finish a Charms essay before I get ready. Meet you all back here," she said to Alice and Mary who smiled up at their friend as she stood and walked away from the table.

"You sure you don't want me to smack McKinnon?" Mary whispered conspiratorially. "I caught Rikard Stebbins trying to look up my skirt last week, and he begged me not to tell. I could trade the favour he owes me and get the password to Ravenclaw Tower. We could put flesh flies in her bed."

Mia stared at her friend in horror, glad when Remus cleared his throat, drawing her attention.

"Are you *really* that upset with Sirius going on a date?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes and let out an irritable exhale. "I just think it's immature of him to make plans with his friends and then back out over a girl."

"Trouble in paradise, Potter?"

Cringing at the drawling voice, she turned to see Snape standing behind her next to Regulus Black and a first year Slytherin who looked slightly familiar.

"Piss off Snivellus!" James snarled.

"He wasn't talking to *you*, blood-traitor!" the young Slytherin snapped.

Immediately, the Gryffindors were on their guard as James stood.

Regulus laughed, patting the boy on the back. "Back down, Barty. He's excitable, this one."

Mia scowled at the use of the boy's name. *Barty. Young Barty Crouch, Jr.* Her hands were shaking as she glared at him. This was not the best morning to come face to face with so many future Death Eaters, regardless of the fact that two of them would eventually defect; they had been Death Eaters all the same. It did not help that, as teenagers, they were incorrigible prats.

"What do you want, Snape?" Mia hissed.

"Just to see if you're all right," he said with a smirk. "That looked rather uncomfortable from where I was standing."

He chuckled, and the noise grated on her skin.

Regulus sneered, not nearly as amused as his friends clearly were by the situation. "It's embarrassing, watching my brother panting after that girl. Everyone knows that the McKinnons are blood-traitors. He should be put out of his misery. Next, he'll be off snogging Mudbloods."

Remus and James made furious moves forward, but Mia got there first—*CRACK!*

She punched Snape in the face with all the strength she could muster, and it had felt just as good as it did when she had hit Draco.

Snape fell backward, black eyes wide as he held the left side of his jaw in his hand.

"You rotten, hypocritical coward!" she screamed, glaring down at him.

Regulus and Crouch looked gobsmacked at the sight, and James and Remus were gaping as though they had never seen her before in their lives.

"I didn't bloody say it!" Snape shouted up at her.

"No! But you were content with sitting back and allowing the other Slytherins to voice your prejudices for you. Besides," she growled, narrowing her eyes at Regulus, "Sirius has already smacked *this one* for being a little prick."

"Miss Potter!" Professor McGonagall bellowed, and Mia turned to look at the older witch. "Do you care to explain yourself?"

Mia looked between Snape and Regulus who continued to stare at her with hate in their eyes. "No. Won't make a difference."

*Nothing you do will change what is meant to be.*

Words from Remus's letter floated across her mind. It had been too long since she had read it, but she needed the words now. She needed to remember her guide and her rules. To remember that he had told her she could not save lives that were not meant to be saved. She could not stop a war that was not meant to be stopped. And she could not redeem those who, at this moment in time, were irredeemable.

"Can I assume that I'm headed to detention shortly, Professor?" Mia asked. "And that I'm forbidden from attending Hogsmeade?"

"Absolutely, young lady. And I still want a proper explanation for your behaviour!"

"Very well." Mia almost smiled as she gathered her bags and turned to look at a very pleased-looking James, Remus, and Peter. She grinned at her brother and best friend before her eyes fell on the rat and she glared. "What can I say, Professor? I just can't control myself when the people I love are threatened."

Her eyes were empty and cold, and her body language was eerily calm and collected, but she noticed that Peter abruptly stopped breathing, only regaining the function of his lungs once her stare relaxed.

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Sirius slipped through the portrait hole with a bright, smug grin spread across his face. His lips were swollen, and his hair was pleasantly dishevelled, or least it had been when he caught a glimpse in a reflection.

There were a few lingering first years on the sofas, hunched over rolls of parchment in a panic, still trying to find the comfortable routine of homework and life that the older students had fallen into since the beginning of the year.

Sirius practically skipped up the stairs to the dorms. Upon entering, he spotted Remus, who was sitting on his bed with a large book open in his hands, his body surrounded by empty candy wrappers and discarded Chocolate Frog cards.

"Hello, my fine, furry friend." Sirius threw himself onto his own bed and rested his hands lazily behind his head.

For as happy as Sirius was, Remus looked the polar opposite. He glared across the room at Sirius. "Where the hell have you been? Curfew was an hour ago."

"You're going to make a wonderful—or really inconvenient—prefect one day," Sirius said with a chuckle. "I was in Hogsmeade."

Remus did not look impressed. Sirius wished Peter was there to talk to.

"This whole time?" Remus sat up and closed his book, giving Sirius his full attention. "We went looking for you and couldn't find you anywhere," he said in an accusing tone.

"Marlene and I were out by the Shrieking Shack." Sirius waggled his eyebrows, and Remus's nose twitched. "Did you know that it's apparently haunted?" he joked, hoping to bring a little humour to the all-too-serious-looking boy. "Girls *love* it."

"That's ridiculous." Remus scoffed.

They had all heard the rumours. Ghosts had been heard bellowing out of the Shrieking Shack, and the town of Hogsmeade had been urged to avoid the place like the pox. The Marauders knew the truth, of course, and Remus did not look amused that couples were using the view of his "dog house"—as Sirius was prone to call it—to snog in front of.

"Ridiculous but true, mate!"

"So you've been out snogging a girl while staring at my . . . cage. How romantic of you," Remus said sarcastically, rolling his eyes as they briefly turned gold before returning to their normal shade of green.

"If *you* had been snogged like *I* was just snogged . . ." Sirius let out a satisfied sigh. "You might see that place a little differently too."

"Unlikely," Remus growled.

Sirius sat up and stared across the room at his friend. "What's got *your* tail in a twist? I've had the best bloody day of my life, and you're acting all morose and shit. You should be asking me for details, and I should be bragging about those details over a couple bottles of butterbeer with my best mates!"

"Then go find James and Peter, I'm not in the mood," Remus snapped and reopened his book.

"What happened? Honeydukes out of Chocolate Frogs?"

"Mia's in detention right now," Remus replied quickly, slamming his book shut.

"That's unlikely," Sirius said, disbelievingly, crossing his arms. Apart from the prank she had helped him pull on Regulus, Mia never stepped a toe out of line. In fact, she often

tried to keep all of them out of trouble. Besides, he was certain that even if she ever did break a rule, she would certainly never get caught. Mia was brilliant, and her Disillusionment Charm was a thing of beauty. "What did she *supposedly* do?"

"No *supposedly* about it," Remus insisted. "She got busted in view of about fifty students and half the professors."

"Holy shit." Sirius was suddenly captivated. "What happened? What did she do?"

"Do you care?"

Defensive, Sirius jumped to his feet, officially done with Remus's pissy mood. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean? Is she all right? What happened to her!?"

Panic suddenly flooded him. Had something serious happened to Mia? Did the Slytherins retaliate for the prank they had played on them last year?

Remus slowly rose from his bed, standing, unintimidated, inches taller than Sirius. "Well, once you'd sauntered off on your bloody *date*, Mia was being consoled by her friends."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Sirius asked, confused. "What did she need consoling for? What happened?"

"Because you're a blind idiot, and you don't deserve what you can't even see!" Remus clenched his fists in a clear bid to contain his anger. "Mia fancies you, dickhead!"

Sirius stumbled back in shock.

Remus stepped forward, crowding him against the footboard of his bed. "She was upset about you running off with McKinnon!" Clearly angry, Remus's eyes flashed again, and the colour change did not go unnoticed by Sirius. "Then Regulus called you a blood-traitor and said you'd be bringing home Mudbloods next, and I'm pretty sure he even threatened your life, mate."

Sirius snarled, his brow furrowing together in anger. "They made fun of Mia?"

"That's not the point, Sirius. It wasn't about *her*. It was about *you*," Remus said, his voice lightly touched with envy. "She punched Snape in the face, made him bleed and everything, and McGonagall saw it all."

Sirius's eyes widened. *Mia punched Snivellus?*

"She did it for *you*, and you were off snogging some Ravenclaw that you'd never even *met* before today."

The silence was suffocating as he processed everything.

Mia had been unlike any girl he had ever known. She was James's sister, but nothing like a sister to Sirius. She had always been his friend—more than a friend. She had been his safe place for as long as he had known her.

"I . . . I didn't know."

"You don't even bother to try," Remus accused bitterly.

"What the hell am I supposed to do with this, Remus?" Sirius asked, wide-eyed. "She's James's sister. She's Mia. She's our friend . . . She's . . . She . . ." he stammered as he paced back and forth in the room.

He had been out in the snow not an hour ago, locked in his first snog with a fourth year Ravenclaw who obviously fancied him. It had been one of the best nights of his entire life, and that did not say much considering how shitty his life had been up until Hogwarts. Until he had met James and Remus and Peter and . . .

*Mia.*

"She's *ours*," Remus said firmly. "*Ours* to take care of. *Ours* to protect," he went on, his eyes fierce. "*Our* job. Remember, Sirius?"

"I remember," Sirius whispered.

That first night in Potter Manor had been horrible. He thought the Potters to be this perfect family with perfect children. James and Mia exuded joy and love. To hear her screaming in the night had terrified him. He remembered watching as James crawled into her bed and pulled her tight against him, and suddenly, she had calmed down. Just like that. It had been like . . . *magic*. Sirius remembered feeling envious of his friend for having a power that felt so important. Sirius *wanted* that power. Wanted to be able to calm her screams and dry her tears. So he had taken it upon himself to declare that she belonged to *all of* them: James, Remus, and himself.

It had felt right at the time. James was her brother, and Remus had always been her best friend, and Sirius was . . . was . . .

*Oh, fuck.*

"*Our* job," Sirius repeated, the words feeling like they were trying to choke him as they came out.

"Then do it! Bloody take care of the girl, and stop hurting her by being an arrogant prat! James can't take care of her forever, and if *you* don't man up and do it—" Remus stared at Sirius, eyes hard with conviction. "Someone else will."

"Oh, like *you*?" Sirius turned his narrowed eyes up at his friend, and suddenly, they were no longer children, no longer little boys who played with toy dragons and talked about nothing but Quidditch. A girl was involved and not *just* any girl. A girl they had *both* somehow claimed, even if neither was certain what that meant just now.

"*Someone* should!" Remus snapped back.

"What's going on in here?"

The voice distracted both of them, and they turned to see James standing in the doorway, a worried expression on his face as he watched his best friends looking as though they were nearly ready to start throwing hexes.

"Nothing," they both said at the same time and separated, going to their own beds.

"Okay." James watched them closely. After a few moments of silence, he made his way to his own bed and turned to look at his best friend. "How was your date?"

Sirius frowned. "Fine. It was . . . I don't think I'm going to see her again."

"Bad luck. You should have stuck around a while longer then. Did Remus tell you that Mia punched Snivellus?" James laughed. "It was hilarious. The only time I've ever seen her that angry before is when you were in the hospital wing last year."

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Mia did not get back to the common room until well after midnight. She was exhausted after spending her entire day helping Professor McGonagall organise first year Transfiguration essays, and then—because her offence had been of a violent nature—she had spent her night polishing each and every candelabra in the Great Hall.

Instead of making her way back up to her dorm room, she collapsed on the sofa in front of the fireplace and fell swiftly asleep.

Her rest did not last long, and soon she jolted awake, heart racing. She covered her face with her hands and willed the tears to retreat as she forced the image of Voldemort from her mind. Forced the sounds of Sirius and Remus screaming from her thoughts. She stood, looking to the stairs leading to the girls' dorms with hesitation. She hated dreams that involved her boys. It always made her worried that somehow, if she did not see them with her own eyes, that meant that they were not safe.

Slowly and quietly she made her way up the stairs to the boys' dorms and slipped inside the room her brother shared with the other Marauders. She quickly peeked in on a snoring Jamie who was in a deep sleep, sprawled out across his bed, one leg hanging off the edge. She smiled and ran her hands affectionately through his messy hair, making it a touch worse.

Her gaze then fell across the room where she could see, framed against the moonlight, Remus's heartbreakingly beautiful silhouette. She watched closely as his chest rose and fell with shallow breaths. She made no closer move toward him, knowing that this close to the full moon he was a light sleeper, and she did not want to wake him when he needed all the rest he could get.

Before she turned to leave—and despite the fact that she was annoyed with him—Mia peeked behind Sirius's curtains to check on him. He was on his side with one arm crossed over his chest, gripping the other gently. Her brows knit together as she remembered an older Sirius. This was how he slept in the bed in the tent when they had been on the run. She remembered Apparating out of Godric's Hollow and how Sirius had been splinched. She had bandaged and repaired his wound just as he had done to her months prior. While he rarely complained about the injury that she took responsibility for, she noticed that he favoured the wounded arm in his sleep.

"You okay?" Sirius mumbled as his eyes opened.

She frowned, not noticing before that he was awake.

"Sorry," she whispered. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"Need me to get James?" Sirius sat up and rubbed his eyes, turning to look to the side where James was out cold. "Oh, well. I could wake him up."

"No, don't. I'm fine." Her focus drifted across the room hesitantly at Remus's bed.

"Come on," Sirius said and scooted backward on his mattress.

"No."

Sirius frowned, looking angry. "You want *Remus*?"

"How was your *date*?"

His anger seemed to dissipate at her words. Without answering, he reached out and grabbed her hand, tugging her forward until she fell onto the mattress.

She hissed but kept quiet, not wanting to rouse the others from their slumber. By the time she righted herself into a sitting position on the bed, Sirius's head was in her lap, and she let out a frustrated growl.

"Shut up and pet me."

"Sirius," she groaned.

"Date was awful. Should have just gone with my friends."

Mia frowned, letting his words roll around in her mind. "I'm sorry you had a bad time. If it makes you feel any better, I didn't have the best day myself."

Sirius let out a quiet chuckle. "I heard about that. You know it's *our* job to defend and protect *you*, right?"

And just like that, she was back in the tent on the run with Harry, Ron, and Sirius. Only this time in her memories it was not Sirius in bed with a splinched arm, it was *her* in bed, the long scar on her splinched back slowly mending while she rested. *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* in one hand, the other gently stroking the black fur of the giant dog who slept with his head in her lap.

Mia frowned as she brushed her fingers through Sirius's hair. "Maybe we'll just agree to always take care of each other."

Sirius smiled.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

### *Gasping*

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*You held me down, but I got up  
Already brushing off the dust  
You hear my voice, you hear that sound  
Like thunder gonna shake the ground"*  
(Roar - Katy Perry)

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**March 27th, 1974**

Sirius did not take another girl to Hogsmeade for the rest of the year. He also did not take Mia. Despite not dating another girl after Marlene McKinnon, the fact that Sirius had gone to Hogsmeade with the girl—only to ignore her the next morning—had earned him a reputation. Regardless of the fact that he spent his nights in the Gryffindor common room playing wizard's chess and Exploding Snap with James, rumours began to circulate the school about the young playboy who was often "seen" snogging behind tapestries, in empty classrooms, and even, apparently, in Professor McGonagall's office.

It annoyed Mia more than it did Sirius, and she began to really understand why the *older* Sirius did not have much concern when it came to being in the *Daily Prophet* so often. His infamous reputation had been filling the gossip mill since he was only fourteen years old.

While the year started out stressfully, by the time spring rolled around, the Marauders and Mia were back to normal. She had taken to reading Remus's letter again before bed every night and sometimes in the morning; it was necessary to remind herself over and over of her number one rule: *Live your life. Enjoy your life.*

And so she did.

Once, during the middle of March, to celebrate James's—and technically her—fourteenth birthday, Mia slipped into the laundry room of the castle late the night before and grinned when she spotted a fresh stack of newly laundered Slytherin robes. She was suddenly very grateful for the sewing charms that Molly Weasley had taught her years earlier.

The morning of James and Mia's birthday, after opening the gifts that the owls flew in from their parents as well as the few treats that were given to them from their friends, Mia smiled deviously up at her brother.

"I have a birthday gift for you. Does everyone know how to do a Heating Charm?" she asked. "And can you keep it subtle?"

"Did you do something bad, kitten?" Sirius asked with a grin.

Mia only smiled innocently in response.

He barked a laugh and grabbed his wand, motioning the others to do the same. "Oh, this should be good."

"Now, everyone aim your wands to the Slytherin table and use a Heating Charm. Not hot enough to burn or scald, but . . . uncomfortably hot," Mia emphasised.

As one, the Gryffindors swished their wands and uttered the incantation, putting focus on the green and silver table at the other end of the Great Hall. At first, nothing happened and Sirius looked disappointed. They kept on with the incantation and suddenly there was a quiet *Pop!*

Followed by several more.

*Pop! Pop! Pop!*

Mia snickered as she watched Snape look up from his breakfast and cast a glance around the table. Amycus Carrow followed suit.

*Pop!*

The older Slytherins were looking around, trying to find the source of the noise.

*Pop! Pop! Pop!*

"What's happening?" James asked with a grin.

Mia beamed. "Just watch."

*Pop! Pop! Pop!*

One by one, the Slytherins stood from their seats, confused and shouting. *Pop!* Some were struggling with their robes—*Pop!*—trying to get them off as quickly as possible.

All of a sudden, freshly popped popcorn kernels began shooting out of the lining of the Slytherin robes, overflowing their pockets and collars, covering their table and blanketing the floors.

Sirius smiled in approval. "Very clever, kitten. Not *quite* the most awful thing you could have done to them, but entertaining, to say the least. What do we give her, boys?" he asked, looking around the table.

"Exceeds Expectations," Remus said politely with a smirk on his face.

"I have to agree with Professor Lupin." James laughed, and Mia stifled a chuckle at the moniker.

"I'm only seeing Acceptable myself," Sirius admitted with a frown. "You need to learn how to get a little dirty with your pranks."

Mia merely smiled sweetly at him. "Do you know how long it took me to sew popcorn kernels into the lining of each and every Slytherin robe?" she asked with feigned superiority. "You need to learn patience."

"Wheeeee!" A joyous yell echoed from just outside the Great Hall as Peeves the Poltergeist flew through the open doors, a large bucket in his hands. "Sticky, slippery snakes!" he chanted, hovering over the Slytherin table where he tipped the bucket he carried, drenching each and every popcorn-encased Slytherin in litres of melted butter.

Mia's notional grades were immediately changed to Outstandings across the board.

The boys spent the better part of a month trying to figure out how she had been able to get Peeves to help her, but Mia kept her lips sealed. Peeves was a wild card that would ultimately be dangerous in the hands of the Marauders.

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## June 20th, 1974

"Mia, wake up."

"Mmm," Mia mumbled into her pillow.

There were only a few days left of school, and she was already looking forward to sleeping in her large bed back home. Exams were over, and she had performed outstandingly. Third in her year just behind Lily and Remus—tied with Severus Snape of all people. Mia, of course, knew that she could easily top them all—having already taken and excelled in all of the classes the first time around—but she also knew that Lily and Remus were being looked at for future prefects and the upcoming year would make all the

difference for her friends. She had been a prefect before and something told her that doing so again would make it difficult to completely embrace Remus's instructions; her guide and her rules: *Live your life. Enjoy your life.* So instead of worrying about exams or future prefect badges, Mia dreamt about the orchard behind Potter Manor, where she had planned a summer of reading and watching her boys play Quidditch. Lazy mornings in the family library, afternoons with her mother in the garden, and maybe a repeat of last summer's gathering of friends at the river.

"Mia, wake up."

One of her eyes cracked open, and she groaned. "Sirius?"

Grey eyes sparkled down at her. "Wake up, kitten."

Mia bolted upright in bed, gasping as she gathered her sheets around her body as though he had never seen her in a nightdress before. "Sirius, how did you get up the stairs?"

Sirius chuckled at the action, clearly thinking the same thing. She had slept in *his bed* once, for crying out loud. Though when they had awakened the following morning, there was an awkward tension in the air. From that point on, when Mia had nightmares, she went straight to her brother.

"You're kind of sexy when you're embarrassed."

"Sirius! The stairs! How did you get up the stairs?" she snapped. "They're charmed so boys can't climb up them."

"You're adorable when you underestimate me."

Mia glared up at him, trying her darnedest to not let him see that she was in fact impressed that he had somehow figured out how to get around such an old charm.

"Now get up; you and I have a wedding to get to."

"A wedding?" Mia groaned and fell back onto her bed, pulling her blanket over her face.

"A wedding," Sirius confirmed, yanking the blanket back down and smiling at her.

"Are you proposing? Because it's been a few years since you've done that."

"I still maintain that buying me a Cauldron Cake is worthy of my eternal love."

She remembered their first trip on the Hogwarts Express and how she showered them all with treats from the trolley. James graciously gave her the title of Best Sister Ever. Remus and Peter thanked her for her generosity. An eleven-year-old Sirius implied that chocolate gifts were a traditional form of dowry and then begged her to be his wife.

Mia yawned, pushing him away from her face. "Well, you can earn *my* eternal love if you let me go back to sleep."

"No. I have a wedding to go to, and you're coming with me."

"You want me to be your date to a wedding?"

Sirius laughed, stepping back and running a hand through his hair. She wondered if that was a tell. She had never been able to figure out exactly when Sirius was trying to hide something.

"If this is a *date*, then I am officially worthy of all the shitty rumours going around this year. No, this is certainly *not* a date," he said, grabbing her hand and pulling her up into a sitting position. He tugged on her legs, moving them off the side of her bed as she continued to glare at him. "I just have to go to this wedding, and, well . . . I'd rather have you there than one of the guys."

Mia blushed as she remembered dancing at Bill and Fleur's wedding with an older Sirius. He had told her that he hated weddings because he had been forced to go to so many as a child.

*"Most of the weddings were for cousins, aunts, and uncles of mine, all destined to marry one another, or married off to the worst type of people to ever exist. Like the Malfoys and the Lestranges."*

She gasped at the memory. "Are you talking about *Narcissa's* wedding?"

"Yes."

She felt her heart still in her chest as she tried to blink away the images of a cold drawing room. "Sirius . . . I . . . I can't go."

"Why not? It'll be a laugh. By the way, how are your roommates still asleep? I expected to have three girls screaming at me by now. Or asking me to stay," he said with a wink.

"I put a Silencing Charm around my bed before I go to sleep," she curtly replied. "Where's the wedding at, Sirius?"

"Silencing Charm? Were you expecting me?"

"Sirius! The wedding! Location!"

He rolled his eyes dramatically. "Malfoy's place. Big manor that's as ugly and cold as—"

"I can't go," she stressed quickly, forcing the memories of a Cruciatus Curse out of her mind. The place where she had been tortured. Where her friends had been imprisoned. Where Sirius had almost died—*again*. "And . . . I don't want you to go there."

He frowned, his brow furrowed. "I don't want to go either, but I *have* to."

"Why?"

"Because Narcissa wasn't always like this," he admitted sadly, running a hand through his hair again. "She's my cousin, and I feel like . . . if it was *me* trapped in a situation like that, I'd really want someone to show up at the last possible second and offer me a way out."

Mia frowned at his earnest expression. "She won't take it. I'm sorry, Sirius, but she won't."

He shrugged his shoulders, undeterred. "Probably. In which case, you and I will drink the Malfoy's good firewhisky and champagne and then plant dungbombs inside the wedding cake."

"That might almost be worth it." Mia genuinely laughed. It was terrifying to think of returning to Malfoy Manor. She did not *want* to go, but Sirius was determined to leave, and the thought of letting him go by himself made her blood run cold.

He beamed excitedly. "It's settled then! Get up, and get out your good dress robes!"

"Wait. How are we getting there?"

Sirius pulled from his robes a silver envelope with beautiful black script written across the front of it and the Malfoy family crest in the corner. "Invitations are set up as Portkeys."

Mia eyed the envelope. "Sirius, that invitation is addressed to *Regulus* Black."

"Is it?" Sirius feigned innocence as he turned and examined the invitation. "Huh, I guess it is."

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"I'm going to be sick," Mia said as she slowly stood up after landing outside of Malfoy Manor. She hated Portkey travel.

She scanned the grounds as they made their way up the long path leading to the intimidating home, James's Invisibility Cloak thrown over them. Glancing around, she did not know why she was shocked that it was still dark. "Why are we here so early?"

"It's the Summer Solstice."

Mia stared at him. "And?"

"And a new moon."

The two made their way inside manor, sneaking in behind a large family. The invitation tucked inside Sirius's robes granted them access through the security wards.

"And . . . ?"

"And what?" he asked, looking at her strangely until his cheeks turned a bit pink, and he winced. "Sorry. I guess I forget that your parents don't observe most pureblood traditions. Today is the Summer Solstice, and it also falls on a new moon, which calls for a wedding at sunrise. The Summer Solstice represents fire and cleansing, the new moon is a time to plant seeds for the future, and the sunrise speaks of birth . . ."

"Ugh." Mia made a face. "You have pureblood mouth."

Sirius barked out a laugh and then immediately quieted himself when a few guests turned to try and find the source of the noise. "Sorry, should I have thrown in a few 'fucks' and 'shits' to Muggle it up for you?"

Mia rolled her eyes. "You're so crude."

"You love it."

Her cheeks felt like they were suddenly on fire. She would never verbally admit to enjoying Sirius's crass language—language that had rubbed off on her when she was good and furious. Usually at *his* expense. "So, you're saying that they've chosen this day *specifically*? Is that why they pulled Narcissa out of school a few days before graduation? To get married?"

"Looks like the Malfoys and the Blacks think that this marriage will be the beginning of something big," he said sarcastically as they observed the gathered crowd. Most were older Wizarding families, Wizengamot members, Ministry officials, and the highest of pureblood society. Mia recognised Sirius's parents in the corner arguing and quickly tugged on his sleeve to pull him in the opposite direction.

"The union of the Malfoys and the Blacks *is* something big," Mia acknowledged. "It will create awful power. They plan on cleansing away inferior blood with fire, and using Lucius and Narcissa to birth and then lead a perfect pureblood world."

She grimaced as she remembered hearing such awful pureblood propaganda in her other time. How Lucius Malfoy had used his own family to further himself with Voldemort, and how Draco had been branded a Death Eater because of it. Mia grinned as she recalled Draco's defection.

"It won't work."

"Damn right it won't. I'm going to stop the bloody wedding."

"Sirius, that's not what I meant." Mia frowned as they ascended a large staircase. She paused as she thought about the fact that they had passed the drawing room and she had not even noticed it. How had that happened? It was the object of her nightmares, and she had just walked through it as though it were nothing.

"Here," Sirius whispered, breaking her concentration. "Stay under the cloak while I go in."

Before Mia could stop him, Sirius stepped out from under the Invisibility Cloak and slipped through an open doorway. Frowning, Mia followed, keeping the cloak tight around her as she watched.

"Cissa," Sirius said as he walked into the bridal room.

The young woman sat at a large vanity, her beautiful blond hair plaited back with soft curls framing her face. The blue ribbon tied around her elegant white dress matched her eyes perfectly. She was a vision, save for the missing smile a bride should normally be wearing.

Narcissa gasped at the sight of Sirius. "What are you doing here? You weren't even invited!" She stood and ran to the door, peeking out to make sure no one had followed him.

Mia ducked her head to avoid taking an elbow to the face.

"About that." Sirius pulled the silver envelope from his robes with a grin. "I wouldn't expect to see Regulus today. He sends his apologies, but the lad's lost his invitation."

"You have to leave," Narcissa insisted, looking to be in no mood for his games. Her voice was bitter and cold, but there was an edge of panic to it as she said, "Leave *now*."

Sirius shook his head. "Not without you."

"Are you out of your stupid little mind, cousin?" she snapped at him like a viper, quick and sharp. "This is my wedding day!"

"It doesn't have to be." Sirius dropped his casual attitude. "You can run. Go be like Andromeda. Find someone who actually *loves* you and won't treat you like a house-elf or a broodmare."

"I do *not* want to be like Andromeda," Narcissa said, tears trembling in her eyes.

"She's free. Free from all of this pureblood supremacy shit."

"She was tortured by her own sister!" Narcissa argued, picking the sides of her dress up in clenched fists as she began to pace back and forth in the room. "At my engagement party! And *you*, a fourteen-year-old *boy*, were the only one to try and stop it, Sirius! I am *not* Andromeda. I don't have the ability to walk away from this. My choice has already been made."

"Made *for* you."

"Yes, made *for* me," she agreed. "As yours will be for you. Andromeda ruined *both* of us by running off with that Mudblood," she spat, her eyes turning cold and distant.

"Don't call him that! You've never called them that before!"

"It's what they are." Her blue eyes narrowed at him. "They are Mudbloods, and you're a blood-traitor!"

"And the blood-traitors are right!" Sirius yelled and stepped forward, meeting her eye-to-eye. He reached for her arm to keep her from walking away from him. "Cissa, don't think I don't know what Lucius is up to. I overheard my parents talking to Abraxas last Easter. I know who they're following and what they're wanting to do."

"Don't," Narcissa begged, her stony resolve cracking.

"Cissa—"

"Please . . ."

"You're marrying a fucking *Death Eater*!" he yelled, and she fell to the floor, covering her face as she sobbed.

He silently stroked her hair, trying to offer her comfort in the only way he knew how. After a full minute, Narcissa finally spoke. "You're going to be one too."

Sirius jumped back from her as though she were infected. "Like hell!"

"You're too young," Narcissa said quietly as she stood, reaching for the nearby dresser for a handkerchief to wipe her eyes. "That's the only reason they haven't done it yet. Don't you see, cousin?" She turned to look at him sadly. "This is our life; obey or die."

"Like *you* almost did? He Imperiused you, didn't he?"

Narcissa did not deny it. She just stood there, her eyes blank of all emotion.

"*Didn't* he?!"

"I wasn't listening like a good wife," she conceded. "I told you; obey, or die."

"I *saved* you. And for what?"

"You *shouldn't* have," Narcissa said with a sigh. "I would have been better off as some grave memorial plaque on the back of the Quidditch stands at Hogwarts. As it is, I'm the future Lady Malfoy." Sirius blanched at the words. "And you're the Black heir. You need to forget about me, and start worrying about yourself, Sirius."

At the sound of footsteps, Mia scooted into the room, pulling the Cloak off to reveal herself. "Sirius! Someone's coming."

Narcissa's eyes widened in horror. "You brought a *Potter* to my wedding? Salazar! Sirius, are you not planning on surviving the year?" She shook her head and moved behind her young cousin, shoving at his back. "Get out, *both* of you!"

"Cissa, come with me," Sirius said with one last plea.

"Get out!"

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An hour later, Sirius and Mia stood at the back of the gardens outside Malfoy Manor beside the hired servants and house-elves. Sirius had used the Invisibility Cloak to find Abraxas Malfoy's stash of firewhisky, and he had drained nearly half of a bottle already. They remained quiet and unobserved, looking oddly in place with the "commoners" who watched from the back of the gathered crowd.

At the front of the garden, Cygnus Black placed Narcissa's hand into Lucius's, and the presiding wizard tied their hands together with two cords; one black, the other silver to represent each House in the marriage. General introductions were made where the presiding wizard spoke of duty and honour but never love.

Sirius continued to drink, and Mia eventually took the bottle away from him, swallowing a large gulp herself before passing it off to a server beside her.

"Narcissa of the House of Black," the presiding wizard intoned. "Turn to your new Lord Husband and make your vow."

"I, Narcissa of the House of Black, give to you, Lucius of the House of Malfoy, my virtue and m-my voice. My body and my obedience."

Sirius winced at the words, and Mia took his hand in a gesture of comfort.

"To take your name as my own and uphold it with honour and purity. I pledge to you my firstborn son, your heir who will carry on your legacy and the legacy of your fathers. I . . ." Narcissa hesitated for a moment, and Sirius stood at attention, watching eagerly.

"I willingly bind myself to you until death separates us and swear this vow upon my magic. *Suscipiam illud vinculum*," she chanted, and the black cord around her wrist glowed before turning silver to match the other.

Sirius deflated, and Mia held his hand tighter. She waited for Lucius to make his vows to his new wife, but when none came, her brows knit together in confusion, especially when the presiding wizard said, "I now declare you bonded for life!"

There was polite applause, and the guests all stood at once to form a line and make their congratulations. Servants surrounding Sirius and Mia went to work, carrying around silver platters stacked with flutes of champagne and small tumblers of firewhisky.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Mia muttered, shocked by what she'd just witnessed. "He didn't vow *anything* to her. He's supposed to say *something*."

"Let's go, Mia. Suddenly, crashing the party doesn't seem so fun after watching my cousin willingly enslave herself." Sirius tugged on her hand to leave, but she stood firm as though she were still waiting for the ceremony to continue. For someone to shout "Stop! We forgot something!" but no one did.

"I've seen a wizard marriage before." She thought of Bill and Fleur, who had been bonded with love and devotion, each making beautiful vows toward the other. "That wasn't—"

"Normal?" Sirius asked. "No. That was an old bonding ceremony. Narcissa just tied her magic to Malfoy for life, and it wasn't even a proper *Marriage* Bond. It sounded more like what . . ." He hesitated, and a bitter expression fell over his beautiful features. "Like what happens when we get a new house-elf."

Mia grimaced. "There are different types of bonds?"

"What?" Sirius looked down at her with a raised brow. "Of *course* there—"

"Well, well, what do we have here?"

Mia froze on the spot, her eyes wide and frightened at the sight in front of her. She gripped Sirius's hand like it was her lifeline and silently began wishing that she was back in 1998, the day after her nineteenth birthday, where she and Sirius were safe and alive.

Sirius glared ahead at the young woman that stood before them. "Bella."

The woman looked much the same as Mia recalled, though younger. Her black hair was as thick and shiny—just missing the streaks of grey. She shared the sharp, angular features that appeared to be a Black family trait, and her hooded eyes were identical to what Mia remembered of an older Andromeda.

Sirius narrowed his eyes. "I'd say it's good to see you, but since your very appearance makes me want to Scourgify my eyeballs—"

"You are pushing your luck, little cousin." Bellatrix sneered at him. "You *dare* come here, step foot inside this house after everything you've already done?"

Mia wrapped her arms around Sirius's bicep, clinging to him tightly as the word "Crucio" echoed in her mind.

"And you've brought a *Potter* as your date?" Bella's stare fell on Mia, and she scowled at her with a look of hate that did not exactly rival the one an older Bellatrix gave to a young Hermione Granger before setting the Cruciatus Curse upon her.

"It's tradition, didn't you know?" Sirius smirked defiantly, apparently unafraid of the woman whom he had witnessed torture her own sister. "The official bridal-bonding with blood-traitors. It'll bring the happy couple wonderful luck for their marriage. Lots of blessings, many sons, blah, blah, blah . . ."

Bellatrix took another step forward. "You are nothing but an insolent little blemish on an otherwise perfect Noble House."

Mia looked up at Sirius's determined face and then turned to stare at Bellatrix. She remembered seeing an older Bellatrix with a bound black dog hovering behind her, cackling with glee.

*"I've just caught myself a wayward blood-traitor. Sirius Black, back from the dead."*

Something lit inside of Mia at the memory, and she felt herself reaching for her wand.

"I'd love more than anything to rid our family of you for good myself!" Bella snapped.

Mia shoved herself in front of Sirius, eyes blazing. "You will not touch him!" she growled, wand raised in time to meet Bellatrix's own.

Sirius gasped and reached for her hand. "Mia."

"Oh, *she's* got fire." Bellatrix grinned down at her. "I should smack that look off your face."

Mia glared up at the older witch. "I've had worse."

"You're lucky it's considered bad taste to spill blood on the morning of a marriage. Especially one so important." Bellatrix leant in close to Mia and whispered, "Maybe another day, little girl. I look forward to it. Dealing with you, my little cousin here, and all of your adorable blood-traitor friends. It's rumoured you even have a pet werewol—"

*Too far.*

"You will not touch my family, you bitch!"

Sirius put his arms around Mia's waist and tugged her back several feet, shoving himself between her and Bellatrix, his eyes wide.

"You *dare* speak to me that way? Do you have any idea who I am?" Bellatrix shrieked, her hands shaking with rage, and her eyes alight with fury. "You filthy little blood-traitor, I will enjoy watching you die screaming!"

She *had* screamed. Mia had screamed and screamed right there in Malfoy Manor, and yet she did not die. She vividly remembered the sight of the black dog launching on top of the dark witch, jaws clamped around her throat, ripping and tearing as she struggled for air.

Mia stood, unafraid as Bellatrix Lestrange looked down threateningly at her.

"And I will enjoy watching *you* die . . . *gasping.*"

Before Bellatrix had a chance to raise her wand again, Mia tapped the bracelet on her wrist, the same wrist Sirius was gripping, and chanted, "*Portus!*"

## Chapter Thirty-Three

### *Provoked and Sealed*

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*Drench yourself in words unspoken  
Live your life with arms wide open  
Today is where your book begins  
The rest is still unwritten*  
(Unwritten - Natasha Bedingfield)

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**June 20th, 1974**

Sirius and Mia arrived in Hogsmeade Village under the vista of a beautiful sunrise that pushed its way over a lavish Scotland horizon. From the spot where they landed, Hogwarts could easily be seen in the near distance.

"Come on," Mia muttered as she began making her way up toward the castle.

"Mia!" Sirius shouted after her, reaching for her hand. "First, you can't just go back up this way and knock on the front door. We sneaked out; we have to sneak back in." He sighed irritably and tugged on her wrist, leading her through a copse of trees on a path that led to an old, abandoned cottage.

"What is this?" she asked as he led her through the front door.

"Old hunting lodge. Used to belong to the groundskeeper before they built the new one for Hagrid. We found it this year. It's dangerous to walk through. Pretty much condemned, but it's the cellar that we're after," he said and pulled lightly on her wrist, guiding her down a set of stairs that opened up into a small cellar. In the back was a locked door.

"*Alohomora*," Sirius muttered, and the latch opened. "It leads into Hogwarts. Now, are you going to tell me what happened back there? How the hell do you know how to do a Portus Charm? That's beyond even N.E.W.T. level."

"Do you trust me?" Mia asked, sighing when Sirius nodded. "Then know that I can't answer your questions all the time, but I have my reasons."

They walked through the dark passage, her lit wand the only light to guide them. The pair continued until it felt like they were climbing, up and up, over rocks and dips in the ground, as the cave-like tunnel ascended higher.

"I *do* trust you, Mia, but I'm *seriously* doubting your level of sanity, considering what I just saw," Sirius muttered quietly and the two fell silent once again.

He held his hand out to her automatically when a portion of the passageway was partially blocked by old barrel drums with Blishen's Firewhisky labels branded into the wood—obviously, someone had once used the inlet as a secret storage facility what looked to have been at least thirty years ago.

"You do know who you threatened, right?" Sirius eventually asked her.

Mia nodded calmly, ducking beneath an exquisite spider web so as not to damage it. "Bellatrix Lestrange. And I didn't *threaten*, I *promised*. She threatened you, my family, and Remus. *That* I will not allow. Wait, this is . . ." She blinked and looked around as the secret passage finally came to an end.

"Just another passage. We've found loads so far. Door right there opens up to a mirror on the fourth floor. Look, you can't just go around threatening Bellatrix Lestrange. Merlin, I thought . . . She had her wand, and the last time . . . She could have *killed* you!"

"She didn't. We escaped," Mia whispered, placing a gentle hand on his cheek.

It broke her a little to see him so worried, so angry over something she had done. She put herself in harm's way in the worst possible situation, but she could not help herself. She had faced Bellatrix Lestrange, the object of her worst nightmares, and instead of being afraid of getting tortured again, Mia had only thought of Sirius. Of Bellatrix sending Sirius through the veil. Of their capture at the manor.

It was all for him.

She noticed that his breath was heavy. He was in good shape and still young, so the climb had not likely exhausted him, which meant that his adrenaline was still pumping out of fear. It only made her angrier at Bellatrix.

"I'm all right," she promised him, stroking his jaw with her thumb, always amused that he already had stubble. Remus did too, but James and Peter complained about their lack of facial hair, and she had even caught James using a Shaving Charm back at home in an effort to trick the hair into growing faster.

"I'm sorry I put myself in danger, but we're both fine." She hugged him tightly, pressing her face into the fabric of his robes. "We're fine. I'm fine. I'm alive."

"You're alive," Sirius repeated in a soft whisper, pulling her away from his body and to stare in her eyes. "Mia, you have no idea how . . ." he began to say but stopped. *How scared I was*, he silently finished. *How scared I was to lose you.*

Without a second thought to remind him of the fact that this was James's sister or that Remus would probably kill him for being so reckless with her, Sirius crushed his lips against Mia's, desperate to feel her, to taste her.

He had assumed she would be frozen in shock by such a physical declaration, but he was pleasantly surprised when he felt her hands at the back of his neck, holding him close to her. She whimpered against his mouth, and Sirius groaned at the sound, savouring it with delight and vowing to create it again.

He eagerly gripped her arms, holding her tightly, terrified that she would escape and this moment would end—because it *would* have to eventually end. He let his hands move down as he kissed her so that he could rub circles over her ribs until she whimpered again. He gently traced the seam of her lips with his tongue, silently requesting entrance. When she opened her mouth, he gratefully took the opportunity to explore. When her own tongue touched his, Sirius felt his body stiffen as a realisation—a truth—swept through him:

*She tasted how firewhisky felt.*

She was warm and delicious, and a burning sensation rose from deep inside of him. Suddenly, he was terrified. He had not felt this way with Marlene McKinnon months ago in Hogsmeade. No, his first snogging session had been wet and awkward, all hands and mouths. He had easily walked away from Marlene after snogging her and, other than the feeling of pride in his chest and the desire to brag to his friends, nothing lingered.

But this . . .

This *burned* him.

It scorched him from the inside out and lit a fire in his lungs that sucked all the oxygen out of them. His adrenaline-fueled passion turned swiftly to reverence, and his bruising kiss softened as his hand came up to thread through her messy curls.

He was certain she would hate him once he pulled away, so he needed to tell her how he felt right now, knowing that he would be unable to do so later with words. He worshipped every moan and whimper that she sighed into his mouth; for a singular moment, he imagined that the sounds could sustain him forever. They could heal him and

make him no longer Sirius Black—no pureblood supremacy, no expectations, no hatred, or bigotry. No choices to make or future to face and certainly no dragging her down with him.

He was pulled from his despairing thoughts when she nibbled on his lower lip, and his eyes rolled as he felt every ounce of blood in his head rapidly drift south with the gushing force of a waterfall.

"Mia," he whispered, moving his hands to her hips and pulling her tight against him. She felt perfect. She felt like . . . like . . . *Mine*.

*Mine*, Mia thought and tried not to cry.

Her hands touched his chest, and her eyes opened. In the shimmer of her still-lit wand that had fallen to the ground, her eyes needily sought out inked flesh and scars but only found pale, flawless skin.

Her first kiss with an older Sirius had been passionate, desperate, and deliciously punishing. This younger Sirius lavished her with gentle hands and soft, eager lips. A part of her wondered if they were, in fact, two very different men, but he tasted like firewhisky and smelled like fresh cut grass and leather.

She kissed him desperately, trying to find *her* Sirius inside of him. She ran her fingers up the length of his neck and moaned when his hands graced her hips and held tight. She wanted to tell him. Tell him *everything*—the truth that she had been hiding for years, but she knew she could not.

He touched her so gently that it drove her mad, and she wanted nothing more than to crawl into his lap as she had years ago—or technically, as she would twenty-five years from now. The taste of him brought her back to her own timeline, and she fought back the tears that were surely on their way as he unknowingly plucked at the string of their bond; it vibrated through her, sending shivers up her spine.

He must have felt it too. He broke the kiss with a loud gasp the very moment that she felt the emptiness in her soul shiver with satisfaction.

"Mia, I'm so sorry."

She knew that look. A very specific type of panic.

She had seen it only once before in her life, shortly after the end of the war when Sirius all but tricked her into befriending Draco Malfoy, who was having trouble adjusting to his new blood-traitor status. The two had gone to lunch, and the little ferret insinuated

that she was getting fat. In the silence that followed a typical spat between them, Hermione had looked up and offered him forgiveness. He blew it off immediately, likely having assumed she meant his most recent remark. She clarified by telling him that she forgave him for the way he had treated her their entire childhood; that after the war, she understood at least a small part of what he might have had to grow up with. And she forgave him.

Draco had gaped at her the same way that Sirius looked at her now—like he had been reminded of where he came from and what was expected of him. Like the history of his family just came crashing down around him, and he was unworthy of the gift she was offering. Why would a Malfoy be deserving of her forgiveness? Why would a Black be deserving of her love? Draco had walked away that day and ignored her for a week. They had never talked about it again.

Sirius would walk away now, too, she realised.

"I won't tell Jamie," she said sadly, accepting that for some reason Sirius needed to run and maybe James would be as good a reason as any. Sirius was not ready to face this, whatever it was between them. He would be one day. The day after her nineteenth birthday, he would be ready, and she would be willing. "You don't have to apologise. You know how I feel. I'm going to live my life, enjoy my life. I'd like to do that with you."

Sirius stood there, staring at her like he wanted to look away. As though he was struck by the light and beauty of the sun, but it was burning his eyes to keep staring.

"I'm not worthy of that," he muttered. Before she had a chance to follow up with an irritated scoff and a reproachful lecture, he cut her off. "Not of you. Not now. Hell, Mia. You defended me not an hour ago against the craziest witch I've ever known, my mother included. And I just stood by like a first year Hufflepuff."

"Sirius—"

"You deserve *better*," Sirius said quietly as he walked away from her. Hovering by the door, he softly added, "Remus is in love with you."

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**July 16th, 1974**

Mia and Sirius did not speak again about what had happened in the secret passage.

They also did not speak about the fact that the passage was no longer a *passage*. After Sirius left her there alone post-kiss, she shot out an angry "*Bombarda!*" and the walls collapsed. Sirius had already been long gone when it happened, but she was certain that he knew she had done it since she overheard Peter asking about the broken passageway days later only to watch as Sirius hushed him and cast a sideways glance in her direction.

Everything else seemed to go back to normal after that.

Sirius returned to Potter Manor a week after going home to Grimmauld Place. Mia had asked him how things went with his parents when they found out he had stolen Regulus's wedding invitation. As usual, he responded with an, "I don't want to talk about it," but she caught the glimmer of something on the back of his hand where the words *Toujours Pur* sat on his skin: a scar. She wanted to press for information but knew better. Sirius rarely opened up about his family, and he certainly was not going to let himself become vulnerable like that with her—not after their kiss.

That kiss had rivalled her first.

Very much the same yet perfectly distinct from one another. She frowned at the thought that she might not feel his lips again for many years, if ever. Mia was ultimately terrified that if the timelines ever caught up with one another, she would vanish into thin air—into non-existence. She worried that since Future Remus remembered her enough to send her back in time, that it meant she had perhaps died somewhere along the way. She had never recalled meeting an older woman in the Order, and Harry certainly never mentioned having an aunt other than Petunia Dursley.

It had taken her days to push that unbearable thought from her mind, knowing that if she died here in the past, Remus would *not* have sent her back to face it.

Remus.

*"Remus is in love with you."*

That was what Sirius had said to her in the dark passage. He apologised, said she deserved better, and then stepped aside and showed her whom he thought was just that: better. To him, better was Remus; and Remus, apparently, was in love with her.

Being around the boys was painful and confusing, so for most of the summer, she retreated to the family library, eager to research bonds in the hopes of getting answers about her and Sirius. She needed to know what she had created when she brought him back from the veil. She needed to know exactly what it was that tied them together, especially after witnessing that abhorrent excuse for a wedding ceremony at Malfoy Manor. The last thing she wanted was for Sirius to be tied to her like a house-elf.

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"If I didn't know any better, I would say that you're hiding in here, my girl." Dorea stood at the entrance to the large library, a sly smile on her face and a cup in each hand. "Come and take a break," she insisted as she brought the cups to a nearby table and sat down on the small sofa. "Now, tell me what's bothering you."

Mia sighed, closing her book. "Nothing."

"A true Gryffindor then? Incapable of lying?" Dorea tutted. "No, no, I think not. Try again."

"Does it matter?" Mia asked sadly.

"If it matters to *you*, it matters to *me*." Dorea smiled and sipped her tea quietly, crossing her legs at the ankles. Unconsciously, Mia mimicked her. "You've been in this library since the moment you returned from school, despite the fact that your letters spoke of nothing but the orchards and the gardens and, yes, the library. You wouldn't be my Mia without a book in your hands, but *this* level of self-sequestering is unhealthy."

"I'm researching."

"Perhaps I can be of assistance?" Dorea offered. "It is *my* library after all."

Mia hesitated briefly, automatically throwing up her Occlumency shields despite the fact that her mother had never once mentioned anything about potentially having skills in Legilimency.

"I'm researching . . . bonds."

She waited, watching her mother, fully expecting her to be astonished or concerned. As it was, Dorea did not so much as lift an eyebrow, but she did smile teasingly as she reached for her cup of tea to again take a sip, letting the moment linger in the air before returning the cup to its saucer on the table.

After another much too long moment of silence, Dorea calmly asked, "Is this about Sirius or Remus?"

Mia's eyes widened, and she felt her cheeks warm over. "What?"

"I said," Dorea spoke clearly, enunciating every word, "is this about your bond with Sirius or your feelings for Remus?"

"How did you . . . ? I never . . ."

"Tilly," Dorea said.

At the call of her name, the little house-elf popped into the library with a bright smile on her face. "Does Mistress and young Miss need more tea?" she asked, staring at the cups curiously.

Before either witch could answer, she snapped her fingers and a teapot appeared in her small hands, and she began to refill the cups.

"Tilly, my daughter was just asking me how I knew about her bond with the young Master Black and her affections for the young Master Lupin. Do join us for conversations, dear," Dorea said to the elf. "Your opinions are quite strong on both matters, after all."

Tilly silently consented and took a seat across from Mia, a stern look on her face. "Young Miss made a bond. Tilly sees it with her own eyes, yes, Tilly does. Young Miss used Blood Magic. Bound herself to the House of Black," Tilly said clearly and then quietly added, "Young Miss should have been bound to her *own* House."

"The Young Miss *is* already bound to House of Potter, Tilly," Dorea kindly scolded the elf, gesturing to Mia's bracelet. "She wears our words upon her wrist."

Mia consciously covered the bracelet with her other hand, her heart race accelerating at an alarming rate. "And Remus? How did you know about Remus?"

The little house-elf smirked, looking at Mia with an incredulous expression that made her feel just a bit stupid. "Tilly has eyes."

"Thank you, Tilly," Dorea said, looking far too amused for the topic at hand. "As always, I appreciate your discretion when it comes to the Masters of this House."

"Tilly does as Tilly does." The house-elf chuckled softly and then vanished with a pop!

"Now, may I ask my daughter a few questions in regards to this bond that she has apparently made with Blood Magic?" Dorea asked carefully. Her words almost sounded like a threat or blackmail, but she showed no malice in her face or demeanour.

"I-I didn't . . . I *can't* tell you," Mia said, shaking and on the verge of tears.

Dorea reached for one of Mia's trembling hands and surrounded it with her own. "Calm down, sweet girl. I did not slip Veritaserum into your tea. Though I'm not above such things," she said with a wry grin. "I understand that you cannot tell me certain things as they pertain to the future; is that why you refuse to speak?"

Mia felt her stomach drop. "The future?"

"Yes, dear. Where you're from."

"How did . . . ? I don't . . ."

How had she messed up? Had she been talking in her sleep more than normal? Did Dorea use Legilimency on her without knowing it? Did Dumbledore break his promise to her? Had Madam Pomfrey been compromised?

"Every action we take is the causation of destiny, time travel won't change anything," Dorea said, quoting Remus's letter. "I went through your belongings the first night you arrived here."

When Mia's mouth fell open accusingly, Dorea pointed at herself and said, "Slytherin."

"You've known this *whole* time? You read my letter?" Mia tried to catch her breath. "How have you not mentioned it until now? It's been years."

"Because it wasn't useful to bring it up until now," Dorea explained, and Mia stared at her mother, never before seeing her more Slytherin than this moment. "I have no care to learn the future. As ambitious as Slytherins usually are, my ambitions were always specific. I wanted Charlus as a husband, and I wanted out of my hideous family. Both achieved. According to your letter and my own research—" She grinned when Mia sat up a little straighter. "—Yes, I have been researching. Time cannot be altered regardless of your presence. According to your letter, you were sent back for *personal* reasons, not to change the world or stop this heinous war that appears to be all too quickly upon us."

"What if I *could* stop it?" Mia choked on the words as they slipped past her lips. "What if I could end it? Change it?"

"Is the time you're from a good place?" Dorea asked.

"Yes," Mia admitted sadly, "but only after so much suffering."

"And if you changed something now, who is to say that there would not be *more* suffering?" Dorea stood and moved to sit directly beside Mia, taking both of her hands within her own and sighing as Mia began to cry.

"You don't understand . . . people are going to die."

Dorea inclined her head. "People tend to do that. Mia, sweetheart, we are all given a number of years to live our lives. The *content*, not the *length* of those years, is what matters. You cannot cheat Death. If you were to change something now, save one life, Death would only take another."

Mia looked away, ashamed as she asked, "What if I didn't care who was taken instead?"

"You've lost so much, my girl, and we promised to never pry into your past." Dorea pulled Mia into her arms, stroking a hand down her curly hair. "But *your* loved ones mean just as much to you as anyone else does to *their* loved ones. A life is a life, and you are not capable of being so selfish to risk one for another when you already know the outcome."

Mia continued to cry, heartbroken. She did not want to hear these words, not from Dorea. She wanted someone to give her permission to fix the future, to save them all. The tears eventually stopped flowing, and she looked up at her mother and threw caution to the wind. Damn the consequences.

"What if it was Jamie?"

Dorea looked very briefly caught off guard, but her expression was shielded away almost instantly. She drew in a slow and calculated breath before firmly insisting, "My answer remains the same. I have faith that however long your brother's life is, it will be filled with meaning and love."

"How can you know that?" Mia broke down again, wishing, pleading for Dorea to change her mind and let her confess everything. The burden was too much.

"Because *you* wear our words," Dorea whispered, touching the golden bracelet on Mia's wrist. "James is currently the last of the Potters. Which means that in the future, he is either alive to give you this bracelet himself, or he has had children or grandchildren and they have placed this in your care. Therefore the Potter name continues, and James lived with meaning and love in his life."

Mia did not respond with words but nodded rapidly.

Dorea cleared her throat. "Now, enough with this sadness. I plan on helping with what I can in the here and now. Tell me about this bond. Are you married to Sirius in the future? Are you a Black?" she asked with a grin. "Don't mind my smugness, but the idea of a son of Walburga taking to wife a Muggle-born is *immensely* pleasing to me. I'm tempted to break out the good champagne."

"No," Mia admitted with a soft chuckle. "At least, I don't *think* so. He . . . I . . ." She struggled to find words. "I saved his life. He died. I . . . called him back."

Dorea's eyes widened in what appeared to be genuine shock for the first time since the conversation began. "A life debt ritual? Sweet Salazar . . . Do they teach Blood Magic that powerful to children in the future?"

"No, well I, I . . ." Mia cleared her throat. "I stole restricted books from Dumbledore and found the spell." Dorea laughed, and Mia gaped at her. "What's funny about that?"

"My sweet little Mia, who follows rules to the point where she refuses to divulge secrets about the future, stole restricted books on Blood Magic from Albus Dumbledore. I can't think of anything funnier than that."

"So what does this mean?" Mia asked after joining in on the laughter, wiping tears of amusement—no longer sorrow—from her eyes. "Before I left, Sirius said he knew what was happening with this bond that was created. And the Black house-elf recognised *me* as its Mistress even though Sirius and I are not married. I thought the bond was gone when I came back here, but he . . . Sirius . . . Sirius kissed me last month, and I felt it again. Like a strong vibration, deep inside." She touched her sternum, watching as Dorea's lips pursed in thought.

"That sounds to me like an unsealed bond," Dorea said and then sat back, tapping her finger against her chin. "There are several different types of bonds and they exist in the world whether created or not. Only when prepared or provoked are they visible to the eyes of creatures like house-elves. They have their own bonds that they are born into. That's why they can see them so well. It sounds like you added Blood Magic, which strengthened a bond between yourself and Sirius that already existed. Otherwise, the Blood Magic was what provoked an already prepared bond."

Mia stared. "I didn't *create* it?"

"No one creates bonds, we merely accept and define or decline them altogether."

"What do you mean define?"

Dorea stood and walked to a nearby glass case where several vases sat. She waved her wand in front of the middle shelf; the glass became wood and the vases vanished altogether. Another flick of the wand and a small door opened in the centre much like a safe would. Inside were several old books. Mia could not read all the titles, but she recognised Nature's Nobility, a book by Godelot—the same person who wrote *Magick Moste Evile*—and a book she was certain had something to do with Sex Magic. Relieved that her mother did not pick up that particular text, Mia focused on the book that Dorea did grab before closing the wooden safe and transfiguring it back into a glass case.

"There are four general types of bonds that exist," Dorea said, flipping through pages until she landed on the one she was looking for. "The first and most abundant is the Familial Bond. It exists between parent and child, brother and sister, and even extends through friendship. Most of those bonds are born finished and need no ritual to seal them. However, because they are not sealed, they are easily broken, as the Black family often does by blasting us off the family tree. You've been bonded to the House of Potter by your acceptance of this bracelet," she went on, pointing to the item of jewellery. "Because no ritual was formed, it was as though you were born into the family."

Mia smiled softly as Dorea handed her the book on Bonds. "So I really *am* a Potter?"

"If a Potter allowed this bracelet to be given to you with Familial intent, then you are in fact a Potter. Bonds begin with preparation triggered by *emotions*. You were emotionally connected to the Potters in the future, yes?" Dorea asked, smiling when Mia nodded.

"The second step to a bond is provocation triggered by *actions*. Someone had to actually give you this bracelet. Finally, bonds are sealed through *intention*. When Charlus and I sent in your records to the Ministry, you were officially ours. Officially a Potter, thus sealing the Familial Bond. Not that a bond would matter. You have been a Potter since you stepped foot into this home, merely because I willed it to be," Dorea said with an air of arrogance.

"What other bonds are there?"

"The Bond of Servitude." Mia felt her face pinch up in a self-righteous scowl, and Dorea sighed knowingly. "Yes, I mean house-elves, and no, Tilly was not forced into one."

To *this* House at least. Those bonds are a one-way vow. Unfortunately, some older marriages use them similarly."

"Sirius and I attended Narcissa's wedding." Mia flinched, forgetting that she was not supposed to tell anyone that. "Well, I mean . . . we sneaked in."

"He took *my* daughter to a Black-Malfoy wedding." Dorea chuckled, more amused than anything else. "That boy has moxie. I bet Walburga was beside herself."

"She never saw us. We only spoke with Narcissa." Mia almost told her that they had seen Bellatrix as well, but she was not in the mood to deal with the possible outcome of *that* bit of information let loose. "Her vows were one-sided, and they were all about obedience and loyalty."

"That sounds like a typical pureblood wedding. At least among those who practice the old traditions." Dorea sighed as she sat back down, shaking her head. "Embarrassing, but it brings up the next bond which is Marital. Marital Bonds are sealed during a wedding ceremony, prepared by the interest of love or desire, and provoked either by a proper engagement or . . ." She cleared her throat. "Intimate matters."

"You mean a Marital Bond can be provoked," Mia clarified, eyes wide in shock. "Just when two people . . . are intimate?"

"Yes and no. When two people become involved romantically, the bond that already exists is manifested into defining itself, preparing itself for eventual sealing. If the pair does not eventually marry, the bond remains unsealed and essentially void." Dorea shrugged her shoulders as if it were nothing of consequence. "It is the marriage *ritual* that seals the bond."

"What's the difference between a sealed bond and an unsealed bond?" Mia asked.

"Sealed Marital Bonds can only be broken with death. There is no divorce in the Wizarding world, and bonds are the reason why. If a man was bonded in marriage to his wife and then left her for another, the new marriage would be rejected by his magic and by society. Sealed bonds of *any* kind amplify our magic. It's the reason witches and wizards generally live much longer than Muggles and why, when we're injured, we can tap into our magic and our bonds to heal ourselves."

"I never knew any of this," Mia said, enthralled and annoyed at the same time. "You would think that at least some of it would be beneficial to teach at Hogwarts, especially to Muggle-borns who don't have parents to pass down the information. How many Muggle-

borns might have rushed into a magical marriage only to find no way out of it?" When the thought occurred to her, she swallowed nervously. "Do you think that Sirius and I have a provoked, but unsealed, Marital Bond?"

Dorea seemed to hesitate, which actually made Mia panic a little.

"No," she finally admitted. "I believe you have something very rare: a *Soul* Bond."

Mia felt something flutter inside of her chest as she nervously asked, "What's a Soul Bond?"

"It's a bond that extends beyond Familial and Marital," Dorea said softly, almost reverently. "It connects two magics together in a powerful way that can weave into the fabric of time itself."

"But that just sounds like what the life debt ritual can do. The book I read said that people used to use life debt rituals to bind others to them in marriage or servitude. How is a Soul Bond different?"

Taking Mia's hand, Dorea smiled sweetly, squeezing her fingers. "I believe that your life debt ritual *added* magic to your bond, strengthening it. If you knew Sirius in the future, then it stands to reason that he remembered you from his own past. Those memories and emotions from him would have prepared the bond, or perhaps your emotions for him here in this time began the preparation, I can't be sure." Dorea frowned in consternation. "Time travel is quite bothersome."

"Agreed," Mia said stiffly.

Ignoring her comment, Dorea continued. "Because the Soul Bond and life debt both extend beyond time, there's really no way to tell what the original catalyst was. However, the difference between the two is the fact that a Soul Bond cannot become a Bond of Servitude. A Soul Bond acts much like . . . werewolves," she said, smiling when Mia stiffened at the word. "Werewolves have mates. Sometimes they find them, often they do not. It's very rare if I understand. However, when a werewolf is properly mated, nothing comes before their mate. Protection and happiness are key. The same is true with a Soul Bond. Marital Bonds can still exist through abuse; Soul Bonds cannot."

Mia tried digesting so much information. "And you think Sirius and I . . ."

"Yes. It would explain how your bond exists in both timelines, and your behaviour with one another."

Mia feigned innocence. "What do you mean?"

"I mean James writes home just as often as you do. And I am not as blind as your brother and your father. While I haven't wanted to bring it up, because I imagine it involves your past and I made a promise," Dorea said with a sigh. "I know about your nightmares."

Mia frowned and looked away, embarrassed.

"I also know that when they happen, James takes care of you, but also, that Sirius does. I believe that is the bond calling him to you."

"So it's not his *choice*." Mia frowned, feeling sick inside. Whether she was the one to provoke it or prepare it or whatever, it all came down to the fact that Sirius was not in control of his behaviour. It meant nothing. "It really is magic. He protects me because of the bond, he kissed me because of the bond."

She looked away, suddenly angry at herself for allowing that glimmer of hope to creep in. She remembered being so worried in the future when older Sirius had kissed her and then did not speak about it for months. They were supposed to talk the day after her nineteenth birthday. Was that when he would have admitted that he had not meant to do any of it? That he had been forced into it all by magic? Had he wanted to wait because he knew he would need to let her down gently?

"Stop that!" Dorea said, her tone scolding as she pointed at Mia's head. "I can see the wheels turning. No, the bonds force nothing, they merely suggest. A bond, however, prevents harm. Sirius would never be able to harm you. Nor you him."

Mia scoffed. "I hit him all the time."

Dorea chuckled, grey eyes rolling in amusement. "I mean true harm. Nor would either of you willingly let harm come to the other. It's all about intent."

Mia nodded as she remembered how Sirius had so openly protected her while she healed from being splinched, and how he came to her rescue when she was being tortured by Bellatrix. Likewise, it was Bellatrix's threats against Sirius's life that had forced Mia's hand in threatening the witch. She began wondering how long the bond had been affecting them both. Was it the bond that made her want to bring him back from the veil? Was it the reason she followed Harry into the Department of Mysteries when he thought that Sirius had been captured? Was it the bond that had originally called out to her in desperation to save Sirius's life from dementors all those many years ago?

"For a Soul Bond to be fully sealed or on its way to being sealed with a ritual, both parties need to be all knowing of the situation and the bond, willing to openly accept the bond, and loving of their bond mate."

"That makes sense," Mia agreed. "That's why the bond feels different here. In the future, Sirius told me he knew about the bond, but here he doesn't, so it's different. Does that mean we're destined, though? It gives us choice, but . . ."

"But what if you wanted to choose another?" Dorea asked with a smirk. "Perhaps a young Mr Lupin?"

Mia shook her head, feeling her face burn hot with awkwardness. "No. I know Remus isn't meant for me," she insisted, the image of Tonks and baby Teddy entering her mind. "It's just . . . I feel trapped. Sirius kissed me and left me and told me I should basically go to Remus instead."

"Then why don't you?" Dorea asked plainly. "Your Soul Bond is not sealed, Sirius has not proposed marriage, and meant to be or not, you are young. Mia, I grew up knowing that in the future my parents would choose my husband for me. I would be bound to him in servitude and marriage, and I would be miserable all my life. But I chose to go against what I assumed was fate. I made my own, and I found love and happiness."

"Doesn't the Soul Bond existing mean that Sirius would *be* my happiness?" Mia asked sadly as tears began to form again.

"Not without both of you being knowing, willing, and loving at the same time." Dorea wiped the tears from Mia's cheeks. "In the meantime, I encourage you to follow your letter. Live your life."

"Enjoy my life." Mia nodded solemnly until something occurred to her and she jolted, looking up at her mother in shock. "Wait. Did you basically just give your teenage daughter permission to rebel?"

Dorea took in a deep breath. "Charlus is a sweet and naive Gryffindor, but I am not so trusting, even of my children. But since we're on the subject—diverted from the original topic of conversation as we may be—do you know how to perform the proper Contraceptive Spells?"

Mia bobbed her head anxiously and began stammering out, "Umm, yes. From . . . before. Not that I . . . cause I never . . . I have *never* . . . But I knew, because . . . just in case."

"Good." Dorea exhaled gratefully. "That only leaves one last important thing."

"What's that?"

"Do not tell your father or brother a word of what we've spoken about today."

## Chapter Thirty-Four

### *Game On*

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*We're both looking for something  
We've been afraid to find  
It's easier to be broken  
It's easier to hide*  
(First Time - Lifehouse)

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**September 2nd, 1974**

Since the full moon fell on the first of September, Remus was not aboard the Hogwarts Express. Instead, he had been Side-Alonged to school a day early so he could be taken to the Shrieking Shack without bringing attention to himself.

Mia was taking her mother's advice to heart and decided to try and enjoy her life in the moment—*with Remus*.

After the Sorting of new students and the start-of-term feast were over, she retired to the hospital wing to wait for Remus, something she had not done for a few years. Madam Pomfrey initially insisted on sending her back to Gryffindor Tower, but Mia had taken a page out of her Slytherin mother's book and feigned sickness in order to stay the night.

When Remus was brought in the following morning, she was glad to see that his wounds were not as bad as she remembered. She watched from her own bed as Madam Pomfrey healed his back and the few scratches he had inflicted on himself, including a new one across his chest. Had he not been wounded, Mia would have blushed at the sight. Remus used to be very skinny, bordering on underweight, but playing Quidditch with James and Sirius over the summer—not to mention the physical stress of his monthly transformations—had put a little bulk on him.

When Madam Pomfrey stepped out of the room to let Remus sleep, Mia slipped behind the curtain, sliding onto the chair beside his bed, and quickly took hold of his hand.

Remus yawned, slowly opening his eyes and turning his head to the side to look at her. "Morning."

She smiled sweetly at him. "Morning."

"How was the train? Sorry I couldn't make it—previous engagement," he joked, and Mia chuckled quietly. His nonchalance at her presence warmed her inside, making her have the slightest bit of hope that he would not reject her presence there in the future. She only wanted to help. She only wanted to be with him.

"It was a bit of a pain without you there," she admitted, still holding his hand, marvelling at how much bigger it was than hers now that they were older. "Jamie asked Lily to sit with us since we had an extra seat, and she hexed him with a Hair-Thickening Charm." Remus cringed at the tale, and she smiled. "I know. If anyone *doesn't* need a Hair-Thickening Charm, it's Jamie."

Remus reached his free hand up and tugged on one of her curls. "I think *all* Potters should avoid that particular hex," he said with a playful smile.

She smirked, narrowing her eyes. "Funny. Sirius left the compartment an hour into the trip to go snog some brunette Ravenclaw." Noticing that Remus's stare went cold at the words, she pointed at his face. "What's that about? Why the angry eyes?"

"Sirius shouldn't do that in front of you," Remus said with a growl.

She brushed it off as genuinely as she could. While she was being as sensible as possible when it came to Sirius, she had a particular distaste for many of the girls he chose to associate with, which only made her question traits about herself that might be similar. She hoped that he did not have a type. What was more, she hoped that if he did, that she was an anomaly.

"I'm fine. He made his choice, and I'm not going to sit around like some lovesick puppy over Sirius Black, of all people," she admitted confidently. "He told me I deserve better."

"You *do*," Remus insisted. "You never did tell me exactly what happened between you and Sirius."

"Does it matter? I just want to move on." When Remus did not reply but continued to stare at her, she sighed. "We kissed, and he went mental." She shrugged her shoulders, leaving out the part in the story where Sirius told Mia that Remus was in love with her. "It's for the best."

She watched Remus as he swallowed, running the pad of his thumb in small circles over her knuckles. When he inhaled slowly, she watched his reaction closely. His throat bobbed, and his eyes closed. Had she not known him better, she might have assumed him

to be in pain. But this was not Remus in pain; this was Remus trying to focus. Her heart thudded a little as she wondered about the thoughts possibly moving through his mind.

"So," he eventually said, his eyes opening once more and pinning her to her seat. "Where was Peter while Sirius was off confirming poorly constructed rumours and James was being hexed?"

Mia frowned, and the thudding of her heart changed into an irritated staccato.

Remus's brows knit together in obvious concern. "What?"

"He'll be in detention all this week. Peter was caught nicking things from the trolley."

"Stealing?" Remus frowned, his lips parting in surprise. "Peter's got plenty of money to pay for things. Even if he didn't, he knows Sirius or James would lend him a few Sickles."

"Caught in the act. Looking for attention, I'm guessing. Let's not talk about Peter, please." She laced their fingers together, relieved when he squeezed her hand instead of pulling away. "How are you feeling?"

He smiled softly at her. "Pretty good right now."

"Really?" Her eyes lit up. "What's different?"

"Nothing. The transformation was the same as usual. The waking up part has been good so far."

She smiled coyly at him and looked away, the intensity of his gaze strangely intimidating. It had not always been so; Remus had always been comfortable, though the change in his demeanour was not unpleasant or unwanted. "I thought you'd be mad at me for coming here. You told Madam Pomfrey to keep me out a few years ago."

"I just didn't want you playing mediwitch for me." He sighed, looking embarrassed as he scratched at his chest, startling when his fingers touched the new scar there. Tugging on the sheet to hide his skin from her gaze, he cleared his throat. "I don't like you seeing me like this. The only thing worse would be you seeing me actually transform."

Mia kept her face blank at his words, knowing that she had, in fact, once seen him transform into a large werewolf. A large werewolf that had turned on her, Harry, and Ron. A werewolf that had chased her and Harry through the Forbidden Forest.

"But you're okay with me here now?" she asked with trepidation.

"I'd be mental to say no to waking up next to a beautiful girl any day of the month."

She noticed that Remus's eyes flashed gold at her smile. She was certain that she was blushing, and his attention only made her blush more. Averting her gaze for a few moments, she did her best not to argue the fact that he had called her beautiful.

"I know it's a while off," Mia began, biting her lower lip nervously, staring at the floor. "But do you want to go to Hogsmeade with me?" she asked hesitantly, slowly bringing her gaze up to look at him.

Remus sat there, pale and wide-eyed, his irises back to their soft green. "You . . . You want to go to Hogsmeade with me?"

"Yes."

"We've gone to Hogsmeade. You've never needed to ask me before."

"That was just as friends," she blurted out before she had a chance to think the words over. Realising her blunder, she looked away, humiliated, but Remus squeezed her hand again to get her attention, and she drew her eyes back to his face.

"You mean . . . a *date*?" Remus asked, needing clarification. "With . . . *me*?"

"If you don't want to, I understand . . . I just thought that—"

"Is this because of Sirius?" he asked, his brows furrowed, and his gaze suddenly dark.

"No," Mia answered immediately, much too quickly for his liking if the way his nose twitched was any indication. "No. I . . . I don't think so. I'm not asking you because Sirius broke my heart or anything. Because he didn't. I didn't kiss him, to begin with; *he* kissed *me*. I won't lie and say that him running off didn't hurt a little, but . . ." She exhaled sharply, fighting through the awkwardness of the situation. "I . . . I like you, Remus. I have since I first met you."

Of course, Mia was thinking of the first time she had met an *older* Professor Lupin who saved her and her friends from dementors—the first Patronus Charm she had ever seen. He was wise, kind, and powerful, and a schoolgirl crush had developed rather quickly. It faded over time, of course, only to resurface here in this time in the guise of a deep, abundant friendship.

"I don't want to be a backup," Remus whispered.

"You are *not* a backup. You deserve better than to be anyone's backup," Mia said firmly but then frowned. Was he? She knew about her bond with Sirius and knew that Remus would eventually find Tonks and have his own family. But a part of her did not

care. Remus would not find Tonks for many, many years, and Mia did not want him to be alone the entire time. Neither did she want to be alone herself.

"I'm not like Sirius. I won't just take a girl to Hogsmeade, snog her, and walk back up the hill alone."

"So you're saying you want something exclusive with me?" Mia asked softly, her heart pounding against her chest back to that exciting pleasant rhythm. Remus must have heard the change because he looked guilty over her reactions.

"You deserve better than me."

Mia narrowed her eyes. "I'm getting really tired of boys saying that."

"I'm not messing about, Mia. We could never . . . I mean . . ." Remus swallowed and held her hand tighter, lifting their laced fingers from the side of his bed to her gaze. "This is it," he said firmly. "It's not fair to you. You deserve someone who can . . ." But he did not finish his sentence with words, merely raked his gaze over her body, letting his stare linger on her lips while licking his own.

His stare was enough. She understood his meaning even as he looked her over with heated eyes that left her feeling warm all the way to the tips of her toes.

"I could never . . . I could never kiss you."

"That's ridiculous! Of course you could!"

"No, I couldn't!" Remus snapped at her. "Mia, you've seen my boggart; my worst fear is hurting or infecting you."

"Your worst fear is you attacking me in your werewolf form," Mia argued, annoyed with him. "If you think I'm thick enough to go snogging your muzzle in the Shrieking Shack then we have bigger problems than I thought."

She glared at him, ignoring the twitch of his nose when she mentioned his muzzle. She knew he hated it when she referenced specifics of his lupine alter-ego, but Mia also knew that he needed to get over it.

"It's not happening in *human* form either," he vowed.

"Lycanthropy can only be transmitted through a bite wound from a fully transformed werewolf on the full moon."

She narrowed her eyes, recalling a similar argument between an older Sirius and Future Remus at Grimmauld Place the night they all found out about Tonks's pregnancy. Mia sighed irritably realising that if he was still worried in the *future* about his lycanthropy

being transmitted to others without a full moon bite, then she knew she was going to struggle with convincing him *now*.

"Remus, I refuse to let you keep from enjoying every aspect of life because you're afraid of hurting people—of hurting *me*."

"I refuse to put you in harm's way," Remus growled and tried to pull his hand away from her, but she held onto it tightly, glaring at him when he huffed and tried again. "That's why you deserve better than me. It's *this*." He held their hands up to her face. "Or nothing. That's all *anyone* can have with me. Ever."

"Fine." Mia scowled and stood up, releasing his hand and turning her back on him. She watched in the reflection of the window nearby as he reached out for her instinctively and then pulled his hand back, looking shocked. He shook his head, and she wondered to herself what his inner wolf was trying to tell him at that particular moment. Was Moony wanting a connection? Or was the wolf trying to remind him that Mia was not his mate?

"I'll see you in class," Mia said as she turned back around. "You should probably talk to Jamie before Hogsmeade. It's two months away, but still. He'll probably want to do the whole 'big brother' talk." She rolled her eyes. As if James had any room to tell her whom to date considering the production he put on anytime he asked Lily to borrow a quill.

"Wait . . . what?" Remus blinked confusedly and looked up at her. "But I thought—"

"You thought I'd embrace your condition for the past three years of friendship and then turn *tail*," she said with a wry smile, "the moment it became inconvenient to me? I told you, Remus. I am not afraid of you, and I'm not afraid of your ridiculous rules. And they are ridiculous. Though to make you comfortable—for the time being—I will abide by them."

He sat in silence, looking utterly gobsmacked.

"Get some rest," she whispered as she kissed him on the cheek.

She would obey his rules like a good little Gryffindor, but the Sorting Hat almost put her in Slytherin, and if a Slytherin knew anything, it was how to exploit loopholes.

**September 3rd, 1974**

Gryffindors and Slytherins slipped through the dungeon doors to enter the Potions classroom. Cauldrons had already been set up at each station, and Slughorn stood at the head of the class, grinning brightly. The look on his face was incredibly disconcerting to Mia, who had never known the man to be happy without a self-serving reason.

"Good morning! Good morning! I'm very excited for today. Some of you have displayed a fine aptitude for Potions," he said, eyeing Snape, Lily, Damocles Belby, Adrian Abbot, and Mia. When his gaze fell on the four Marauders, Slughorn sighed. "Others still need a bit of improvement."

None of the boys looked more annoyed by the declaration than Remus.

"Over the next few months, in addition to brewing pre-approved potions from the textbooks, I am assigning each of you one specific potion ingredient. I want to see your skills at discovery and invention!"

Mia's eyes widened; depending on the ingredient, this could be an outright disaster. She could only imagine what Frank would do if given something like alihotsy; the common ingredient in Laughter Potion was also known to cause hysteria. While Alice was quite adept at brewing, one thing was for certain: Neville's aversion to cauldrons was a genetic trait passed down by his father.

Slughorn then went down the list. Alice received a chizpurple fang, Amycus Carrow got dandelion root, and his sister received leech juice. Frank—*thankfully*—took eye of newt, which was not known to explode in *any* form. Mary received flobberworm mucus, and Elora Zabini took baneberry. That just left the Marauders and the future members of the Slug Club—though Mia was determined to avoid the group at all costs.

"Mr Black," Slughorn said with a smile and placed a small bottle on the table. "Your ingredient is fairy wing."

Sirius glared at the bottle as though it were contaminated. "These are used in Beauty Potions. Give it to one of the girls."

Both Lily and Mia turned and scowled viciously at him.

Slughorn merely ignored the outburst and moved down the line. "Mr Potter, you have onion juice."

James frowned and slumped forward against the table. "The only thing you can make with onion juice is a fungal removal potion."

Slughorn grinned as though that were the whole point. "And it's quite easy to make too. I hope you're up to the task."

James glared at the professor before sullenly staring down at his ingredient and huffing.

Slughorn placed the next bottle in front of Peter. "Mr Pettigrew."

Peter paled as he read the label. "R-Rat spleen?"

The Marauders all snickered audibly, and even Mia chuckled silently to herself.

"Yes, it's quite common in shrinking solutions. You seem to be rather proficient at the brew; I assume you'll do just fine." Slughorn grinned and moved on. "Mr Lupin," he addressed Remus, who still looked annoyed about being at the bottom of any class.

Remus eyed his ingredient as it was placed in front of him with a look on his face that said he was not amused in the slightest. He glanced between the other three Marauders as well as Mia, all of whom looked perfectly innocent.

"Moonstone, sir?"

"Yes," Slughorn jovially replied. "When in powdered form it can create a lovely Draught of Peace, but be careful. It's also known to be an active ingredient in love potions." He continued to give a good belly laugh while Remus blushed red.

Sirius laughed quietly. "Careful with that moonstone there . . . *Moony*."

Mia's eyes lit up at the nickname, and she turned to stare at the boys, all of whom looked mildly amused at Sirius's joke, except for Remus, who turned and punched him in the shoulder.

"Shut up, Padfoot," he growled.

She knew that the boys had begun their Animagus training, but despite the many rat jokes at Peter's expense, she had not realised that they were already so far along in their instruction that they had discovered all of their animal forms and created the lifelong nicknames that would accompany them. She smiled proudly at their progress, which only made her realise that she had originally wanted to follow their lead into Animagus training—on her own at least—and she had barely even begun the meditations to start it. Thankfully, the boys were illegally researching all on their own, while Mia already knew the process after she had read a book on Animagi training following the war.

Adrian Abbot was given nightshade, and Lily was handed a bottle of ashwinder eggs, leaving Snape, Mia, and Damocles Belby.

"Mr Snape," Slughorn said the name proudly. "A phial of moon dew."

Snape looked smug as he reached for the ingredient.

Mia rolled her eyes, knowing that he was already predictably planning on brewing a Draught of Living Death.

"Miss Potter." Slughorn smiled and handed her a container of lacewing flies.

She grinned at the sight of the main ingredient in the first advanced potion she had ever brewed: Polyjuice Potion. "Thank you, sir."

"And finally, Mr Belby." Slughorn set a bottle down in front of Damocles.

"Aconite." Damocles inclined his head curiously, and Mia's eyes widened.

"Also called monkshood," Snape chimed in.

Slughorn grinned. "Yes indeed, Mr Snape, five points to Slytherin!"

"Also called wolfsbane," Mia added.

The professor chortled, looping his thumbs in his suspenders and leaning back proudly as though every correct word out of the mouths of his students was a direct reflection on him. "It is! Though rarely known as such. Ten points to Gryffindor!"

Mia turned and grinned smugly at Snape, who glared at her in response. She shifted her attention back to Damocles with a kind smile. There were few Slytherins who could carry on a conversation without sneering or spitting slurs, and Damocles was one of them.

"I'm excited to see what you come up with. I've read a lot about it."

"You have?" Damocles asked. "It's usually used as a pain reliever or a poison. I can't help but wonder the properties it exudes when the stem, leaves, and flowers are brewed or stewed separately."

"The sprigs are an ingredient in Wideye Potion. Perhaps it could be used as a mind sharpening ingredient?" she proposed, smiling when Damocles nodded thoughtfully at her suggestion.

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An hour into class, everyone was working silently while Slughorn was asleep in the fluffy armchair, which sat behind his desk instead of a proper seat.

Mia was busy examining her lacewing flies to prepare for her Polyjuice Potion, though she was seriously considering making a few adjustments to it to see if she had it in her to invent something new. She had always been terrific at creating and adjusting her own charms and transfigurations, but Potions was something for which she always felt she needed to follow the book. However, Snape—and therefore Harry in sixth year—were proof that potions could be altered for the better.

"What are you up to?" James asked as he approached the table she shared with Snape, Damocles, and Lily. Damocles had left his seat to dig through Slughorn's supplies, offering James his first chance to see what Mia had been talking to the Slytherin about.

"Nothing," Mia said innocently.

"I saw you talking to Belby," James whispered. "Still looking into wolfsbane?"

She eyed him carefully and confirmed with a quick nod.

James smiled, clearly remembering that when he had questioned her about the toxic plant on a list he found her writing, she admitted that she was wanting to use it to potentially create a potion that could help Remus with his "furry little problem" as Sirius was calling it these days.

"Speaking of," James said, tilting his head in the direction of Damocles's cauldron, "I heard a rumour that a certain sister of mine is trying to get involved with a certain friend of mine."

"Not a rumour. I asked Remus to Hogsmeade, and he's not the type to be casual about such things. I told him to talk to you instead of you finding out and thinking that we were keeping secrets," she said, daring him to challenge her.

"You asked Remus to Hogsmeade?" Lily asked before James had a chance to say anything.

Mia turned and her mouth fell open. She knew that Lily fancied Remus a few years earlier but had already forgotten, and now she felt bad for perhaps hurting her friend's feelings.

"Umm . . . yes. I'm sorry, Lily, I should have—"

"No. I think you two are well-paired," Lily said with a sincere smile.

Snape scowled, turning his attention to Lily. "Why do you care anyway?"

"Because Mia and Remus are my friends, Sev," Lily scolded him quietly before stirring her potion in the cauldron.

James looked at her hand and sucked in a sharp breath. "Evans. Is that . . . an *engagement* ring?"

Everyone turned and stared at Lily, shocked. It was not completely uncommon for witches to be betrothed so early, at least among old-fashioned pureblood families, but everyone knew Lily was a Muggle-born.

"What?" Lily held up her hand in obvious shock and rolled her eyes at James. "This is a mood ring, you dolt. My parents bought it for me this summer." At his continued look of utter non-comprehension, she shook her head. "It's a Muggle thing."

Mia laughed at her brother when he sighed in loud relief.

"How do Muggles make rings that tell your mood?" James asked. "That sounds like magic."

"It's not magic," Mia answered. "There are crystals in the ring that react to changing temperatures thus altering the colour of the ring." When she turned to see James—and several others—staring at her perplexed, she rolled her eyes. "Oh Jamie, honestly, read a book!"

"So what's your mood right now, Evans?" James grinned, staring at the ring on her finger.

"Annoyed," Lily answered immediately and turned away from him, putting her focus back on her cauldron.

Mia shook her head at James, and he frowned up at her innocently, looking genuinely confused over how he had messed that up. She grabbed his full attention by snatching his chin in her fingers to prevent him from staring at Lily. "So. Remus. What did he say to you?"

"Not much. A lot of stuttering. Sirius is still taking the piss out of him for it."

They both looked back to the Marauder table, where Sirius was indeed whispering to a consistently red-faced Remus, who was angrily trying to grind his moonstone into a powder.

Mia frowned. "Be nice."

"Absolutely not. He's a bloke that wants to snog my sister. Friend or not, there's a process he's got to go through," James said firmly, the hint of mischief in his eyes.

"He does *not* want to snog me." She gripped his face harder, and James's eyes widened at her volatile reaction. "He's a perfect gentleman and always has been. Much

more than either you or Sirius could or will ever be. I will date whomever I please, James Charlus Potter, and you *will* get over it!" she snapped, releasing him with a shove so that he fell to the floor, staring up at her with evident awe.

Mia turned back to her cauldron and glowered down at it, resisting the urge to glare at Lily, who was stifling her giggles after watching James be literally put in his place.

James stood, dusted off his trousers, and made his way to the back of the classroom to re-join his table.

Mia sighed, hoping that the awkward moment was over.

It wasn't.

"I'd go ahead and stop the *Love Potion* you're making there, Remus," James called out loudly. "I really don't think she needs it! My sister's just over the moon for you."

The classroom burst into laughter, and Mia turned red with rage as she swivelled on her stool and narrowed her eyes at her brother, who was looking smug at the little scene he had caused. Sirius was grinning next to him, and Peter was laughing quietly, trying to avoid Mia's glare.

Remus had his head buried in his folded arms, but she could see that his ears were a violent shade of red. Mia glared at her brother but then decided to smile in her mother's most threatening Slytherin manner.

Game on.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

### *Satisfied*

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*Everywhere I'm looking now  
I'm surrounded by your embrace  
Baby I can see your halo  
You know you're my saving grace  
(Halo - Beyoncé)*

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**October 4th, 1974**

Mia let James think he was safe.

He was not.

As his sense of self-preservation was so off, he continued causing problems in all of their classes during the month that followed the initial challenge between the siblings. Poor Remus got caught in the crossfire; in each class, James would have something to say about the potential future relationship between his sister and friend.

Remus, ever the loyal Gryffindor, did his best to stay out of the fight itself and also to respect James's wish that he not start anything with Mia without permission—something that *thoroughly* pissed her off.

In Charms, James would summon things from Mia's desk with a well-timed Accio when her back was turned, claiming that Remus wanted a memento to get him through the rest of the day. In Care of Magical Creatures, James would *loudly* ask Professor Kettleburn for details regarding the mating habits of werewolves. In Herbology, he would transform fluxweed into roses and pretend to be a Muggle delivery service on behalf of Remus, who would stand at the back of the room with dirt on his face, hiding his embarrassment while simultaneously trying to plant his puffapod.

The only four classes in which Remus and Mia got a break from James's antics were History of Magic (where James and Sirius napped), Defence Against the Dark Arts (James was not stupid enough to mess with their new professor, Auror Proudfoot), Transfiguration (James and Sirius took this class seriously due to the nature of their Animagus training), and Ancient Runes (which Mia and Remus had without any other invading Marauders).

The two would sit beside one another in Ancient Runes. Often, in the middle of class with their heads buried in a book of translation texts, Remus would reach over to take Mia's hand and smile, lacing their fingers together. She would breathe in deep and let the feeling of calm that he exuded wash over her; somehow it made her feel that putting up with James was all worth it.

It was *especially* worth it the morning of the fourth of October.

"Just don't drink the pumpkin juice, and you'll be fine, Lily," Mia whispered.

"How did you even slip the potion into the whole batch?" Lily asked as the two girls sat at the Gryffindor table, waiting for the rest of the student body to arrive for breakfast.

"I'm friendly with the house-elves." Mia grinned, happy to know that in this timeline she was able to make peace with the small creatures, considering the elves at Hogwarts in the future were utterly terrified of her and her knitting habits.

"You sure it's going to work? It's brilliant, but you're going to get in trouble for it too." Lily eyed the High Table with a raised brow. "I'm not one to promote breaking the rules, but if you want Slughorn to give you credit for this, you'll have to accept responsibility for it."

"As long as I can still go to Hogsmeade when this is over with, I'll take whatever punishment is meted out," Mia said, beaming excitedly.

One by one, students filled the Great Hall, taking their seats at the tables. Slowly, in various stages of exhaustion, the four Marauders joined Lily and Mia. Peter, James, and Sirius looked worse for wear, but since they were in a post-full moon week, Remus was looking better and better every day.

"Morning, boys." Mia smiled brightly as she went into her usual routine of serving a plate for Remus while he simultaneously fixed her tea and porridge. "What are you all so exhausted from?"

She had assumed they were up late practising their Animagus transformations. She had been doing the same thing, though in the privacy of her dorm room seeing as she was only in the early stages of meditations to find out what her Animagus form would be.

"Up late snogging," Sirius lied, smirking at her while Mia rolled her eyes.

A month ago, she would have been annoyed by his typical behaviour, but she was already long over it. Sirius had fallen swiftly into confirming all the rumours about his bad reputation to be true. His reasoning was that he might as well *do* the things he was being

accused of. Peter was in awe, James was amused, Remus was disgusted, and Mia was suddenly indifferent. She had known that Sirius had a past when she, Harry, and Ron had listened to an older Sirius and Remus talking about their shared history and the rebellious nature of youth. Mia knew that she would be confronted with it at some point, and this was that moment in time.

So she ignored it and focused on her rules: *Live your life. Enjoy your life.*

And she was about to enjoy it *immensely*.

"Eat up." Mia smiled across the table at Remus, offering a nod of gratitude as he passed her a jar of marmalade. She noticed his eye turn to a tall, empty glass sitting in front of him. She normally filled it with pumpkin juice every morning, but today she made no move to do so.

He reached for the pitcher in the middle of the table to fill the glass himself, but Mia silently covered the top of it with her palm, shaking her head slowly as she sipped her tea and gave him a knowing look.

Remus's eyes widened as he realised that something bad was about to happen. He turned to the side and watched as James, Sirius, and Peter guzzled their morning juice as usual.

"Do I even want to be here for the fallout?" Remus whispered.

Lily laughed. "Oh, yes."

Suddenly, all across the Great Hall, each and every student partaking in their morning pumpkin juice experienced a bit of transfiguration: their hair shifting to various shades of vivid colours.

The Slytherins all gaped at one another and scowled at the shades of black and green that their hair had turned. The Ravenclaw table was almost entirely peopled with navy blue heads of hair, while the Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors were a flutter with mixtures of yellows, bright greens, and various shades of purple.

Two of the three pumpkin juice-drinking Marauders were sporting a *predictable* shade of sky blue hair.

Lily looked perfectly scandalised at James's hair and mouthed "Oh my God" to Mia before covering her mouth to hide her shock and laughter.

James blinked and looked around the room. "What's happening? What did you do?" he demanded, narrowing his eyes at his sister before grabbing a spoon and examining his reflection.

"Oh, I just slipped a potion in with everyone's morning juice." Mia smiled innocently.

"Clever, kitten." Sirius chuckled, rolling his eyes as he ran fingers through his sky blue hair. "Is *this* supposed to be a prank? Random shades of colour? Could have done that with a simple Colour Change Charm. You wasted a potion on this? That's barely an Acceptable in my book."

Mia sat tall, looking down at her nails as though she were inspecting a fresh manicure. "Oh, I *did* use a Colour Change Charm. I used individual ones on each lacewing fly that went into my modified Polyjuice Potion."

"So you slipped us Polyjuice?" James blinked, confused as he blew strands of hair out of his face. It looked much more out of control than his black hair ever did, which was saying something. He patted his palms down his chest and then inspected his fingers. "I don't get it. Why'd only our hair change? And shouldn't we all look alike?"

"That's if you use the hair of any *normal* witch or wizard, but if you use the hair of a Metamorphmagus, you can allow the drinkers of the potions to essentially alter themselves."

Mia was grateful for her past friendship with Nymphadora Tonks-Lupin who had once confessed that Metamorphmagi were immune to Polyjuice Potion, as they could change the shape of their face and colour of their hair at will. She was even more grateful to find that Professor Slughorn's collection of strange and rare ingredients—which included hairs from goblins, werewolves, and one Metamorphmagus—rivalled that of Professor Snape. She was just as easily able to pilfer from one as she was from the other.

"Did you know that most Metamorphmagi hair changes colour to depict their moods?" She looked across the table at Remus, who was grinning at her, clearly impressed. "I got the idea from Lily's mood ring."

"Fine, fine. You're very bright; cleverest witch ever," James conceded while rolling his eyes. "Now what do the colours mean?"

"Well," Lily chimed in, amused. "The Slytherins are predictable—black and dark green showing anger and envy. They're presumably upset at what Mia's done to them and

jealous that they didn't do it themselves. Ravenclaws are all dark blue, meaning that they're amused, and Hufflepuffs and most of the Gryffindors seem to be stuck between anxious, annoyed, and happy."

"And us?" Sirius pointed to his head of light blue hair.

"Oh, that particular shade of blue is my favourite." Mia beamed. "It means satisfied."

Lily blushed bright red, stifling a snort by burying her face in her hands.

"Satisfied?" James blinked nervously, swallowing as he looked at Lily.

"Yes. Tell me, big brother—" Mia leant across the table, lacing her fingers together and leaning her chin on them as she stared at James, a wicked gleam in her eye, "—in the half hour that you've been awake, what on earth could you have done to make yourself so amazingly *satisfied*?"

Remus's eyes widened, and he turned and covered his mouth, hiding his laughter with a loud cough. The rest of the Gryffindor table was not nearly as subtle with their guffawing and giggles.

James's face immediately turned bright red, and his eyes lingered on Lily before averting his attention elsewhere.

Sirius caught on quickly, but—rarely ashamed of anything—he shrugged his shoulders and looked at James. "Well I don't know what *you're* so satisfied about, but I woke up and had a wank in the shower."

The table broke out into a roar of laughter, and James slowly covered his face with his hands and waited patiently for the laughter to die down. In that time, his hair shifted from bright blue to a bright red to match his face before turning a slightly darker shade of teal, indicating acceptance.

He eventually smiled over at his sister, shaking his head.

"Well?" she asked.

James stood, bowing dramatically before her. "You win."

"And Remus?" Her eyes narrowed as James's hair shifted to a brighter green indicating anxiety, while Sirius's turned dark green. Mia ignored both shifting shades.

James laughed and reached across the table, extending a hand to his werewolf friend. "Remus, I hope you know what you're getting yourself into, mate."

Remus blinked at the gesture and then smiled, taking his hand.

Before letting go, James gave a good tug and leant forward, whispering, "You do realise though that if you hurt—or do anything unsavoury with—my sister, I'll be known as the famous James Potter, wolf slayer, right?"

"Got it." Remus nodded firmly, grinning.

"Now, just to test a theory," James said, reaching for the pumpkin juice and filling Remus's and Mia's empty glasses. "Go on. You want my approval? Drink up, Moony."

Remus cleared his throat and held his glass up to Mia, who merely flushed before toasting, "To us, I suppose," and the two drank their juice.

It took less than five seconds for both of their heads to turn a brilliant shade of soft pink. Mia immediately looked down, her cheeks flushed at the sight of Remus's hair, already knowing that hers would match it. Remus looked confused as he reached for a spoon to look at his reflection.

"What's pink, then?" James asked, looking at Lily.

Beaming excitedly at her two friends, Lily answered, "Infatuated."

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### **March 26th, 1975**

"Ow! Fuck!"

"You're all still concentrating too much on the transfiguration portion and not enough on the meditative state," Remus instructed his three friends as they sat in a clearing out by the Forbidden Forest where the three almost-Animagi practised their training.

Remus sat on the ground leaning up against a large tree, his eyes tired and his muscles sore as the full moon was the following evening. Thinking about his own transformation only made him less sympathetic to the mild annoyances that his friends were currently going through. As it was, James had grown half an antler that he had twice gotten caught in the branches of the low-hanging trees, Sirius was stuck with four big black paws but nothing else, and Peter had been able to grow a tail and elongated teeth, but was unable to return to normal. Their ridiculous appearances should have kept Remus in high spirits all night, but he was more stressed than ever.

"Whath's wong, Wemuth?" Peter slurred through his gigantic teeth.

"I still haven't bought Mia anything for her birthday," Remus confessed. Unable to even glance at Peter without laughing, he decided to turn to the friend that looked the least ridiculous, which was James. "What should I do, Prongs?"

Remus and Mia had officially been an item since the morning of what was now known as "The Great Rainbow Explosion of 1974."

Mia had ultimately taken credit for the prank, which earned her a week's worth of detention for drugging her fellow students, but also an extra fifty points from Flitwick and Slughorn each, for impressive work in altering a potion with a charm.

A few weeks later, she and Remus walked hand in hand down to Hogsmeade where he treated her to a butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks, and she lavished him with gifts of chocolate from Honeydukes before moving on to Tomes and Scrolls, where they spent hours eagerly digging through old books. After finishing their shopping, they walked back up to the castle, stopping to embarrass Sirius, who was snogging a third year Hufflepuff in view of the "haunted" Shrieking Shack, and then retiring to the Gryffindor common room where they snuggled together on the sofa in front of the fireplace to read their new books.

It was a comfortable relationship built on friendship and common interests, and most nights were similar to that first date: Mia leaning her back against Remus's chest while he draped his arm around her shoulders, nuzzling his nose into the crook of her neck while reading the book in his hand as she kicked her feet up at the end of the sofa, quietly browsing through her own novel.

James and Sirius eventually tired of teasing the couple, though Mary, Lily, and Alice were constantly asking Mia details about the more amorous aspects of her relationship with the quiet Marauder. No details were ever given because, as per Remus's original rules regarding their relationship, no details were ever created. While he remained adamant that they not cross any lines where she could possibly be infected with his lycanthropy, he was thrilled that she had not slipped him any more of what she now called Mood Juice, because *every* morning he would have walked to the Great Hall sprouting bright blue hair. Having a girlfriend was leaving him in quite a frustrated state. If pain were not an issue, Remus might have looked forward to the full moon, as the transformation always burned off excess energy.

His friends naturally made things much worse. It was completely impossible to talk to James, considering Mia was his sister, and she had been insistent that Remus keep Peter's

nose out of their business. That only left Sirius who had—over the last six months—grown ten times worse in regards to the rumours that were going around the school about him. Sirius had almost come to his senses early January when he had shown up in the dorms looking unbelievably guilty.

*"What did you do?" Remus asked immediately. "And why can I smell firewhisky all the way over here?"*

*"I fucked up," Sirius said, swallowing hard. "I fucked up bad."*

*"Padfoot, what did you do?" Remus's eyes flashed with worry as he stood to help his drunken friend to his bed.*

*"I had sex with McKinnon," Sirius confessed.*

*"Is that . . . not . . . normal?" Remus raised a brow, having believed most of the whispers exchanged in the Great Hall in regards to Sirius's nightly activities. While he was quite certain his friend was not the father of McGonagall's secret love child—all other rumours were never denied by Sirius himself.*

*"No, it's not bloody normal!" Sirius shouted. "It was the . . . it was the first time. Fuck, she's going to be pissed."*

*"Marlene? Why? Were you that bad?" Remus snorted.*

*Sirius looked up and glared at him. "No, I was fucking fabulous, thank you, Moony! But I . . . I kind of . . . ditched her right after." He winced, covering his face which was painted with shame.*

*Remus shook his head. "You're disgusting."*

*"I know! It's not even her I'm worried about. You can't tell Mia," Sirius begged. "She'll hate me."*

*"Why would my girlfriend care who you shag?" Remus asked, narrowing his eyes as a crack of jealousy became visible in his expression.*

*Sirius fell back on his mattress, groaning over his mistakes. "Because she thinks Marlene's a slag. And I don't . . . Fuck, Moony, I know she's your girl, but I still don't want her to look at me like everyone else does, okay?"*

Remus had been jealous and annoyed, but a large part of him understood. He was territorial and possessive when it came to Mia, and he still did not understand how Sirius could have run away from her when she had clearly been so willing to open her heart to him. But he knew how it felt to look at the girl, think that the sun rose and set every day with her, and that he would never measure up.

Remus was constantly fighting the wolf within himself. A subtle voice in the back of his head that crept up every now and then demanded that he take her, kiss her, pin her up against a wall and ravish every part of her. It was that *same* wolf that would peek out from time to time and snap at her bitterly when she would say or do something he did not like too close to the moon. He was in constant worry that he was on the verge of dramatically screwing things up with her.

So he understood what Sirius's concerns were and promised his friend that he would keep his secret.

The secret of Sirius's virginity—or sudden lack thereof—did not last long despite Remus's efforts. Once the final line had been crossed, Sirius threw caution to the wind as he buried his personal issues—and himself—inside any girl that would have him.

When Mia had found out, she had scolded him profusely about being disrespectful of himself and others.

Sirius had then tried to crawl into her lap to have her pet his head—something that was incredibly funny now that the Marauders knew what form Sirius would take as an Animagus—but Mia had shoved him off of her, much to Remus's amusement.

They were all quickly growing up, and Sirius was trailing behind.

"What?" Remus blinked, brought back to the Forbidden Forest and his three friends.

James cleared his throat. "I said, *you* would know better what to buy Mia than *I* would."

"You still haven't got her gift? You're the worst boyfriend ever." Sirius laughed as he began using his massive paws to dig in the ground, a sight that actually caused Remus to laugh out loud.

"I meant to, but the last Hogsmeade trip was cancelled because of how The Magic Neep was attacked."

It had not been widely publicised, but the morning after the attack on the greengrocer's shop, Dumbledore had not been at breakfast. Rumours circulated around the school that the Muggle-born who owned the shop had been assaulted by wizards in dark cloaks and masks.

"I wanted this birthday to be a good one. You're all going to have your typical party in the common room, meanwhile, I'll be stuck in the bloody shack," Remus muttered bitterly, a growl escaping his throat.

"Bad luck that the full moon falls on our birthday." James frowned. "She'll understand."

"I *know*, that's what makes it worse." Remus sighed. "I'll wake up the next morning after not being around for *her* birthday, and instead of *me* doing something nice for *her*, she's going to be in the hospital wing, holding my hand while Madam Pomfrey shoves potions down my throat."

"Well, I know it goes against your instincts," James offered, "but maybe let her just take care of you."

Remus snarled at the suggestion, and his eyes flashed gold.

"Easy, Moony," Sirius said, holding his transfigured paws up in supplication. "Prongs is right. Girl's a caretaker, and you haven't let her do a single thing for you since first year." He shrugged his shoulders, shaking the dirt out of his paws and watching as they transformed back into hands easily. "Girls are all about the intimate stuff—"

James narrowed his eyes. "Watch it."

"Not *that*. Come on Prongs, look at Moony and tell me that he's having sex." Sirius chuckled at the thought. "Obviously not. He looks like . . . like . . . like *you*." James threw a rock at him that Sirius quickly dodged, then proceeded to bury. "I mean, girls like the little moments where you let them in your head. Show the softer side and all that crap."

Remus scoffed. "And you know this from experience?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. I know this because every girl I've ever snogged or shagged has complained about the fact that I *don't* do all of that mopey, vulnerable bullshit. So do that, and you'll get along famously."

James eyed Remus carefully. "Not too famously."

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**March 28th, 1975**

Remus winced as he woke up in the hospital wing the morning after the full moon. It had been a particularly bad one. With no rest leading up to the transformation and the stress of worrying about Mia's birthday, Remus had shifted and then immediately taken his frustrations out on himself. It also did not help that Mia had come to say goodbye to him as he walked to the Whomping Willow, and she hugged him so close and tight that he could still feel the warmth of her body by the time the moon was high.

Frustrated did not even begin to cover it.

Sensing her nearby without opening his eyes, he asked, "How was your birthday?"

"It was sad without *you* there."

He opened his eyes to see her frowning at the deep cut on his right shoulder. She eyed it carefully, her nose twitching, and her hands fidgeting.

"Madam Pomfrey?" Remus called.

"Yes, dear?"

"No offence, but . . . could you let Mia heal me this once? It's been a few years, and I remember I liked the way she did it." He frowned, hoping to not upset the mediwitch responsible for his monthly recovery.

Madam Pomfrey smiled at the pair. "Of course. As long as you feel comfortable with that, Miss Potter?"

"Yes," Mia said immediately. "Are you sure?"

He nodded, offering her a beseeching look even as he forced down the primal urge within him that said, *No! We are the protector! Don't let her see us weak!* "I'd rather you do it this once. Please, Mia?"

She smiled at his request and reached quickly for her wand. "Roll to the side."

He could feel it as she syphoned the dried blood off with her wand. The pain did not hurt as much as usual; Madam Pomfrey was efficient but lacked a gentle touch due to time constraints. That, and there was just something about Mia's magic that spoke to him—that spoke to his wolf.

He rolled back over when his wound was closed, and he smiled with satisfaction at the pleased look on her face.

She eyed him with a smirk. "Was *that* my birthday gift?"

Remus shrugged. "James's idea."

"Smart boy, that James Potter." She smiled, taking advantage of the moment by running her fingers through Remus's hair and grinning smugly when he let out a relaxed moan. "You could just get over yourself and let me do this more often. It makes me happy to help you."

"It makes me uncomfortable," Remus admitted, forcing himself to get the words out in order to be honest with her, no matter how emasculating it felt. "But if it makes you happy," he relented with a sigh, "I could learn to deal with a little pampering from time to time."

He knew she wanted more—and Merlin, so did he—but he could not cross that boundary. Here, however, post-transformation, he had little energy to fight her off, and he knew she would never take advantage of him in a weakened state knowing how important it was to him that she always be kept safe.

She smiled and leant over, placing a gentle kiss on his cheek. "*You* make me happy."

## Chapter Thirty-Six

### *Wait and See*

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*I miss that town, I miss the faces  
You can't erase, You can't replace it  
I miss it now, I can't believe it  
So hard to stay, Too hard to leave it  
(Photograph - Nickelback)*

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**May 25th, 1975**

*I need a place that looks like the Forbidden Forest where no one can enter but me.*

She concentrated on that exact thought as she walked, passing in front of the stone wall on the seventh floor three times. Slowly, a circular wooden door appeared, and Mia let a smile cross her face as she opened it and walked into the Room of Requirement. The view was incredible.

Kicking off her shoes as she stepped inside, she moved through the magically created trees and undergrowth, feeling the soft grass on her bare feet. Where there should have been a wall to her left, instead was a view extending to the Black Lake. To the right, she could see the shadow of Hogwarts, which was odd since she was technically inside the castle at the moment.

The forest lay ahead of her, and Mia smiled as she walked through the shadows of the trees, glancing upward at what should have been ceiling. Instead, she saw sky lit only by a perfectly circular moon, hung large against a black background. A full moon was her motivation for this, and she used it to calm her, to relax her as she wiggled her toes into the soil. A part of her felt guilty that she was using the very thing that caused Remus pain to take away her own anxieties. To persuade her guilt to leave, she reasoned that, in the end, this would make it easier for him.

It was good to know that Padfoot and Prongs—and yes even Wormtail, for now—would soon be there for Moony during his transformations, but she longed to be there with them. With *him*.

It had taken months to get the meditations down correctly, to relax enough to allow herself to dip into her "inner animal"—an animal she had assumed would have been an

otter but was not. As soon as she discovered this, she tried to summon a Patronus and watched, shocked, as the silvery otter she had come to know and love morphed into a slightly larger beast with slender limbs and a tail as bushy as her hair. It now made sense why an older Sirius had been surprised to learn that *Hermione's* Patronus was an otter—because *Mia's* Patronus was certainly not.

She closed her eyes and felt the wind cover her skin, felt the glow of the moon against her back and the dirt shift between her toes. She focused on her inner animal, but also reached out with purpose to Moony, to *Remus*, who was in the Shrieking Shack at this very hour. She reached out to Prongs and Padfoot, knowing that the boys had followed Remus out the doors of the castle; unable to join him in the shack just yet, they had instead retired to the *actual* Forbidden Forest to practice their own transformations.

Something inside of her pulled and tugged in multiple directions and she realised quickly it was not just *one* bond but many. In her meditative state, she could feel and see them clearly. A golden string that tied her to Sirius—a Soul Bond prepared by emotions triggered by memories, provoked by kisses in two different decades, and left unsealed. A lighter, silver string connected her to James—a Familial Bond, as her mother had explained it, prepared by her sisterly love for Harry, provoked by her gift from Sirius, and sealed by the Potter's official adoption.

But there was a third string, something almost invisible as though it existed but had yet to be awakened. Something that reached from her out to Remus, far away in the shack, but did not end there as it extended back into the Forbidden Forest where she lost it.

*Another bond?*

Letting go of the thought took time, but she released it with effort, knowing she had to have a clear mind to complete the transformation.

Mia let out a deep sigh of contentment and acceptance, and she felt her body shift beneath her. Hands became paws, and she dug sharp black claws into the earth, feeling the way the dirt shifted under her touch. Her vision increased tenfold, and she could see the forest ahead of her as though she were looking through a pair of omnioculars. She could feel her ears shift upward, and the sounds of nearby whispering voices were heard as though they were right outside the door.

*Outside the door?*

It was relatively easy to slip back into the corridor without being spotted since she had the Room of Requirement on her side. Asking it to create a doorway that was both invisible and silent was less of a feat than she had imagined. Disillusioned, she closed the door behind her, spotting Sirius, James, and Peter. They were huddled together as they held wands up to nearby paintings and looked behind tapestries, likely searching for more hidden passageways.

"I *know* she came this way," Sirius said. "I saw her sneak off the other night, and she disappeared up around the seventh floor."

Peter sighed. "If we could just finish the map, this wouldn't be a problem. Oh, bugger, I think I left my bag out in the forest."

"Beasties have gotten to it by now," Sirius said with a chuckle.

Frowning, Peter moaned miserably. "That was a new bag. And I had a Charms essay in it."

"What'd you bring your book bag for anyway?"

"I had snacks in it. Thought if we all got through a full transformation that we might be hungry. Training always makes me hungry."

Sirius snickered. "Cheese?"

"Shut it."

"I don't think she's up this way, Padfoot," James said, sounding annoyed. "I'm starting to worry, though. It makes me nervous that I'm more concerned that my sister is sneaking off in the middle of the night than I'm worried about her dating a werewolf who happens to be my best mate."

"Hey, I thought *I* was your best mate?" Sirius pouted.

James groaned. "You are."

"Hey!" Peter whined.

James pinched the bridge of his nose. "Can we pretend that the both of you have self-esteem that doesn't revolve around me? I'm thrilled that I'm the centre of your entire world, but Mia's still missing!"

"*Who's* missing?" Mia whispered as she cancelled her Disillusionment Charm, popping up right behind James with a grin.

"Mia!"

"Me?" she asked, acting innocent to the point of batting her eyelashes. "I know exactly where I am."

"What are you up to?" Sirius asked her point-blank.

"What are *you* up to?" she countered. "It appears that *all* of us are out past curfew."

"We at least have the cloak," James protested, narrowing a suspicious gaze at her. "We're not going to get caught."

Mia rolled her eyes and tapped her wand on the top of her head, recasting the Disillusionment Charm on herself and very nearly disappearing into the stone background of the wall behind her. "It only counts if you're actually wearing the cloak, Jamie."

Sirius looked amused, as usual. James looked mildly embarrassed as he scrambled for the cloak. Peter looked flustered and nervous.

She glared at him with a murderous look in her eye, glad that they could not see her. "What's wrong, Pete? Worried that you're being watched by someone you can't see?"

"Very funny. Come on out, Mia," James said with a chuckle. When she was visible once more, he asked, "Seriously, what are you doing out past curfew?"

She put her hands defiantly on her hips. "I asked you the same thing."

"My-uh!" James whinged.

"Jay-mee!" Mia copied, matching his tone and pitch.

"We were looking for Ravenclaw's lost diadem," Sirius blurted out. When Peter and James looked at him incredulously, he went on, "What? It's not *technically* a lie. We were doing that all week before tonight."

Mia smirked at him. "Good luck finding that."

James shook his head and waited another moment, staring at her with a strained expression that she assumed he thought was intimidating but came off looking a bit constipated. He was just precious.

When she remained silent, refusing to "fess up," James huffed. "Fine, we'll wait until the next time you go out and track you then."

"You won't find me." Mia grinned smugly. "Your map isn't finished."

All three boys swallowed and stared at her.

"What?" James gaped. "*What* map?"

"The map you four have created of Hogwarts and all the secret passages that lead into Hogsmeade." She chuckled softly and watched as their eyes widened.

"That lying werewolf!" Sirius snapped. "Leave it to Remus to bail on his mates and tell all our secrets to his bloody girlfriend."

"Remus didn't tell me anything. You should *always* trust Remus, Sirius. If your secrets aren't being properly kept," said added pointedly, her gaze turning to Peter, "maybe you have a *rat* in your midst."

Peter shrivelled before her, looking terrified. "I d-didn't say . . . Did I?"

"I've told you repeatedly, Peter's a terrible secret keeper; very, very twitchy," she said, twitching her nose and pointing at it.

James stared wide-eyed at his sister while Sirius glared down at Peter. "You little—"

"Uh oh. Looks like I've accidentally put Peter in the *doghouse*." She grinned at Sirius as he suddenly paled at her words, his grey eyes widening.

"Mia . . ." James whispered.

She turned to her brother. "What's wrong, *dear*? You're looking at me like I've just sprouted *antlers*." When James began breathing erratically, she could not contain the laughter anymore. "Oh calm down, the lot of you!"

"How long have you known?" Sirius yelled.

"About the map or you three becoming Animagi? *Illegally*, I might add." She stared at Sirius, as he appeared to be vacillating between amused and furious.

James huffed. "Both."

"I *told* Sirius years ago that we should have a map of the castle. Plus, I *just* heard Peter talking about it a few minutes ago when you didn't know I was here. I assume the problem is you haven't figured out how to track everyone's movements?"

Despite the fact that James and Sirius remained silent on the matter, Peter spoke up. "Pretty much." James and Sirius threw him a glare, and he looked away from them innocently as though he had not even spoken.

"Try a Homonculous Charm." She smiled sweetly at her brother, all hints of malice and devious mischief gone from her eyes. "I'd offer to show you myself, but it looks to be a Marauders' thing, so I'll let you three work it out with Remus when he's feeling better."

"Speaking of Remus feeling better . . ." Sirius eyed her. "We're becoming Animagi to help him. You told me that he should be safe around other animals."

"I know." She smiled, picking up the defensive tone in his voice that she knew he often used when people he loved were being threatened. "I assumed as much."

"That's great, but *how* did you know?" James asked.

"I'm surprised *Sirius* hasn't figured it out yet," she admitted with a soft laugh. "Remus either, to be honest. Though he might just be too polite to ask why my scent has changed."

Sirius stared at her curiously and then inhaled deep and slow, his eyes darkening. "Wait, why do you smell . . . canine . . . ish. How?"

She smiled wryly. "How'd *you* do it?"

His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "How long?"

"Six months, give or take."

"Bloody hell! It's taken us three *years* to get this far! Are you at full shift?" Sirius demanded bitterly. When Mia shrugged her shoulders lightly, he stomped his foot. "Fuck!"

James blinked, confused. "What's going on?"

"She's an Animagus too!"

"Keep it down! What's the matter with you?" James glared at Sirius. "Filch could be just around the corner, and if so, we're all bugged, you bell end!"

"You're having trouble with the final shift, right?" she asked, amused. "Keeping the form at will?"

"Yes," Sirius snapped, enviously. "I was the first to fully shift. Prongs can get there as well, but neither of us can hold it for more than a few minutes. Won't be much help with a werewolf if we turn into snacks ten minutes past moonrise."

"You have to find something to ground you. An image to keep in your mind. Your reason for doing this," she offered politely.

"We use the shack," James admitted.

Mia shook her head. "Not strong enough. A shack can be knocked down; also, outside of the shack, Remus is still the wolf. You need something permanent."

"What do *you* use?" Peter asked quietly.

"The moon," she admitted, and all three boys grimaced as though they could sense how Remus himself would react. "It's morbid, I know, but it'll never go away, and as long as it's there, he'll turn. He's connected to the moon, and we're connected to him *through* the moon. It's all tied together."

"So what *are* you?" Sirius finally asked. "I smelled canine, or something like it, but I can't tell what."

James chuckled. "I would have thought you'd be a cat."

"Why's that?" Mia narrowed her eyes. She had, in fact, worried about such a thing happening. It would have been ironic considering she had accidentally turned herself into a cat during her original second year.

"Because you and Sirius fight like cats and dogs." James grinned, and both Mia and Sirius rolled their eyes. "So what *are* you?"

"Guess you'll just have to wait and see."

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Later that night, Mia pulled the Invisibility Cloak from James's trunk and wrapped it around herself. She had not had nightmares that often since her encounter with Bellatrix the summer before, and she imagined it had something to do with facing her fears. Regardless, she struggled to sleep some nights, especially during the full moon when she knew that Remus was alone and in pain.

It had not occurred to her until she began her training inside the Room of Requirement, but one night just after Christmas, she sought out the Room of Hidden Things. A part of her wanted to look for the diadem, which she ultimately found and immediately refused to touch. It was not as though she could control Fiendfyre or had a basilisk fang on hand. Another part of her wanted to look for other missing parts of history. She wanted to see everything that the Fiendfyre during the final battle might have destroyed. She wanted to look for old books and buried treasures that the castle had kept hidden for centuries.

What she had not expected to find was a mirror.

A wondrous mirror, taller than a wardrobe, with a beautiful gold frame, stood on two clawed feet. The inscription at the top made her gasp as she recognised from Harry's stories what this was: *Erised stra ebru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.*

The Mirror of Erised.

Very, very slowly, Mia approached the mirror and took in a sharp breath.

A name escaped her lips on a pained whisper, something she had not said out loud in over three years: "Harry."

There he stood before her, or *next* to her really, as she gazed in the reflection and saw herself standing beside him. Harry looked just as she remembered. The spitting image of James, with two exceptions: a lightning bolt-shaped scar on his forehead and the most brilliant green eyes, the colour of emeralds in direct sunlight.

Standing on either side of Harry were the smiling faces of his parents, though not as adults. No, James and Lily appeared in the mirror as they looked to Mia right now, fifteen and full of life. James looked like he could be Harry's brother.

The Potters, all together again.

Mia sniffed at the sight and wiped away a tear. She stood *with* them. Harry had thought of her as a sister, allowed her to wear the words of his House that had provoked a Familial Bond and *made* her a Potter. James, her brother in everything but blood, and Lily, quite possibly the only female aside from Ginny Weasley that Mia could ever consider a true friend. Mary and Alice were lovely girls, but Lily was more; Lily was . . . *family*.

Ron appeared close behind Harry, a hand on his shoulder, and Ginny beside him making moon eyes at Harry.

To the left of Mia's reflection stood Remus, just as beautiful as he was right now, perfectly fifteen and perfectly *hers*. However, his reflection changed, and she watched closely as he aged right in front of her eyes into the professor she had originally met, except his *eyes*; those were still the same eyes as *her* Remus. Only *her* Remus held a blue-haired child in his arms, and Mia smiled at the sight of little Teddy Lupin and Tonks, who moved to stand beside her husband. They were smiling brightly, and Mia felt guilty and jealous at the same time until the reflection of Remus smiled at her with that loving expression she knew too well.

She was not his *mate*, but she was still his *memory*, and Mia knew better than anyone that Remus had a capacity to love that rivalled Harry's; there was room for her in his heart.

An older Sirius appeared in the mirror, slowly walking up behind her, his grey eyes boring into her as if they could liquefy her very soul. He approached her reflection from behind, but his eyes remained fixed on her as his arms wound themselves around her reflection's waist tenderly, *intimately*. He knew her. He remembered her.

He looked exactly as she remembered: war-torn and battered by life but vivacious and full of fire. He wore the scars and tattoos that his younger self had yet to bear, and she mapped each mark with her gaze until it landed on one she was sure she had seen before,

but never placed it until now. In faded black ink, peeking out from beneath an open shirt right over his heart was a name.

Mia gasped and turned away from the mirror as quickly as possible.

She was not ready for this.

She remembered what Harry had told her about the mirror: it showed the deepest desires of our hearts. But Dumbledore had cautioned her friend that the mirror gave neither knowledge nor truth.

And she needed both.

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### May 26th, 1975

"You're here early, Belby."

"All right, Potter?"

Mia smiled as she walked into the Potions lab to find the young Slytherin hard at work, sweating over a steaming cauldron. "Still experimenting with the aconite?" she asked, trying to hide exactly how curious she was about his investigations.

While the rest of the class had finished their experiments anywhere from a week to three months into the year, Damocles kept digging, insisting that the longer he brewed, stewed, or dried the aconite, the more properties it released.

"Found something new *you* might be interested in. Look what happens when I add scarab beetles to the brewed wolfsbane."

He dropped the beetles into the cauldron, and Mia gasped when the liquid let off a faint blue smoke that she knew all too well to be a chief characteristic of the Wolfsbane Potion. She squealed with excitement. "What did you *do*?"

He smiled at her, a look of pride and excitement in his eyes. "Kind of got the idea from *you* actually. You mentioned that aconite could be used for mind sharpening. I tried mixing it differently with a Wideye Potion, but then . . . *Snape* suggested that I could extract more potency from the aconite sprigs if I cut them *after* stewing for two weeks. Smug sod was right too."

*Son of a bitch! Was it really that bloody simple?*

Mia had been working on the Wolfsbane Potion since Professor Snape had killed Dumbledore and ran off. They found his notes on how to brew the potion, of course, but it had always said to stew *cut* aconite sprigs, never to cut *previously* stewed aconite sprigs. A part of her thought he might have done it on purpose in order to remain useful to Remus—to somehow keep an old rival indebted to him.

Mia really wanted to punch Severus Snape in the face. Again.

"Then, instead of the Wideye Potion, I thought to mix it with a Wit-Sharpener Potion."

"Isn't that used to counter a Confundus Charm?" Mia asked.

"Yes. Adding the beetles like you would to a Wit-Sharpener Potion not only sharpens the mind, but it clears it and holds it in place. Unfortunately, I can't think of many uses outside of maybe people who've gone mad under the Cruciatus Curse. Even then it would have to be administered immediately and daily."

"I'm sure you'll find a good purpose for it, Damocles." Mia beamed. "You're brilliant. This will change lives, I just know it."

And another thing she *just knew*, was the proper way to brew a Wolfsbane Potion.

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Mia made her way back to the Gryffindor Tower with a skip in her step, surprised to find all four Marauders sitting around the fireplace, Marauder's Map in hand. As she stepped through the portrait hole, she laughed when they all jumped and Sirius quickly closed the map.

James sighed at the sight of her. "Oh, it's just Mia."

"Just?" She scoffed and walked over to sit down beside Remus, kissing his cheek. "Hello, love."

His tired eyes lit up, and she brightened at his reaction.

"I thought you were going to be in the hospital wing for a few more hours. I would have come to see you."

"Couldn't stay away." He grinned and put his arm around her, leaning forward and placing a kiss on the top of her head. "My friends here told me that you helped with our little project. A Homonculous Charm; I should have known."

"You would have gotten there." She smiled and cuddled gently into his side, trying to be careful, knowing that he would have fresh wounds and deep bruises. "*You* had these three prats to distract you from your brilliance. *I* was all on my own."

"Prats? You think *Moony* there is the only brilliant one?" Sirius handed her the map and touched it with his wand. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

"Appropriate password." She nodded her head with amusement, doing her best to look as impressed as possible as the map came to life before her very eyes.

The map was just as it always had been, magical and brilliant and quite a bit less worn than it was when Harry had it. She quietly sought out Gryffindor Tower, relieved that her name showed *Mia Potter* and not *Hermione Granger*. She wondered briefly if James had done a bit of concealing magic until she remembered that the Familial Bond being sealed would have changed her name.

"Very clever," she said, doing her best not to be sad that her past self had somehow vanished further into oblivion.

"Watch this. Mischief managed," Sirius said with a grin and the ink displaying the map vanished before her very eyes, leaving behind blank parchment.

She chuckled at how very much like Fred and George they all looked in that moment. "Is your mischief ever *really* managed, though?"

"That's not even the best part. *You* try to read it," he insisted, "but without the password. You can use any other spell you want."

Mia rolled her eyes, knowing perfectly well what would happen when she tried to break into it without the password, but she had to placate them now—especially Sirius, who was so very eager to show off.

"*Aparecium*." She tapped her wand on the top of the map. Slowly, as though an invisible hand were writing upon it, words appeared on the smooth surface of the parchment she was holding. Chuckling softly at the sight, she read aloud:

*"Mr Padfoot offers congratulations to Miss Potter for her noble attempt at sneaking into such a brilliantly crafted magical object but offers his condolences over her failure. He understands she must feel very envious over her lack of such a creation. He also offers compliments to Miss Potter on her very shapely arse."*

Remus and James each punched Sirius in the shoulder at the same time.

Mia laughed and continued reading as the words faded in and out of the parchment.

"Mr Prongs would like to remind Mr Padfoot not to talk about Miss Potter's arse, which is most certainly not shapely."

"Mr Moony agrees with Mr Padfoot over Miss Potter's shapely arse, but he is too much of a gentleman to say such things aloud."

She fell over laughing

Remus held his hands up as James turned to descend upon him. "You wouldn't strike an injured man!"

James smirked at his friend as he snatched the map back from his sister. "You're lucky she likes you so much."

"Yeah, I am," Remus said with a smile.

Mia bit her lower lip and grinned. "I have a surprise for you," she whispered into Remus's ear, purposely getting close enough to let her lips linger on his skin. He let out a soft breath, and she watched closely as he swallowed at her touch. "But it won't be ready for another three weeks."

"What is it?"

"Something . . . that will change *everything*."

He raised a brow. "You're really not going to tell me?"

"You'll just have to wait and see."

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

### *In Control*

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*You can kiss me in the moonlight  
On the rooftop under the sky, oh  
You can kiss me with the windows open  
While the rain comes pouring inside  
(This Kiss - Faith Hill)*

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**June 17th, 1975**

"Do you trust me?" Mia asked him softly.

The full moon was approaching that coming Monday, and Remus was already a little on edge. It did not help that exams were also that week, and he was determined to ace every class in order to secure the Gryffindor prefect badge for which he was hoping. Only Mia knew about his ambition to become a prefect; he confessed it to her late one night while the two sat in the common room, flames flickering gently in the fireplace in front of them while he lazily linked their fingers together with one hand, using his free one to draw soft circles on her shoulders.

He had told her how he felt the need to prove he was a *real* wizard because the world would never see him as one. She had frowned and tried to ease his frustrations as she was prone to do, making him promises that one day he would be a great duellist, able to fight off all manner of Dark wizards and even creatures like dementors. Remus had chuckled at her vivid imagination and insisted that he would be happy to have a calm life after Hogwarts with a job if he was lucky. Becoming a prefect and being one of the top students was his life goal—to show that being a werewolf did not make him any less knowledgeable in magic.

He had never told anyone else his worries like that, not even his parents.

He trusted Mia with anything.

"Of course I trust you." Remus gave her a nervous smile, staring at the goblet in her hands as she held it out toward him. He peered into the viscous grey liquid; blue smoke wafted ominously off of the top of the surface. He trusted her, especially with potions, but

that did not rule out her having something devious up her sleeve, and Remus always liked to be prepared. Plus . . . ominously wafting smoke.

"Then take it," she pleaded with him, and he raised a brow at the genuine expression on her face. "Every day for a week before the moon."

Remus very nearly jumped away from the potion at the mention of the moon, suddenly much more nervous than before. It was one thing to maybe slip him a joke potion that turned his hair a different colour. There was also the time when she dared the Marauders to take a Laugh-Inducing Potion in the middle of Transfiguration and then placed bets on who would get detention first—Peter had.

But to take a potion that she was hinting had something to do with the moon?

"Mia, I know you're good at potions but—"

"Remus, please."

He could actually see tears forming in the corners of her eyes and the sight made his chest tighten. He really could not stand it when she cried.

"I know it's difficult for you to trust people when it comes to your lycanthropy. I know that you struggle in letting me help you."

Remus scoffed. That was an understatement; he had *barely* allowed her back into the hospital wing since they had started dating at the beginning of the year. Even then, she had only healed him the once.

"But I want—I *need* you to do this for me. Please take this potion." She was begging him now, and something about the way the word "please" fell off her lips sent a primal vibration through his chest.

She held the goblet out to him again. "This one tonight, and then again every night until the moon."

He closed his eyes and inhaled her scent to try and ground him. That scent used to send him into a frenzy, but now that he was allowed to hold her hand, to brush the hair from her neck and breathe her in whenever he wanted, it calmed him. It also helped that her scent was no longer mingled with Sirius's—just his. Remus would certainly lie about it if she ever asked him, but when she hugged him tightly, he would rub his cheek against hers on instinct, scent marking her as his own.

"I trust you," he said, reaching for the goblet. Her eyes brightened so much that her irises changed from brown to a shade of amber that caught him completely by surprise. If

he had not known her scent so well, he might have actually assumed someone had Polyjuiced themselves as Mia, and the potion was wearing off. Just in case, he waited a few seconds, watching her intently.

Her eyes returned to her usual chocolate colour, and he sighed in relief.

"Thank you." She smiled and kissed his cheek.

Remus nodded, shaking his head and blinking his eyes rapidly, wondering if he was seeing things. He brought the goblet to his lips, drinking it down in one large gulp, figuring that if he got it over with quickly he would have less of a chance to let his nerves get the better of him.

The second the liquid fell into his mouth, though, he almost gagged on it. Forcing it down his throat, he grimaced, swallowed, then turned to her as though she had just smacked him. He coughed, trying very hard not to vomit, and dropped the goblet, kicking it away from him. "Ugh, I *trusted* you! That tasted like . . . like . . ." But there was no comparison.

"Like licking the inside of the Sorting Hat?" Mia offered.

Remus's eyes widened, and he nodded.

"Yeah, sorry about that. Can't seem to make it any better. But you still have to take it."

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## June 24th, 1975

"Where's Mia?" Remus yelled as he burst into the nearly empty Gryffindor common room.

After waking up in the Shrieking Shack following the full moon, Remus had made his way through the tunnel beneath the Whomping Willow at unheard of speeds. Still slow and aching, but he was not limping, bleeding, or on the verge of blacking out. When Madam Pomfrey was not looking, he snatched three phials of Invigoration Draught, tossing them back like they were shots of firewhisky before he darted out of the infirmary against the mediwitch's instructions.

The students were leaving Hogwarts for the summer that morning, and he had originally planned to leave by Portkey later that afternoon once he was feeling better.

But this could not wait.

"Well, look at *you*, Moony." Sirius grinned as he walked down the stairs, his broom slung over his shoulder.

Everyone else in Gryffindor Tower had likely left early that morning, trunks all packed and ready to go, but James and Sirius had mentioned the day before that they were wanting to have one more fly around the pitch to celebrate another year of winning the Quidditch Cup, though Gryffindor still lost the House Cup when James had lost fifty points after he had been caught glueing rat traps to the floor outside the Slytherin common room.

Sirius set his broom down at the foot of the stairs next to his trunk, which had been covered by an assortment of stickers and logos of Muggle bands he had become obsessed with over the years. "You're all up and looking less like shit than you did last month. Hey, Prongs!" he called up the stairs. "Come check this out! Moony doesn't look like he recently threw up."

James rushed down the stairs, broom in hand and robes hanging open loosely over his red and gold Quidditch jersey, wand tucked behind his ear. "Wow. You look . . ." James paused, tilting his head to the side as he stared at Remus. "More healthy, less sane? What's got your tail in a twist?"

"I've used that one before," Sirius muttered to James.

"Fine," James huffed. "What's got your paw in a . . ."

"Pickle?" Sirius offered.

"Thank you, Mr Padfoot," James smirked.

"You're very welcome, Mr Prongs."

"Will you two idiots shut up?" Remus growled. "Where's Mia?"

Sirius stuck out his lower lip in a pout. "Apparently *morning* Moony is a *prickish* Moony, Prongs."

"Indeed he is, Padfoot," James tutted while shaking his head disapprovingly.

Remus took in a slow deep breath, not having the patience for their usual antics. "Tell me where Mia is," he began slowly, "or I'll go and tell Lily that you're the one who stole all of her books and wrote 'Mrs James Potter' in them."

James laughed mockingly, listing up the sleeve of his robe with a proud grin. "Nice try, mate, she already knows that. I've got the scar from her stinging hex to prove it."

Remus growled and ran his hands through his shaggy hair in frustration. "Why are you two being so difficult?"

"Not sure," James admitted casually. "Might be your reactions, if I'm being honest. I'm feeling very provoked into the need to fuck with your head a little right now." He chuckled, and Sirius joined in.

Remus turned and snarled at them, actually feeling it when his eyes flashed gold.

They immediately stopped laughing, though neither looked actually frightened. Four years of watching Remus fold his socks had left his friends less than intimidated by him.

"Okay, okay," James conceded. "Why do you need to see my sister?"

"She's been feeding me a potion all week," Remus admitted, trying to calm himself down.

"What potion?" Sirius asked.

Remus sighed. "I'm not sure. She didn't tell me what it was called."

"You took a *potion* from your girlfriend without finding out what it's called?" Sirius gaped at him.

Remus refused to make eye contact. "I know, I know."

"Better yet, you took a potion from *Mia* without finding out anything about it?" James asked, looking horrified. Growling werewolf? No problem. Potentially poisonous sister? Everyone on alert. "You *do* remember The Great Rainbow Explosion of 1974?"

"Or the Laugh-Inducing Potion she dared us to drink?" Sirius chimed in.

"Or the Exploding Potion she flushed down the second-floor girls' bathroom?"

"Pretty sure that was us, mate," Sirius said thoughtfully.

"Oh, yeah." James nodded with a nostalgic smile. "But what about the Babbling Beverage she slipped Peter last Spring? He's still not allowed within ten feet of the Hufflepuff table."

"Or the prefects' bathroom," Sirius continued.

"Remember when Macdonald punched him in the face?"

"Knocked out one of his teeth." Sirius laughed at the memory. "Remember how we told him we could fix it with a Sticking Charm, Prongs?"

"But we put it in backward!" the two said at the same time, leaning on one another as they burst into laughter.

"Hey!" Remus shouted. "Can we reminisce about Peter's miseries later? The bloody potion she gave me . . . it kept me there!"

Sirius blinked, confused. "Kept you where?"

"Kept me . . ." Remus sighed and collapsed onto the large sofa; he could smell her scent all over it. "It kept me present. I was there, in control. For the most part."

"I don't understand," James said as he moved over and took a seat next to him. Sirius leant against the empty fireplace, arms crossed over his chest, one foot crossed over the other.

"When I transform, I become the wolf," Remus explained. "The wolf takes over completely. I'm still there, but it's like watching from behind the scenes while someone else takes control of my body. I barely remember anything each month because it's like I'm not even really present, but last night I was there."

He looked up at his friends, who both stared at him with wide, interested eyes. "Last night was . . ." Remus's voice trailed away as he remembered.

He had been taken out to the Whomping Willow as usual and had turned back to see Mia smiling at him from the doorway of the castle, a hopeful look in her eyes that made him feel genuinely nervous. She had not told him any more about the potion the rest of the week but still forced him to drink the nasty stuff each day leading up to the full moon, including that night.

Slipping beneath the willow, Remus made the stressful walk to the Shrieking Shack. Once there, he fell into his usual routine of undressing and taking in slow, deep breaths as the moon began to rise.

His skin had itched badly, and it felt like he needed to scratch it all the way down to the bones. A heat washed over his body, and he could feel the blood pumping through his veins, throbbing as it flooded his head, toppling him to the ground where his knees buckled and the shift began to take place. Pain. Always pain. Excruciating pain as his bones shifted, elongating until some of them broke, only to heal themselves back in place moments later. His muscles tore, adjusted, and repaired themselves, and the skin of his back split open to accommodate the shape of his secondary form. Fur, both soft and

coarse, pushed its way through his skin, and his face elongated into a snout at the same time as his hands fell to the ground heavily, shifting into large paws.

Normally, the wolf would have taken over, searching for a way out—searching for something to kill, something to tear at, and—*late*—something to take, to claim, to fuck.

Of course, trapped in the Shrieking Shack, there was nothing and no one, at which point the wolf would usually turn his frustrations on himself. It had been horrifying over the years to watch from behind the eyes of the creature as its desires changed. It had been one of the reasons Remus insisted on not getting too physical with Mia. He worried that one day the wolf would take over completely and there would be nothing Remus could do to stop him from hurting her.

But last night . . . the wolf was in the back and *Remus* at the front.

He had sat there in the shack, smelling the air and looking around, waiting for the wolf to begin tearing into his own flesh angrily when attempts to escape failed—but nothing happened. He had stood up on his hind legs, stretching to look through the cracks in a boarded-up window where he gazed up at the moon that still called to but did not dominate him.

"I was fully in control," Remus admitted quietly, reverently. "I mean, I transformed and everything like normal, but it was like I could see with my own eyes and move willingly."

"Merlin," James whispered, shocked by the revelation. "And Mia—"

"I need to know where she is, Prongs," Remus said, looking up at his friend desperately.

"She left early with Evans for the train," James answered immediately. "We stuck around to wait for you."

"Well, I'm here now." Remus leapt from the sofa and made for the portrait hole quickly. "Let's go!"

---

Lily helped some of the first years with their luggage, purposely trying to get the attention of the current prefects and Head Boy and Girl as though their opinions mattered on who would become prefects the following year.

Mia, meanwhile, turned her gaze over the horizon at the castle in the distance, worrying her lip between her teeth as she nervously thought of Remus, praying to Merlin that she had not botched the potion. She was terrified something had gone wrong, and he would be furious with her for tampering with something so very sensitive.

Trying to distract her thoughts, Mia helped a second year Hufflepuff try to wrangle his owl back into its cage.

"Mia, I thought you said Remus wasn't feeling well today?" Lily asked.

"What?" Mia blinked, looking up at Lily. "He's *not* well. He was in the hospital wing last I heard."

Lily pointed behind Mia. "Well, he doesn't look very sick. He's running toward us."

"What?" Mia gasped and turned quickly.

Lily was right; Remus was at full sprint. James and Sirius trailed behind, unable to keep up with him despite it being just hours post-moon.

Mia's eyes widened at the sight of him looking so good, and she wondered what the hell she had done to the potion to get *these* results. Wolfsbane had never done anything like this to Future Remus, at least not that she knew of.

He continued to rush forward, his eyes fixed on her, and Mia swallowed nervously as he closed the distance between them, panting, with sweat on his brow. He must have run the whole way down from the castle.

She worried that he would yell at her, call her a know-it-all, or tell her to mind her own business from now on. She was terrified that he would say he could no longer trust her, break her heart, and tell her how *dare* she stick her nose where it did not belong.

"Remus, I can explain . . ." she began to say, but he swallowed the rest of her sentence as he crushed his mouth over hers, kissing her soundly.

He had not waited patiently, silently requesting permission, like Sirius had done. Remus took immediate advantage of the way her lips parted in a shocked gasp, and he invaded hungrily, moaning and growling against her lips, and the sounds vibrated in her throat, tickling. Cold shivers quickly transformed into heated waves that travelled over her entire body.

His kiss was like throwing a rock into the Black Lake: a deep plunge in the centre and then watching as the effects rippled outward, reaching the bank of sand and rocks the way that his kiss reached all the way to her toes.

At first, she could scarcely hear the whistles and cheers from the students surrounding them, but when her hearing fully returned to her, she blushed in realisation of where they were. She gasped for air the moment that Remus let her go, but he did not move far, pressing his forehead against hers and gazing deep into her eyes.

"I love you," he said before she got her breath back.

Her heart swelled at the words, and she had to blink away the tears forming in her eyes to make sure it was really him standing in front of her. She reached her hands up and touched his stubbly cheeks, relishing the sudden feel of his hands buried in the thick of her hair.

It really *was* Remus.

And Remus had *kissed* her.

And Remus loved her.

"You are brilliant and wonderful and absolutely perfect, little witch." Remus grinned brightly, his eyes flashing gold. "And I *love* you."

Her voice was shaky when she quietly asked, "It worked?"

Remus laughed and kissed her again, this time less desperate and hungry, but she could feel his smile against her lips. She was not surprised at all and returned his smile when she realised that he tasted like chocolate. She let out a laugh as he picked her up into his arms and spun her around joyfully.

"Ahem!"

Remus and Mia broke apart to turn, red-faced, toward an approaching James.

"Took you long enough, Moony!" Sirius hollered from behind him.

"Lily." Remus turned and looked down at his friend with pleading eyes. "I would never under any other circumstances ask this of you, but . . ."

"Ugh." Lily frowned. "You want me to distract Potter, don't you? Fine, but I can't guarantee he'll be returned with all present attachments." She wielded her wand for emphasis as she pushed her way between Remus and Mia to present herself in front of James, who almost missed her while he was staring down his sister and friend.

"Potter? Could . . . Could you . . . Oh God. Could you sit with me on the train?" Lily's voice was tight, her words sounding like they were being pushed through clenched teeth. "I'd really like you to explain Quidditch to me."

Without prelude, James dropped to his knees, looking up at her with deep admiration. "I knew it! I knew if I just kept at it, you'd realise how much you love me!"

"Shut up, you great bloody prat! I do *not* love you!"

"Marry me!" James implored, arms wide open as though he fully expected her to fall into them willingly.

"This day just gets better and better," Sirius noted aloud, a truly pleased look on his face.

Lily turned and glared at Remus, who was already halfway onto the train, gripping Mia's hand tightly. They both offered Lily an apologetic smile, silently declaring that they owed her. She nodded in reply, presumably calculating the massive interest that was instantly accumulating on this favour for her friends.

---

Remus rushed down the centre of the train, making his way back to the last compartment, generally reserved for the Marauders. Though they did not have an actual stake of claim on the carriage, it was always empty after Sirius started a rumour that the boys had placed a Pimple Jinx on the compartment that would target anyone entering it without the Marauders' permission.

The couple entered and found Peter already sitting there.

"Hey, Remus, I didn't think you were going to be—"

"Get out."

Peter's eyes widened, and he responded quickly by standing up and moving to the door, keeping his eyes on Remus the entire time.

Remus broke for a few moments and sighed, "Just give us a half-hour, mate," he said with a slightly softened tone.

"An *hour*," Mia amended.

Remus immediately reacted, grinning. "An hour."

Peter flushed red and turned quickly, closing the door behind him.

The moment he was gone, Remus turned swiftly, cupping Mia's cheek in his hand and bringing his lips down to hers, kissing her sweetly and gently, trying to communicate his gratitude without words. Her potion had kept him awake, alive, and in control for the

first full moon since he was four years old. He had spent the night in silence, finding no need to howl or whimper. He had wanted to sleep but could not. He was finally able to experience his wolf form with purpose and control. It was there in the shack, bathed in the light of the moon, that Remus knew he *had* to kiss her, even if it was just the once.

But kissing her was addictive. She made him feel like a wizard, a human—like a *man*.

The wolf lingered still in the background of his mind, urging him to grip her harder, hold her tighter, closer—*Devour her!*—but Remus held back. He was more man than wolf, and she had proven that to him. He did, however, whimper when she pulled away from him for a moment, but she smiled at his complaint and then aimed her wand at the door.

"*Muffliato, Colloportus!*" she said before drawing down the window shades.

Remus swallowed hard at both the Silencing Spell and the Locking Spell.

"Do you really think Lily can keep James distracted?" Mia asked, her cheeks pink.

"He proposed marriage to her in front of at least fifty other students. I think she'll last maybe ten minutes," he admitted honestly. Telling Peter to take off for an hour had been highly optimistic and incredibly unrealistic.

"Ten minutes." Mia nodded and pressed her hands against his chest, letting the bench behind him buckle his knees forward until he was sitting, and she was pulled down with him, trapped tenderly in his arms, her legs draped over his, and her feet kicked up on the edge of the seat.

Remus grinned and leant in, pressing a soft and significant kiss to her mouth.

He placed gentle and sweet kisses along her jawline, trailing down to her pulse point where he hesitated, trying to fight off—but ultimately giving in to—the need to suck at her skin. He was tender, placing an open-mouthed kiss on her neck, letting his tongue linger on the skin and tasting her for the first time. He let out a deep growl and it rumbled in his chest; he then groaned as a mewling sound escaped her swollen, parted lips. His hands roamed up her back, holding her tighter to him as he traced her collarbone with his mouth, a voice in the back of his mind urging, *Keep going. More. Ours.*

But that voice was drowned out when Mia leant close, brushing her lips against the shell of his ear, whispering, "I love you."

He paused as the declaration hit him, and he vaguely recalled telling her the same thing just outside the train right after he kissed her. Remus had not expected to say it out loud, but the words would not be contained. He certainly had not expected her to return

the sentiment, and now that she had, he sat back looking at her in shock and awe, a part of him waiting for her to take it back and apologise immediately.

She did not.

She smiled at him and touched his face and looked into his eyes as though he were worth more than all the gold she had at Gringotts. As a Potter, he assumed she had a hell of a lot. She looked at him like he was worth a damn, like he was suddenly, somehow, miraculously worthy of her.

He said nothing else but kissed her once more, chastely, and nuzzled his nose into the side of her neck, exhaling slowly to calm himself down.

"Are you okay?" she whispered.

Remus smiled and pulled away from her to place a kiss on her brow. "I don't think I've ever been more okay in my entire life," he replied quietly, stroking her cheek gently with his thumb. "You tip everything upside-down. I was never meant to have friends. You changed that. I was never supposed to be close to someone like this; was never supposed to be properly conscious and in control under the moon. No one was ever supposed to . . ."

"I *love* you, Remus. You are so *very much* supposed to be loved."

He pressed his forehead against hers gently and closed his eyes, focusing on the moment and freezing it somewhere in the back of his memory so he could review it again during times of stress and sadness. "You changed everything, Mia."

He felt her stiffen at his words and could hear her inhale sharply. Remus's eyes opened to look up at her staring down at him as though she were looking for something specific inside of him. "What is it? What's wrong?"

She shook her head frantically, almost looking like she would cry at any moment.

"Mia? Did I do something wrong?" He was beginning to panic but let out a small sigh of relief when she shook her head again and smiled, although tears still lingered in her eyes.

"I haven't changed *anything*. You can't change what's meant to be." She began to worry her bottom lip between her teeth. "I'm just doing what I'm supposed to, Remus. I have to enjoy my life. I ended up being very lucky that you're such a big part of that life."

She looked like she was holding something back as she brushed the hair from his forehead affectionately and whispered, "Please always be a part of my life."

"Breaking up with me already?" he joked, but a part of him was terrified. "Am I that bad of a kisser?"

Mia threw her head back and laughed.

"Remus, you are *such* a good kisser that I could probably snog you for the next thirty years, but it would eventually get awkward. I'm just saying . . . we never know what the future has in store, and I want to make sure that, no matter what, you'll always be in my life. My best friend."

"So you're *not* breaking up with me?" he asked, seriously this time.

"No, you prat! I just want you to know what I feel for you, that I love you . . . and it goes beyond this relationship. You are a part of me, and that started long ago—long before I ever met you on this train," she admitted, leaning down to feather her lips lightly against his own.

"I promise. Always in your life."

She let out a long sigh of relief.

"Now that we're *not* breaking up," Remus remarked with a chuckle, "I need to lie down."

She raised an amused brow. "My lips too much for you?"

"Your lips are a great many things, and I look forward to discovering them all. Unfortunately, the full moon was last night," he reminded her, shifting her from his lap and then tipping backward to lie down on the bench. "I'm needing at least another six hours of sleep."

"I meant to ask about that," Mia said, curious. "The potion was meant to keep you alert and in control, but you look—or at least you did until just now—like nothing happened at all."

"Oh, your potion did what it was supposed to, I guess," he admitted, yawning. "But I needed to see you today, so I sneaked out of the infirmary after downing three phials of Invigoration Draught."

"Three?!" She blinked down at him, wide-eyed as he fell unconscious. "Remus Lupin!" But he only snored softly in response. She let out a frustrated sigh, making plans to scold him later for self-medicating.

Just then, there was a loud bang on the door, and Mia rolled her eyes and aimed her wand at it. "*Finite Incantatem!*"

James was the first to burst through the door, a dangerous look in his eyes, hair standing on end more than normal as though he had been recently electrocuted.

Mia gaped at him as he walked into the compartment.

Sirius followed close behind, grinning at Remus's supine form. "Wore him out did you, kitten?"

James punched him and then turned his gaze on Mia. "What happened in here?"

"What happened to your hair?" Mia countered with a raised brow.

Sirius cleared his throat, holding back another laugh. "Let's just say Evans is going to take some time to *think* about Prongs's proposal of marriage."

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

### *Load of Rubbish*

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*Maybe there's a way out of the cage where you live  
Maybe one of these days you can let the light in  
Show me how big your brave is  
(Brave - Sara Bareilles)*

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**June 24th, 1975**

"My dad wants to take me camping for the next few weeks," Remus said as he held Mia's hand, helping her off of the train with a smile.

He had slept for six hours of the ride, just as he said he needed, and he looked well rested for it. Mia had sat in her seat during the trip back to King's Cross Station with Remus's feet in her lap, which forced James, Sirius, and Peter to sit on one side of the compartment together. She finished reading a book on ancient runes that Remus had bought her, while James and Peter played a game of Exploding Snap—which Remus slept through soundly—and Sirius flipped through an old subscription of a Muggle motorcycle magazine.

"Owl me when you get home then. I'll start brewing the potion the minute I get to the manor, and you can come and take it home with you. Or," Mia offered with a smile, "take it at our house. We could set up some strong wards in the orchards by the river. You wouldn't be stuck in a—"

"I'm used to cages. And I wouldn't want to risk being so close to you." He pulled her gently into his arms and kissed her temple. She could feel him relax a bit as her arms wrapped around his waist. His soft chuckle was quiet, but she felt the vibrations in his chest. "But I will *absolutely* take you up on that potion again."

"James! Mia!"

"It's my parents. Come on!" Mia tugged on Remus's hand. "You'll have to come to our place first anyway since you skipped your Portkey," she insisted and watched as Remus winced. "Already forgot about that, did you?"

Before Remus could say another word, Dorea was right in the thick of the group, pulling Mia and James into hugs. She took one step back to look at James's hair, which still had not calmed down after Lily zapped him. "Oh my goodness."

"Isn't it hilarious?" Sirius asked, grinning widely.

Dorea stared at the mess and winced as she tried to pat it down. "And how is the young Miss Evans?"

"That's the future Mrs James Potter," James declared, not deterred in the slightest.

"How bad was it?" Dorea asked Sirius, Mia, and Remus.

Sirius laughed loudly.

"He proposed," Mia said, trying to lace her fingers through Remus's even as he tried to awkwardly shake her grip off in front of her parents.

Charlus frowned. "Again?"

"This time it was in front of the whole train," Sirius continued, laughing. "She hit him with a hex I've never even seen before."

"Static Jinx, actually," Mia supplied. "She invented it herself."

Sirius grinned. "Muggles are great."

"Remus." Dorea smiled and leant in to kiss his cheek affectionately. "Can't tell you how happy Charlus and I are about this." She gestured to Mia and Remus's hands with a bright smile on her face.

"We *are*?" Charlus raised a brow but then immediately looked guilty when Dorea turned and narrowed her grey eyes at him. He cleared his throat and nodded, shoving his hands into the pockets of his robes. "Oh yes, certainly. Good match. Shall we be off?"

They all stepped after Charlus, heading toward the line for the Floo when a voice called Remus's name loudly from behind them.

Remus and Mia both turned, spotting Mr Lupin looking haggard and dressed in what appeared like hand-me-down robes. He had a stern expression on his face, and Remus let go of Mia's hand the moment his father's eyes fell on them.

"I'm sorry," Remus said as his father approached. "I know I was supposed to take the Portkey, but I ended up on the train, and there wasn't a way to owl, and I fell asleep—"

"It's fine," Mr Lupin said roughly. "Let's go; your mother's in the car."

"You have a car?" Charlus and Sirius asked at the same, their eyes bright and interested.

"Erm . . . yes. My wife is a Muggle," Mr Lupin answered with a frown, wearing an expression on his face that said he was prepared for someone to belittle him over his choice of spouse. When the Potters all smiled at him as though his announcement were less interesting than the fact that he owned an automobile, he visibly relaxed a little and cleared his throat.

"Thank you for looking after the . . . the boy." He gestured to Remus but refused to make physical contact with him.

Mia growled quietly to herself at the sight, watching her recently confident boyfriend shrink in the shadow of his father. It reminded her far too much of seeing Lucius Malfoy and Draco. She knew Lyall Lupin was not any sort of Death Eater; he was just a confused man who didn't understand how wonderful his son was.

"Say goodbye to your friends," Mr Lupin instructed. "Professor Dumbledore already sent your things back to the cottage."

Remus nodded and turned to quickly clasp hands with James and Sirius, smiling as Dorea leant in and hugged him gently. Charlus held out his hand to the boy, and Remus nervously took it with a sad smile. Clearly without thinking, Remus smiled at Mia and leant down, placing a chaste kiss to her lips and hugging her tightly.

"I love you," he whispered in her ear, and she smiled brightly at the words.

"I love you too," she reminded him, her gaze drifting to Mr Lupin, who stood behind them looking positively horrified by either what he had just seen or heard or both.

"Remus, let's go right now," the man insisted, and Remus nodded politely, giving a regretful glance back to the Potters before following as his father quickly departed King's Cross Station through the Muggle exit.

Charlus cleared his throat as he looked at his daughter nervously. "Soo . . . the Lupin boy, hmm?" he asked with a raised brow that made him look far too much like James when he was trying to be serious in an awkward situation.

Mia chuckled at the sight as she realised Harry did the same thing. She grabbed her trunk and began following after her family, rolling her eyes at her father. "He's a perfect gentleman."

"Yeah, he very gentlemanly snogged her in front of the entire train." Sirius smirked, and his grin only widened when Mia glared at him.

"Was this before or after James proposed to the Evans girl?" Dorea asked as though this were common conversation, her relaxed face the very opposite of Charlus's, who looked to be nearing a coronary.

"Before. Pretty sure Evans was a strategic move on Remus's part. Mate loves wizard's chess, and he knows how to handle pawns." Sirius chuckled, practically skipping past his own parents with indifference as they greeted his brother warmly—or with as much warmth as Walburga and Orion Black could muster.

"Evans is not a pawn!" James snapped.

"I didn't say *she* was the pawn."

Charlus pouted. "I don't like it."

"Charlus," Dorea scolded, not even looking at her husband. "Mia dear, make sure to owl Remus and his parents when we get home. We'll have them all over for dinner sometime this summer. Get to know them."

"I will." Mia smiled sadly, thinking of the moon the following month. "They're going to be camping for a few weeks though and then Remus has . . . a prior engagement. So I wouldn't expect anything until July or August."

---

### July 14th, 1975

While Mia had not expected to see Remus for another month or so, she *had* thought he would have owled her or fire-called her at the very least to let her know that he and his family had made it home. He had done so every year since meeting her, so when Mia woke each morning and no letter had arrived, she became more and more worried. She tried placing a fire-call to the Lupin Cottage—a place she would later know as The Den—but their Floo Network was blocked. James and Sirius tried to cheer her up, insisting that there was no way Remus would just ignore her and that he was probably in some far away wilderness with his dad on an extended camping trip with no access to owls or the Floo.

Lily's letters helped some.

*Dear Mia,*

*Before I ask for details regarding your film (it's a Muggle thing, I'll show you sometime) worthy kiss with a young Mr Lupin, I need to let you know that your brother mentioned something about wanting to give me his mother's ring, so please watch him. I will not be the motivation behind his theft of your family's heirlooms.*

*Now, about my two favourite bookworms. I was under the impression that you two kept your displays of affection in private, but that kiss was something else! The whole train was talking about it. I tried to keep the gossip to a minimum, I promise.*

*Strangers are one thing, but your friends are another. Mary is staying with me for the summer, and she's begging me for details too inappropriate for me to even write.*

*Let me know if we're still coming to your house this summer to have another river picnic. I'll bring pop for you to try. It's like cold, fizzy butterbeer.*

*Love,*

*Lils*

*Dear Lily,*

*Mum offers you thanks in regards to the whereabouts of Grandmother Black's opal ring went missing the first day we got home. Jamie is now missing his broomstick, which is being held ransom until he writes you a letter of apology, so let me know when that happens.*

*Tell Mary that the details of my private relationship are just that—private; also, that was, in fact, our first kiss, followed swiftly by our second and third and then our fourth, and so on once we actually boarded the train.*

*Thank you for your great sacrifice of distracting my brother. I know it was a bother to you, but it did give me the opportunity to tell Remus that I loved him without a pestering older sibling ready to poke fun at our expense.*

*Speaking of Remus . . . he hasn't written. I think something's wrong. His dad met him at King's Cross and looked so very angry. I don't think he knew about our relationship, and he was clearly upset about it.*

*Not sure about the river this year. If Remus doesn't write me soon, I doubt I'll be in much of a mood to celebrate anything.*

*Love,*

*Mia*

*PS: I know what films and pop are.*

---

*Dear Mia,*

*Your brother's letter arrived this morning. Please tell your mother he can have his stupid broom back, but I am enclosing his "apology" so that perhaps your parents can see the type of ludicrous things I have to put up with on a daily basis from him. And, though you would be a wonderful sister, (and I would love to replace Petunia with you; she's being an arse lately) my answer to his continual proposal is still a resounding: Over my dead body!*

*I'm sorry to hear about Remus. Has he written yet? I'm sure it's nothing. He told me before that he goes camping with his dad a lot, and I doubt they'd bring an owl along unless for emergencies.*

*We've all known that you both were in love for a long time, but it's so sweet to know that you finally admitted it to each other! Mary is positively beside herself and wants to know when you'll get married and start popping out lots of little Lupins! I told her that our Mia was going to have a proper career and not end up someone's little house witch.*

*Let me know immediately when he writes you.*

*Love,*

*Lils*

*PS: Of course you know what films and pop are. Can you, Madam Muggle, please educate the rest of pureblood Wizarding society? Is it too much to ask that people don't look at me like I'm speaking Martian when I mention a telephone?*

*PPS: A telephone is a machine that we use to communicate, similar to fire-calling only without sticking your head in a Floo.*

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**July 24th, 1975**

The Potter family—currently sans Sirius, who had been required to return to Grimmauld Place at the beginning of July—was comfortably enjoying the late evening, listening to the *Wizarding Wireless Network* that played instrumental music. Charlus and

James were engaged in a game of wizard's chess while Dorea and Mia each had a book in hand.

When the green flames burst through the fireplace, everyone turned to see a dishevelled Remus step out, not bothering to dust the soot from his weathered robes.

Mia rushed forward, wrapping her arms around his neck and holding him tight. "Where have you been? Why haven't you written me?" she cried, pulling away to examine his face as though she were looking for injuries—a long-term habit she had kept after being in a war.

Remus, for some reason, was doing the same to her. "You're *okay*?"

He was panting hard, panic evident in his tired eyes. Mia could tell that he had not slept for some time. She had known that the full moon was the night before, and she had been so worried because Remus had not even written to collect the Wolfsbane Potion she had brewed for him.

"You're not hurt?" he asked, touching her cheeks and looking over her shoulders and her arms. "You're not . . . ? You didn't . . . ?"

"I'm fine, love."

Without another word, Remus sighed in relief and fell to the ground, his knees colliding with the floor as he buried his head in his hands to cover the shame on his face.

"Remus?" Mia whispered, moving to touch his shoulder, but he flinched away from her.

"Mia, darling, let's go fix some tea for our guest," Dorea said politely as she stood. As James and Charlus glanced up at the witches, Dorea gave them a sharp look that said, *Take care of this!*

Remus looked up just in time to see Mia disappear through a door. His first instinct was to assume that her mother did not want her near him. He had not even looked at himself in a mirror since waking up after the moon. Merlin, he must look a fright.

"Moony," James whispered, kneeling down beside him. "Moony . . . Remus, what happened, mate? Mia said you were supposed to write her over a week ago. She's been beside herself, a right nightmare worrying about you."

"I-I couldn't . . . My dad." Remus frowned and looked up at Mia's father, who stared down at him with concern written on his face. "Sir, I . . . I'm sorry to just burst into your home like this, it was very . . . very impolite of me."

"He really *is* a gentleman. Come sit down, son." Mr Potter nodded to the chair that his wife had left unoccupied. "Let's have us a little chat about my daughter and why you were so worried she'd been hurt in your absence."

Remus turned a panicked eye to James, who nodded at him. "You've *got* to have more than your mates in your corner, Moony. You have to learn to trust people."

"Is this about the werewolf business?" Mr Potter asked, and both Remus and James turned and stared at him, utterly astounded. "What? You think Dorea and I didn't know? Son, I read the papers, and I might not leave the house too often, but I still have Ministry contacts. I remember hearing about your attack. They kept it out of the *Prophet* sure, but I remember hearing rumours and stories because your father went and made a bit of a name for himself. Plus, you're on the registry." Mr Potter sighed, reaching a hand out and patting Remus on the back when he flinched at the mention of the registry. "It's a right load of rubbish, but it's there for those who go looking for it. Dorea goes looking for *a lot* of things."

Remus started taking in short quick breaths. "But I . . . But you . . ."

"But you thought we'd come chasing after you with lit torches and pitchforks?" Mr Potter raised a brow. "Slow and deep," he advised with a smile, patting Remus on the back again. "You'll pass out soon if you don't calm down, lad. Might be a little embarrassing if Mia comes back in here and sees you out cold on the floor. She'd think one of us did you in. Can't have that, now can we?"

"With all due respect sir, how could you let your daughter date a werewolf?"

"I didn't know she was dating one until we saw the two of you at King's Cross. Of course, Dorea knew. She knows everything, she does. Cheeky witch."

"And now?" Remus asked. "Now that you know?"

Mr Potter gave him a look that was a bit intimidating. James tried to copy the expression but failed miserably and ended up just looking confused.

"Son, I'm more concerned with you being a teenage *wizard* than I am about you being a werewolf."

Having the good sense to blush and avert his eyes, Remus panicked for a completely different reason. His anxiety did not fade much, even when Mr Potter and James started chuckling.

"Now, before I get to deliver a speech I've been preparing for the day my daughter brought home a boy," Mr Potter began, sitting up straight with a look of mild excitement, "I still want to know why you came Flooing into my house in such a panic."

Remus frowned, shame filling him up as he remembered the nauseating fear that felt like it had permeated his every cell. "My Dad saw me . . . He saw me kiss Mia goodbye. I was stupid and foolish and selfish. Last night was the full moon, and I came over as quick as I could. I had to wait until my parents . . ." He cleared his throat and whispered, "Until my parents let me out."

"You thought Mia'd be a *werewolf*?" James gaped at him in confusion and concern "Why? Did you *bite* her?"

"No!" Remus shouted, his eyes wide, horrified by the suggestion. "But I . . . Prongs, you saw what I did!"

James blinked and laughed awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck. "You *kissed* her. No offence mate, it was right disgusting to watch, but last I checked, a little snogging does *not* a werewolf make."

"My Dad always told me . . ." Remus began with a frown. "He said that I could never . . . And he worked for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures; he would know, *wouldn't* he?" Looking between James and Mr Potter, he felt something heavy sink into his stomach. "Wouldn't he?"

Mr Potter frowned and sat forward, leaning his elbows on his knees as he met Remus's gaze. "Did you know that there are some pureblood families that think Muggle-borns actually have mud in their veins?"

Remus scoffed. "That's preposterous."

"It is *just* as preposterous to think that a werewolf can infect someone every other day of the month save for one. And that's for less than twelve hours. Not even half a day. I'm sure my daughter could tell you the actual percentage of when you're actually dangerous—"

"Roughly 1.643835616438356 percent if we're basing it on a year of three-hundred and sixty-five days," Mia said, standing in the doorway beside her mother, cups and teapot in hand.

Remus let out a breath and wiped the back of his hand across his eyes. "Mia."

She ignored him and looked up at her mother. "I'd have to also factor in leap years and the occasions of blue moon occurrences. Do we have any Arithmancy books I haven't read yet?"

Remus let out a laugh as though he had been holding one in for a long time.

Mia sighed as she placed the cups and teapot on a nearby table, kneeling down in front of Remus, taking his hands within her own. "I've told you repeatedly, I am not afraid of you. You will not infect me. You will *not* hurt me. How was last night?"

"Worst moon of my life," he admitted and turned to the side, showing a new scar that ran the length of his cheek. "I was so worried about you."

He exhaled slowly, frowning at how tiny her hands were in his. *Our job*, Sirius had said, *Our job to protect her*. Remus had thought he failed.

"All right, ladies." Mr Potter stood up, groaning as he stretched his arms above his head. He gently took Mia by the arm, helping her to stand before shooing her back toward her mother with a gesture. "Back out of the room. Now that this sad business is over with and the boy is on his way to being happy again, I need to make sure he's not ever *too* happy."

Mrs Potter rolled her eyes. "Charlus, you're being a little ridiculous."

"I already gave him a good speech, Dad." James said with a grin. "Besides, it's not like he's anything like *Sirius*."

Mr Potter laughed. "Thank Merlin for that."

"That reminds me," Mia said with a mischievous smirk and pulled an envelope from her pocket, passing it over to her mother. "Lily wanted me to show you the kind of letters that Jamie writes her."

"Mia, no!" James jumped from his seat and dove for the envelope, falling short as Mrs Potter held it over her head at the last minute, allowing him to collapse face-first into the carpet.

"Oh James, darling." She frowned as she read the letter that James had apparently sent Lily. "Your spelling and penmanship are atrocious and as . . . *alluring* as Miss Evans's eyes are, no girl wants to hear that her stare reminds a boy of the grass beneath a Quidditch pitch." Sighing loudly, she handed the letter to her mortified son. "Take this and try again."

James blinked. "What?"

"I said go to your room, get out some parchment, and try again. Leave out all comparisons of her attributes to sports, and learn more than one way to tell a girl she's

beautiful." She shook her head in disappointment. "And stop talking about yourself. Humility is a virtue in young men who all too often appear overly confident."

"Sirius is overly-confident, and he *always* gets the girls," James said, pouting as he took the letter. Remus wondered if anyone else caught him sniffing the paper. From the way Mia was suddenly pinching the bridge of her nose, he assumed she had.

"Oh darling, Sirius lucked into the *Black* family features; you have Potter hair." Mrs Potter smiled affectionately and ruffled James's hair. "Remus, please fire-call your parents and let them know where you are. As upset and *ignorant* as they may be," she said with a tone that held zero remorse for her outspokenness, "they love you and will likely be concerned if they wake and find your bed empty."

Remus nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"That's not to say you're not welcome here *with* their permission. Yes, darling," she said, rolling her eyes when Mr Potter cleared his throat. "So long as Remus and Mia permit themselves to remain in their own rooms at night. No wandering now. I have eyes everywhere."

Wide-eyed, Remus swallowed hard as he looked back and forth between Mr and Mrs Potter. Mia's father had a pleased look on his face as he folded his arms across his chest. Remus could not be certain, but he thought he saw Mrs Potter winking at Mia.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

### *Calm Before the Storm*

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*Without the mask, where will you hide?  
Can't find yourself lost in your lie.  
I know the truth now, I know who you are  
(Everybody's Fool - Evanescence)*

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**August 25th, 1975**

The rest of the summer broke down into lazy, relaxed days previously unheard of. After Flooing into the Potter Manor in late July, Remus's parents came to collect him, and Charlus and Dorea took it as an opportunity to reach out to them on behalf of the children. Mrs Lupin was easy to persuade in regards to the new relationship that her son had with Mia, but Mr Lupin looked pessimistically nervous about it all until Dorea produced old books on werewolves from the family library.

"Where did you *get* these?" he asked her, wide-eyed. "I've studied everything, and I've never seen these before."

"Sometimes it can be helpful to be associated with a family who has a history with dabbling in the Dark Arts," Dorea said nonchalantly. "It's my understanding that werewolves have been used in past wars by Dark wizards blackmailing them with promises of freedoms. Unfortunately, it's a likely thing to recur. I assume you've heard the rumours?"

Mr Lupin nodded, whispering to keep his voice low, though he was unaware that Mia's hearing was amplified thanks to her Animagus training. "Death Eaters. That's what they're calling themselves."

Mrs Lupin gasped. "You think whoever is behind these attacks on Muggles and Muggle-borns will be after wolves next?"

"We can't say," Charlus sadly admitted, "but we will offer you and your family any knowledge we have. Your son has become quite a fixture in the lives of our children. My daughter especially has a fondness for your boy."

Mrs Lupin looked pleased at that; Mr Lupin looked tense.

Eventually, however, the Lupins learnt to relax a bit. After witnessing for himself the effects of Mia's Wolfsbane Potion the following full moon, Remus's father began to seemingly shift his perspective on werewolves.

Mia had made everyone promise not to speak about the potion and admitted that she had not been the one to discover it and would not take credit for another wizard's brew. She did, however, assure the family that she would provide Remus with the potion each month until it was made available to everyone.

Four days post full moon found the Marauders and Mia at Lupin Cottage, enjoying the large expanse of woods behind the small home.

Sirius had nicked a bottle of Mr Lupin's firewhisky from inside and had convinced each of his friends to partake with him in celebration of the upcoming year, which he declared would be the best ever. He had been visibly stressed on and off all summer. Any time Sirius returned from Grimmauld Place to either Potter Manor or Lupin Cottage, he had new bruises and scrapes and a sour attitude to go with them. He drowned his worries in firewhisky and had taken up a habit of smoking Muggle cigarettes, much to Mia's disapproval.

"Come on, let's go fly," Sirius said, reaching for his broom and looking down at his four friends as they sat around a clearing in the woods behind the cottage.

"Absolutely not. Never mind that I wouldn't fly completely sober," Mia declared with a toss of her head, "but I will not sit on a broom after any amount of drinking."

Sirius grinned at her. "Lightweight."

"Please be careful." She frowned as James stood up to join Sirius, reaching for his broom. He was followed behind by Peter who could not stand not doing everything that James and Sirius did, even if it was phenomenally stupid. Mia hoped that the little, intoxicated rat fell off his broom. Of course then the boy would assume she would just patch him up, and she would never be able to feign ignorance since they all knew she helped to heal Remus's wounds on a monthly basis.

"You two behave," James said with a smirk, pointing at Remus, who had his arm securely wrapped around Mia's shoulders as he leant back against a large tree.

Remus grinned, saluted James, but confirmed nothing as the three boys took flight, leaving him and Mia behind on the ground.

"I thought they'd *never* leave." Mia grinned and turned, cupping Remus's face in her hands and placing a searing kiss to his mouth.

Remus seemed a little less burdened with the idea of potentially infecting her lately, and he responded in kind by threading his long fingers through her mane of wild curls, holding her mouth firmly against him as he greedily robbed her breath from her.

"Amazing," she whispered as she leant back from him, looking down at the smug grin on his face and the twinkle of gold that speckled his eyes.

He removed one hand from her hair, placing it on her exposed neck and following it upward as he traced the flushed line of her throat with a smile that clearly told her he knew he was the reason for the change in the colour of her skin.

"You should always look like this," she said, beaming at him, her breath catching momentarily as he ran his thumb across her jaw line, boring his eyes into hers in a predatory way that thrilled her.

"How's that?" he asked.

"Smug." She laughed softly. "Confident."

"Hard not to be when you react the way you do." Remus leant forward to kiss her again, but she pulled away from him teasingly. His nose twitched, and he let out a low, needy growl before his hands gripped her around the waist and pulled her into his lap, where her knees fell on either side of his legs, straddling him.

Mia whimpered softly as warmth pooled in her belly, fanning outward across her ribs and settling against her hips where he branded her skin with his palms. He deftly slipped his hands beneath the hem of her blouse and ran his fingers along her shivering flesh.

"Just like that." He grinned and kissed her again, deep and hard, and Mia moaned into his mouth.

Purely out of instinct, she rolled her hips forward, but Remus had her up and off his lap before she reached the evidence of his desire for her.

He had actually all but tossed her away from him so that she was sitting in the middle of fallen leaves and dirt. She looked up at him, surprised, as she tried to catch her breath. She noticed that Remus was doing the same thing, though his eyes were clenched tightly.

"Are you okay? Don't hyperventilate on me." She chuckled a little. "Remus, *seriously*, breathe through your nose. You look like you're going to pass out."

"Can't," Remus said, shaking his head.

"Don't be ridiculous, of *course* you can." She leant forward and began crawling back toward him to make sure he was okay. While she knew their snogging was amazing, she never thought it would bring him to a state of unconsciousness.

"Mia, please don't . . ." He winced a little and cracked an eye open, looking embarrassed. "I can . . . I can *smell* you. And if you don't stay right where you are, I can't be held responsible for my actions."

She rose a confused brow at his words. "What do you mean you can *smell*—? Oh." And understanding washed over her. She flushed bright red and covered her mouth, consciously sitting back on her heels and tightening her thighs as if it would help. She struggled to make eye contact with him over her momentary humiliation.

"Please don't be embarrassed. It's not like I'm over here without my own problems."

Mia's eyes widened, and she looked skyward as if doing so would make it so that she would absolutely not stare at his trousers and the obvious arousal that she now knew was there.

"This is ridiculous," she admitted. "We're both normally functioning young adults. We shouldn't be embarrassed by our mutual . . . attraction."

"Only *you* can make so many three-syllable words sound sexy." Remus gave a throaty chuckle. "But no, we're *not* both normally functioning young adults. You're a devious little witch who seems bound and determined to bring an overly-sensed werewolf to his knees."

Her eyes finally drew back to him, and she noticed that there was no hint of soft green in his irises now. She was looking at the wolf behind the man, and his stare was penetrating and burning her up inside.

"Remus." When he continued to just stare at her, she swallowed and whispered, "Moony."

Remus grinned darkly at her and lunged forward, pushing her back against the dirt and leaves, his mouth devouring hers. It was melting, drugging, and she keened when he tore away from her lips and placed a wet kiss to the hollow of her throat. Her eyes rolled, and she arched her body, watching as he took in a sharp breath through his nose, and his

body quaked above her. Her face flushed with heat when she realised how well her siren call had worked for the wolf, and she reached a hand out to touch his cheek.

"Remus. *Remus*, I love you."

His eyes connected with hers and, slowly, they shifted back to green. He very nearly collapsed on top of her. "I'm sorry. It's . . . I can't seem to control myself."

"It's okay," she said, smiling as she ran her hands gently through his hair. "If it makes you feel any better, I have a hard time controlling myself around you, too."

"It does in fact, *not* make me feel better," he answered with a sharp laugh as he leant his forehead against her shoulder to steady himself. He pulled away from her and looked down, his brows furrowed together. "I really am sorry. I don't mean to go so . . . fast."

She giggled incredulously, fingers clinging tightly to his shirt to prevent him from creating more distance between them. "Remus, we've been dating for almost a year, and our first kiss was only two months ago. I think you've got pacing down fairly well. If anything, *I* should have cause to complain about your lack of affections until recently. I've been a very patient witch, you know." Her eyes softened when she saw him smile in return, before bringing his lips to her cheek.

"I just don't want to hurt you. It's foolish of me to not be in complete control."

"First love is only a little foolishness and a lot of curiosity," Mia quoted with a smile that deepened when Remus looked down at her and brushed the hair from her eyes.

"Shaw?" he asked with a raised brow, playing their game. "He was a Muggle."

"Yes." She grinned and leant up to kiss him. "A very, *very* smart Muggle."

"So are we foolish or curious then?" Remus asked her as he fell to the side, leaning his head against a propped arm while lacing his free fingers together with hers.

The setting sun behind them cast a glow over their bodies, and Mia smiled at the way their skin shimmered softly, reflecting the various shades of reds and golds in the evening sky.

"We're foolish to think that our curiosities are dangerous. At least one of us is." She poked his nose, and he narrowed his eyes in response. "Love will find a way through paths where wolves fear to prey."

"Quoting Lord Byron to me? Now you're not even trying," Remus said with a raised brow, scoffing as he sat up. Mia reached for his collar to tug him back down, and he

laughed, pushing her hands away with a grin. "Absolutely not. I'm not rewarding you for an easy fallback on the one line in *The Giaour* related to wolves. It's a poem about *vampires*."

"Would you like me to quote *Little Red Riding Hood*?" Mia chuckled.

Remus narrowed his gaze. "Cheeky witch."

"Cheeky witch who thinks her wizard is being a little dramatic."

"Cheeky witch who forgets her wizard is a dangerous *werewolf*," Remus said, his eyes suddenly serious. "It needs but slight provocation to make the wolf devour the lamb."

"I am *no* lamb!" Mia snapped at him.

He grinned suddenly with amusement. "No, *you* are a lion."

"Yes, 'Now the hungry lion roars, And the wolf howls the moon—'" Mia began but was interrupted.

"No Shakespeare. I *hate* Shakespeare."

Her eyes widened. "You take that back. He's one of the greatest poets and playwrights in Muggle history!" And the entire reason she was named Hermione—at least in the other timeline—as Helen Granger had been a fan of *A Winter's Tale* by William Shakespeare.

"Well, *first*, he was a wizard," Remus clarified.

"What?"

"And *second*, he was a wizard who was tried and convicted for stealing the works of Muggles and Obliviating them afterward."

Mia fumed, pouted, and then finally resigned herself to ignoring everything Remus said until she had a chance to research it herself. She reached out and tugged on his collar, placing a firm kiss to his lips before whispering against them, "A wolf is handsome in the eyes of a lovesick girl."

"You're incorrigible," Remus mumbled against her before returning her kiss, his lips moving slowly, gently, like the peaceful calm before a raging storm.

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## September 20th, 1975

Mia and the boys returned to school the following September.

James, more than ever, was determined to properly woo Lily Evans, who was more determined than ever to *avoid* him at all costs.

To repay her efforts for being a good distraction the previous June, Remus promised Lily—by swearing on *both* of their new prefect badges—to do his best to deter James from the worst of his public declarations of love.

Peter came back to school with a chip on his shoulder and, not one day into the new year, was put into detention for hexing a group of first years. Mia was livid, and the rest of the Marauders were concerned for their friend.

Sirius had met everyone on the Hogwarts Express looking nervous and smelling like he had just *eaten* an entire carton of cigarettes. He fidgeted the whole trip to Hogwarts. When Mia casually brought up his family, he snapped at her and told her not to worry about him.

Remus and Mia, strangely the calmest of the group, had nothing on their minds but one another, and she was steadfast in keeping to her rules: *Live your life. Enjoy your life.*

And she was *very* happy to enjoy every bit of her current life with Remus.

Remus, however, was more tenacious than ever at trying to control himself. That first kiss had opened a floodgate for him. Despite the Wolfsbane Potion each moon, he admitted that he was struggling with his inner wolf at all times.

Mia insisted that it was not the wolf but the man inside, and she suggested he talk to Sirius about it. James was certainly a no-go when it came to talking to anyone about her, but she figured if anyone knew how to help Remus let go a little it would be Sirius.

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His friends and Mia were up to something, and Remus could not figure out what it was.

The morning of the full moon, Mia overflowed his plate with extra portions knowing he would need his energy for later that night. Instead of her morning tea, she was drinking pumpkin juice. Remus also noticed that instead of their typical drinks for dinner,

his three friends and his witch were drinking coffee with their evening meal, and he was sure he saw Sirius and James each take what smelled like Invigoration Draught.

He tried to put the thoughts from his mind as he made his way to the Whomping Willow, but just when Professor Sprout left him alone, familiar scents assaulted him. He turned and looked, wide-eyed, back at his friends and girlfriend who all stood facing him and the recently frozen tree.

"What are you four doing here?" he asked, jumping away just in time as the Whomping Willow unfroze and swung a low-hanging branch within a foot of him.

James grinned. "Thought we'd keep you company, Moony."

"What? Are you . . . ? Wait . . ." He looked at Sirius, James, and Peter. "You mean you're finished? You actually bloody did it?" he shouted out of both excitement and fear.

Sirius's suggestion that the three become Animagi to keep him company during the full moon was based on a theory that they would not end up hurt in the end. Of course, with the Wolfsbane Potion, there was a better chance, but he was still on edge about the idea.

"We had a little help." Sirius rolled his eyes as Mia nudged him in the ribs.

Remus blinked at her. "Mia?"

They looked around to make sure no one was watching, and then they shifted into their Animagus forms.

Remus's eyes went wide at the sight.

Prongs, the stag, stood tall and large with massive bone-like antlers jutting from the top of his head and short brown fur covering his body. He toed the soft grass below with a heavy hoof, and a small rodent took notice of the movement. Wormtail, the rat, crawled up Prongs's leg and over his shoulder to perch on one side of the large stag's antlers, with watery eyes staring ahead at Remus.

As calm and collected as Prongs and Wormtail were, the two other predators of the group looked less so. It was evidently the official first meeting of Padfoot and Mia in her Animagus form, and the two were *not* seeing eye to eye.

Padfoot, the large, bear-like dog was growling low and trying to pin down a smaller, vibrantly coloured creature to the ground as a sign of dominance. Mia, in the form of a fox, struggled against the massive black paw. When she had finally had enough of Padfoot's

antics, she sank her tiny, sharpened teeth into his leg, her long bushy tail a blur as she darted away from him.

Sirius shifted back into his human form, wincing as he looked over his right arm, which was punctured but not bleeding. "What the hell, Mia?"

"You keep your filthy *paws* off of me, Sirius Black!" Mia yelled after shifting back into her own human form.

The two stared at one another, mere inches between their identical scowls.

"I can't help it." Sirius smirked. "It's the beast in me. It's a strong need to dominate and create a little hierarchy in this . . . pack."

"If there is any hierarchy in whatever this is," she hissed, "you'd better believe I am above you!"

Sirius winked. "You like it on top, do you?"

"Ahem!" Remus made his way back away from the Whomping Willow, glaring at Sirius.

"Sorry. Girlfriend, right, got it. To be fair, she did just have her mouth on me," Sirius said, showing Remus his bitten arm.

Remus did not bother to look as he made a beeline right for Mia. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She smiled nervously. "I wanted it to be a surprise. Can I come with?"

Remus could already feel the pull of the moon as it began to rise. He grinned and cupped her face gratefully, crushing his lips to hers and diving in for a deep kiss that was interrupted when an antler nudged him sharply in the shoulder.

"We'd better hurry," Mia said, gesturing to the tree. "Peter, a little help."

Wormtail jumped down from Prongs's antlers and scampered through the patch of grass to touch the small notch on the tree that stilled the violent branches.

"Let's go," Mia said, but before she had a chance to move forward, Remus kissed her again.

"You did this for *me*?"

She beamed up at him. "I'd do *anything* for you."

Sirius interrupted the couple, putting an arm around each of them. "So before she has a chance to say no, I'm voting that Mia's new name is Foxy."

"Absolutely not!" Mia took Remus's hand and the two passed by Sirius beneath the tree. Up ahead, James had shifted back to human form in order to fit through the tight passage on their way to the Shrieking Shack.

"How about Vixen?" Sirius called after them.

"How about I bite you again?" Mia threatened. "I hate nicknames."

"It's not a nickname, it's a Marauder name!" Sirius countered.

"I am not a Marauder."

He barked a laugh. "Then what the hell *are* you?"

"Mine." Remus grinned and walked into the Shrieking Shack with a smile on his face for the first time in his life.

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They allowed Remus his privacy to undress in the shack while they waited, listening closely as he transformed on the other side of the large door.

Despite joking not ten minutes earlier, when they all heard the harsh sounds of Remus screaming beyond the barrier that separated them from the wolf, Mia let out a quiet sob, and Sirius pulled her into a tight, comforting hug.

"I didn't know," James mumbled, a frown etched on his face. "I didn't know it was this bad. He sounds like . . . Merlin, it sounds like . . ."

"It sounds like someone's got him under a Cruciatu*s* Curse," Sirius answered knowingly.

Mia wiped the tears from her cheeks and turned to face the door as the screaming stopped. "Come on. Padfoot goes in first, followed by me, then Prongs and Wormtail," she instructed carefully. James clearly did not like the order, but she insisted, and Sirius took her side on the subject vehemently.

"We're both predators. Sorry, Prongsie, but you're prey. Mia's right; we need to be careful with our approach here."

And they all shifted.

The little fox pawed her way into the room slowly behind Padfoot, looking immediately for the wolf who—just as she remembered—was beautiful. The massive beast

stood looking down at the black dog in front of him, and Padfoot was smart enough to put his chest to the ground, ears back and tail tucked as a show of passive submission.

Mia, likewise, followed his lead, though she kept her eyes trained on Moony, who caught her gaze and slowly stepped back, nodding his head.

Remus was still there.

She made her way over to Moony, nuzzling her head against his large paw, her puffy red tail wrapping around his leg.

Moony leant down and brushed his snout against Mia's furry face before moving forward and doing the same to Padfoot, scent marking them both.

The door opened again as Prongs stepped forward, and Moony growled at first sight, but Mia nipped him in the leg reproachfully, bringing him back to attention. He huffed out a short breath before rubbing his snout against Prongs and Wormtail in the same fashion as before.

Submission established, the five animals spent the night roughhousing in the Shrieking Shack—a constant blur of black and red as Padfoot tumbled over the little fox, one always desperate to pin the other and create the hierarchy that Sirius had mentioned earlier.

Only once did things get out of control.

In the very early morning, when the moon still hung in the sky, Mia curled up against Moony, her head resting between her paws and relaxing at the feel of the rush of the wolf's breath against her face as their snouts lay side by side.

On the other side of Moony, rested Padfoot, snoring with his head leaning against the shoulder of Prongs, who slept soundly with his legs folded beneath him.

Mia's pointy ears perked up at a noise, and her eyes opened to look across the room where she spotted the rat skittering about. Suddenly, the sight of it brought back a vivid memory.

The shack. Sirius. Remus. Harry. Ron.

*"You don't understand! He would have killed me, Sirius!"*

*"Then you should have died! Died rather than betray your friends! As we would have done for you!"*

Mia glared at the rodent in front of her, the memory fuelling a powerful rage deep within her. It was primal, something predatory that she had not felt before in her Animagus form, but she felt it now as she stared ahead.

Rat. Peter. Scabbers. Wormtail. *Traitor!*

Padfoot jolted awake in a panic, shocked at first to find himself in Animagi form. Realising where he was and having the good instinct not to shift back—considering Remus was still *Moony* Moony—he let out a puff of breath in relief.

There was a loud, shrill barking sound, followed by a sharp squeaking noise, and Padfoot drew his gaze toward the commotion that had clearly been the cause of his waking.

With wild, amber eyes, the little fox dove over the large bed in the corner, chasing Wormtail who buried himself into the mattress. Snarling viciously, she dug down, snapping and lashing forward.

He thought, at first, that she was playing just the same as she had been with *him* for most of the night, but then he remembered that Mia and Peter did not get along in human form, and something lead dropped into his stomach. Jumping to all four feet, waking Prongs and Moony in the process, Padfoot leapt onto the mattress and clamped down on the scruff of Mia's neck, carrying her away from the bed.

He gently dropped her down in front Prongs and Moony, who eyed her curiously. Wormtail reappeared on the floor, staring ahead, and she turned and hissed viciously before Padfoot lowered himself to the ground in front of the rat and growled at her.

She looked at him pleadingly. He had expected to see her lost behind her Animagus eyes—the amber was a dead giveaway—but she still looked like Mia. There was conscious understanding in her gaze, and that scared the hell out of him. It was one thing to be amused and even a little aroused when the witch got angry, but she had claws and fangs in this form, and Peter might as well be food.

Padfoot stayed where he was, watching as Moony stood up, leaning down to press his muzzle against the top of her head, breathing on her from above until her black and red ears lowered.

She let out a slow breath and turned away from them all, curling herself into a ball in the corner of the room, tucking her face into the fur of her tail.

They woke the following morning, and Mia turned away to allow Sirius and James to cover up a naked and sleeping Remus—who miraculously lacked any wounds at all, save for a few bruises from the actual transformation.

"Want to tell us what that was all about this morning?" Sirius asked, his arms folded over his chest.

"Instincts," Mia replied quietly, "I guess I'm not used to controlling them in Animagus form."

"That's understandable I guess." James shrugged, running his hand through his already messy black hair. "But I still think you owe Peter an apology."

Mia inhaled sharply and looked at her brother like he had just asked her to kiss a dementor. "I will *not* apologise for acting on instinct. It's not my fault."

"Mia," Remus moaned from the corner. "Please . . . I don't want anyone to fight."

She turned bitterly away from them all and then slowly brought her gaze up to Peter, who looked at her with watery eyes. It was hard now not to see him for what he really was: selfish. He stole things from the trolley, abandoned his friends in times of crisis, even spied on people—which she had caught him doing twice already this year. And while Sirius and James often got carried away when they fought with Slytherins—Snape especially since he had started being a bit of a berk to Lily in public—Peter had been thrown into detention twice for getting caught bullying younger students.

Now that she was an Animagus, Mia could see it all. See Scabbers the rat with his missing toe that he lost while framing Sirius. Sirius who had thought Remus was the spy when all along it had been Peter. Peter who betrayed his friends, rather than die for them as they would have done for him. Peter who got her brother killed. Peter who made Harry an orphan.

"I'm sorry, Peter," she said through clenched teeth.

James, Sirius, and Remus all smiled in relief at her words.

Peter stared ahead at her looking as terrified as he *should* have been.

## Chapter Forty

### *Soon*

---

*You think the only people who are people  
Are the people who look and think like you  
But if you walk the footsteps of a stranger  
You'll learn things you never knew you never knew*  
(Colors of the Wind - Vanessa Williams)

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**October 1st, 1975**

The curse of the Defence Against the Dark Arts Professors continued.

Their first year instructor, Professor Fenwick, did not even last the whole year before he was called away on some emergency that Mia assumed was related to Order business. During second year, Professor Dearborn made it all the way to the Easter holidays, when it was suspected he was almost poisoned by his own house-elf. Professor Prewett, the best Defence teacher they'd had so far, had been terminated at the end of the year due to many complaints from parents—all Slytherin. Last year, Professor Proudfoot had been in an unfortunate accident where a Fire-Making Charm got out of control, set the entire classroom aflame, and she spent a month at St Mungo's before returning to her work in the Ministry.

By the end of September, the position of Defence Professor had not yet been filled.

When a notice was put up in the common rooms informing all students that Defence Against the Dark Arts was resuming the following Wednesday, most were thrilled at the prospect of, once again, indulging in a favourite class. Soon, the betting pool for the new professor's longevity was re-activated at the hands of Sirius and James who continued on the *noble tradition* established by Fabian and Gideon Prewett.

Holding tightly to Remus's hand, Mia was strangely nervous as she walked to Defence alongside her brother, Sirius, and Peter. She did not have many good memories of Defence Against the Dark Arts from her previous fifth year. Most especially, she hated the memories of Dolores Umbridge. While she had no clue what that pink-cardiganed troll was doing during this timeline, Mia could not help but be reminded of her cruelty anytime

she looked into Remus's beautiful eyes, for it would be Umbridge who would draft the anti-werewolf legislation that would make his life so difficult in the future.

"Aren't you excited?" James wondered aloud as the five of them entered the room and immediately took their usual seats near the front. Defence was the only class that James and Sirius did not linger in the back somewhere.

"I guess," Mia said, bouncing her knee beneath her desk anxiously as though she were expecting a lump of pink to walk through the door, followed by an annoying, high-pitched "Hem hem!"

No pink burst through the door, though. Quite the opposite, in fact.

A tall, lithe man with sharp, angular features stepped into the room as if he owned it. His chin came to an actual point, and his cheekbones were as high as the level to which he held his nose in the air. When the man turned, Mia was not surprised to see judgmental eyes looking down at them. What she *was* surprised to see was that, instead of wearing typical professor's robes, this man wore the colours of what she could only assume was his former House at Hogwarts: a green dress shirt and a striped silver tie, covered with black robes that had a dark green lining.

The Slytherins in the class were beside themselves with amusement.

The Gryffindors all wore matching looks of disgust and horror on their faces.

"I am Professor Higgs. This is Defence Against the Dark Arts. Get out your books," he said in a sharply pitched tone. His brows furrowed with an expression that said he was not happy to be there. He turned around to the chalkboard at the front of the room and began writing.

"Still excited?" Mia murmured to James, who was already pouting as he pulled *The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection* out of his bag, followed by a roll of parchment.

Knowing that all of the boys except Remus would forget, Mia produced extra quills for James, Sirius, and even Peter, whom she had been reluctantly trying to be nice to since her near-mauling of him in the Shrieking Shack the prior month.

When the five of them looked up at the chalkboard to begin taking notes, all four boys paled at the words on the board, and Mia audibly gasped. Written in beautiful script was a short list numbered one through five—similar to one found in the books on their desks.

1. *Werewolves*
2. *Vampires*
3. *Hags*
4. *Veela*
5. *Zombies*

Just above the list was written: *How to Kill*.

Mia gaped at the board in horror, and her hand went up immediately. "Professor? I'm sorry, but are you *honestly* advocating murder to your class of teenage students?"

The professor narrowed his eyes at her. "Of course not, Miss . . ."

"Potter," Mia said, seething.

"Miss Potter. Murder is defined as the unlawful premeditated killing of one human being by another. As the beasts on this list are *not* humans, I am, therefore, *not* advocating murder. You may call it hunting if you like," he said with a roll of his eyes and an airiness to his voice that said the words meant little to him.

"Call it whatever you like, it's *murder*."

"Are zombies humans, Miss Potter?"

"No, sir, they are former humans, technically considered undead or living dead." She grit her teeth. "Though, it has been thought that they might be related to Inferi."

"And would you politely ask a zombie to not eat your flesh?" he inquired with a sarcastic tone and an arrogant look that would have rivalled that of an adult Lucius Malfoy, something that only pissed her off further. "Do you perhaps think that the beast is capable of human thought and the ability to develop conscientious decision-making skills?"

"No sir," she said, her hands clenched tight and shaking. "But werewolves, vampires, hags, and veela are otherwise—"

"Harmless?" He stared at her condescendingly with a sneer toying at the corner of his lips.

"No, of course not," she retorted with a scowl, "but—"

"So, I should allow my students to leave this classroom without the proper knowledge to defend themselves against such horrid creatures?"

"They are *not* horrid creatures! The Ministry, in fact, classifies them all as 'Beings.' Under that definition, a Being is any creature that has sufficient intelligence to understand the laws of the Magical community and to bear part of the responsibility in shaping those

laws," she nearly quoted the classification legislation of 1811 verbatim as her blood pressure began to rise.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for your tone, Miss Potter. And, while you are correct in your Ministry classifications, said classifications fall under the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical . . ." He looked at her as if waiting for her to finish his sentence, but before she had a chance to, he continued, "Creatures."

"I don't think Professor Dumbledore would want any students to know how to *kill* someone," James chimed in, a look of righteousness on his face that helped to replace the blind rage inside of Mia's head with pride and a feeling of solidarity. "Mia's right, killing is just another word for murder."

"Very well." Professor Higgs waved his wand, and the word *Kill* on the board changed to *Defend Yourself Against*.

"That's hardly necessary now that we know the original intentions," Mia pointed out. "Werewolves and vampires are not born but made, and they should *not* be treated any differently than the rest of us. They are no more deadly with their conditions than an overly arrogant wizard is with his wand or a Muggle with a gun."

"That may be your opinion, Miss Potter."

"It's *fact*, Professor."

He glowered down at her. "Ten more points from Gryffindor for insolence."

"Mia!" Mary hissed at her from behind, begging her to shut up so they would stop losing House points.

Mia turned around, fiercely glaring at her friend with no intentions to lose this argument.

"I was going to save this for next week's lessons, but since Miss Potter's bleeding heart is under-informed on the consequences of dealing with dark creatures . . ." The professor walked back to the desk and reached inside an expensive-looking dragonhide briefcase, retrieving a stack of photographs. He dropped the stack of photographs right on her desk. "These were leant to me by a friend who works in the Auror department."

She refused to look down, already knowing what they were.

"Care to tell me what you see, Miss Potter?"

"No, sir." She tightened her jaw, still refusing to look.

"Mr Black." The professor turned to Sirius, who was glaring up at him along with James. "And Mr Potter. Pass along the photos. These are taken of victims of vampire attacks and werewolf maulings. While *Miss* Potter is correct in assuming that Professor Dumbledore would potentially not approve of my lessons, the *Ministry* has found you to be of appropriate age to learn what is out there in the world."

As the photos were passed around, most students gasped at the sights. Others looked away, horrified, and Frank was in the corner vomiting into a rubbish bin. Even the Slytherins looked a bit taken aback by the images.

James, Sirius, Mia, and—surprisingly—Lily all refused to look.

Peter, however, *did*, his watery eyes went wide, and his face paled at the sight. He was also the only one to shift his attention to Remus who sat quietly with his head down beside Mia, shamefaced.

"There are *some* witches and wizards who like to think that dark creatures can be assimilated into *civilised* society," Professor Higgs said, purposely glancing down at Mia. "They are wrong. Listening to them is foolish. You need to be prepared to defend yourself. This class is called *Defence Against the Dark Arts*, and *Dark* creatures are covered in your books for a reason. Mr Lupin."

Remus nearly jumped out of his seat. "Sir?" he asked quietly.

"Lycall Lupin is your father, yes?"

Remus slowly nodded.

"Good. If I recall, Lycall Lupin was well known for his career in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. He did wonderful work there. Can you please inform your friends what your father—a man familiar with the classifications of Beings and Beasts," Professor Higgs said, pointedly looking down at Mia, "had to say in regards to . . . I apologise, what division did your father work for?"

"Werewolves," Remus whispered, looking down at his desk.

"Yes. What did your father, an expert on the subject, have to say in regards to werewolves?"

"I-I don't . . . I don't . . ."

"Come now, Mr Lupin. Do speak up. Make sure Miss Potter can hear you."

Remus hesitated. "I don't remember word for word, sir."

"Try," Professor Higgs insisted. "If I recall, he was quite *famous* for his bold declaration."

"Werewolves . . . are . . . are nothing but soulless, evil creatures." Remus paused and took in a slow, shaky breath. "And they deserve nothing but death."

"Fuck this, and fuck you, you psychotic wanker!" Sirius stood up, kicking his chair over. Everyone stared at him in shock as his cold grey eyes stared challengingly at their new professor. "I did *not* leave my shitty, prejudiced family to come to Hogwarts to learn how to be shitty and prejudiced!"

"Fifty points from Gryffindor for language and insolence, Mr Black, and detention with me every Friday for the rest of the month."

"Like *that's* new. I'm out of here."

He reached for his bag and tore out of the classroom, stopping only once by the door to look back expectantly as James stood to follow him. Shockingly, Lily followed after James. One by one, each Gryffindor stood and made their way out of the classroom, leaving behind only Peter, Mia, and Remus.

"I'm going to Professor Dumbledore," Mia insisted as she reached for her bag. "Remus, come on." She held her hand out, but he hesitated to take it, not meeting her gaze. "Remus," she said in a harsher tone, trying to snap him out of whatever horrible thoughts he was stuck in.

Eventually, he stood to leave the room but did not take her hand.

She looked back at Peter who was slowly shrinking low in his seat, making no movement to leave. She swore under her breath as she followed the rest of her House out of the classroom, letting the door slam shut behind her.

"That fucking prick!" Sirius was out in the corridor screaming when Mia and Remus joined them. James had a hand on Sirius's shoulder trying to calm him down. Looking up as Mia and Remus joined the group, Sirius demanded, "Where's Peter?"

Mia huffed. "He stayed."

"That little shit," Sirius said as he tried walking back to the class but was held back by James.

"Leave him. You walking back in there would only make things worse."

"Where's everyone else?" Mia asked, looking around and only seeing a few Gryffindors.

"Frank went to the hospital wing, and Alice went with him." Lily frowned, her cheeks red with anger. "Mary stormed off to find Professor McGonagall to let her know what happened and to see if we can get some of our points back. I'm on my way to see Dumbledore. That was a nightmare. I don't care what that wizard thinks of werewolves, vampires, or hags . . . those photographs should not have been shown to a group of fifth years."

"Maybe they . . . Maybe we *should* know what could happen," Remus muttered quietly, hands stuffed in the pockets of his robes. "Naivety isn't safe."

"Excuse me?" Mia turned and gaped at him, but it was *Lily* who was instantly in front of Remus, a hard glare in her bright green eyes.

"Absolutely not! That man wasn't teaching us to overcome naivety, Remus, he was trying to teach us how to *hate*. All creatures and beings have the ability to cause harm to another. Even unicorns can trample you to death if you startle them. People like Professor Higgs hate Muggles because, historically, Muggles were known to burn witches at a stake, or sink them in a river—"

"That's stupid. They could just use a Flame-Freezing Charm or a Bubble-Head Charm," Sirius interjected.

"—and they hate Muggle-borns because they think we steal magic," Lily continued, ignoring the interruption. "Should my name be up on that board, too?"

"No!" James shouted.

"Shut up, Potter, I'm not talking to *you*," Lily hissed and turned her attention back to Remus. "Are you all naive in trusting me? Maybe I'm just waiting around to steal all your magic!"

Remus stared incredulously at her. "Of *course* you're not."

"So are we all right then? Can I go and complain to Dumbledore now? Or maybe I should walk back into the classroom and learn how to murder people." Lily's eyes shone brightly with righteous purpose, and Mia was immediately reminded of Harry.

*This is where he gets it*, she thought with a smile. *This is where Harry gets that fire.*

"I think we should *all* go talk to Dumbledore. Maybe the more complaints he gets, the faster that tosser gets fired," James chimed in, and Lily nodded in approval, though she did not bother looking at him.

"You go ahead, Lily," Mia said. "We'll all be right behind you."

Lily nodded, giving each of them a last glance before taking off toward Dumbledore's office.

Once she was out of sight, James turned to the rest of them. "So . . . Evans knows."

Mia nodded. "Clearly."

"Wait, what?" Remus blinked. "She knows? As in about *me*?"

"Unless she's secretly dating a vampire, I'm pretty sure that little speech was all about you, mate. I'm going to talk to Dumbledore later; I need a cigarette," Sirius said as he turned down the hallway toward the Quidditch pitch.

"I'll make sure he doesn't get into trouble," James offered, following after him.

"Are you okay?" Mia asked Remus, placing her soft palm against his cheek. At the touch, Remus flinched which caused Mia to frown. "Don't do that. Please don't let one horrible person ruin what you've worked so hard for. I don't care what *he* said, or what your father once said before he changed his views." She leant up and kissed him gently, frowning when he refused to return the affection. "Remus, you are the very embodiment of goodness."

Remus swallowed. "I'm still a werewolf."

"And you're a wizard, a brilliant one at that. And I'm going to prove it to you." A sudden thought occurred to her. "In fact, you're going to help me with a project. We're going to learn Defence this year, properly, and not from that awful wizard."

"I don't like that look in your eye," Remus said, raising a nervous brow. "You look like Sirius when you get that look in your eye. It's dangerous."

She grinned up at him. "Kiss me, and I'll make it go away."

He hesitated only a moment before leaning down and gently brushing his lips against hers.

She pressed her body up against his and moaned into his mouth on purpose, and soon, he was slanting his mouth against her and moulding to her form tenderly but purposefully, as though he were using this moment with her to remind himself that he was human. Mia did not mind. A part of her wanted him to use all of her if it would bring him back to the confident wizard she had snogged all summer.

It was a gentle and loving moment until Mia smiled and pulled his bottom lip between her teeth and gave it a soft nip. Something primal inside of Remus ignited, and suddenly, Mia found herself being pulled down the hallway and into a broom cupboard.

"We shouldn't be here," she said teasingly as she wrapped her arms around Remus's neck.

"Who's going to miss us?" Remus pulled her tight against him.

She was thrilled that he was losing himself in a kiss that rivalled their first. Unlike the sweet, gentle affection they had expressed just moments earlier, this kiss was filled with passion, desire, and a powerful, needy hunger. The magic between them thrummed as though it were trying to merge into something entirely new.

Remus broke away from her mouth to place tender kisses along her jawline, tracing it back until he was gently sucking on a sensitive spot behind her ear, and she let out a quivering mewl at his touch.

Mia released her hands from behind his neck and traced their way down the front of his chest, pulling away his robes to reveal the simple red cotton shirt beneath. She tugged at the fabric, pulling it from his trousers. Once it was free, she dipped her hands under the hem and placed her palms on his hot, hard skin, running them quickly up his bare chest.

At the sudden feel of skin on skin, something in Remus snapped. Still green-eyed and human, he reached down, cupping her arse and lifting her up against him, pressing her into the wall behind her for leverage as her legs wound themselves around his waist.

Mia pulled her hands free of his shirt to weave them through his shaggy hair, tugging once when his tongue trailed against her collarbone, and she felt the echoing tremors of a growl that came from deep inside his chest.

"Remus," she moaned. At the sound, his grip on her arse tightened. *Leave a bruise*, she could not help but think as she leant forward, sweeping her lips against the shell of his ear as she whispered, "I want you."

"What?" Remus breathed, pulling away from her and looking straight ahead. His eyes were wide, pupils blown with lust. "You mean . . . ?" He began, and Mia nodded frantically.

He stood, suddenly nervous, and she could see the gears in his head begin to move at a frenzied pace. Seeing his hesitation and knowing that it had everything to do with his lycanthropy, Mia tilted her hips until she felt the most exquisite contact with him. It was the first time she had ever felt an erection, and the touch flooded her ego causing her to boldly press harder, seeking friction.

The sensation hit Remus all too quickly, and he fell forward, holding her still against the wall. His hands firmly gripped her thighs as he panted against her throat, whispering, "Fuck," softly across her skin.

"Yes . . . Remus."

"No," he finally said on the edge of an exhale.

"No?" Mia blinked. "No," she repeated the word. "You're saying *no* to me?"

"I'm saying . . ." Remus groaned as the previous pleasure began to turn into uncomfortable pain. "I'm saying . . . not *yet*. I'm saying not here. Not with canisters of Mrs Skower's All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover on shelves behind us."

He let out a laugh, and soon Mia joined him. Slowly he released his grip on her but moaned at the contact her body made against his as she slid back down until her feet touched the ground.

"Soon," Mia whispered.

After a moment of apparently weighing the pros and cons in his head, Remus agreed. "Soon."

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### October 7th, 1975

Mia rolled her eyes as she eavesdropped on Sirius and her brother.

"I still can't believe she knew about this room and never told us." Sirius pouted in the corner of the Room of Requirement next to James, who was staring at the back of Lily's head while she talked with Remus. "A whole room that magically changes to whatever you want. I bet this is where she did her Animagus training, don't you think?"

"Probably. We caught her up here, right outside, that one time, remember? It is awesome, though." James grinned, looking around at the room that had formed itself into a new Defence class, with books of all kinds layering shelves that wrapped around the edges, and a raised duelling platform in the centre of the room.

"It would be better if there was a stripper pole." Sirius gestured to the platform. "Right *there*."

James laughed. "Shut up, Pads."

"Both of you shut up," Mia said from behind them. James had the sense to at least look slightly ashamed. Sirius only grinned at her. "All right. You all know why you're here. We've had terrible instructors in the way of Defence, and this year—"

"We have a prejudiced prick," Sirius offered.

"Well, er . . . yes." Mia sighed. "None of you are stupid, and I know some of you read the *Prophet*. It's not just Muggles and Muggle-borns that are being targeted. You hear how the Slytherins talk. Blood-traitors." She pointed to herself, James, and Sirius. "That's what we are," she said clearly, "and we're called that because sides are being chosen. A war is coming, and I'm not foolish enough to think that we're safe because we're teenagers."

"Do you really think *war* is coming?" Frank asked with a frown.

"I think it's already here, but we're not being told anything about it," Mia admitted. "I can't say much, but I've heard my parents talking."

Frank nodded, looking down at the ground sadly. "Me too. My mum had a meeting with Professor Dumbledore over the summer. After he left, she came and told me to start taking my Defence and Potions classes more seriously. I think she's wanting me to go into Auror training when I graduate."

"That would be amazing," Alice said with excited eyes.

"We need to be able to protect ourselves," Remus declared, standing beside Mia at the front of the group. "I'm sure you've all heard about Death Eaters by now. We need to know how to fight them if necessary."

"Not *just* Death Eaters," Mary bitterly spoke up, arms crossed over her chest. Her normally flawless, beautiful skin was marred by a sickly black and purple bruise that started at the bottom of her left hand and flowed upward against her shoulder and collarbone, ending at the edge of her jaw.

"No." Mia frowned at her friend, feeling her stomach turn at the sight of Mary's bruise. "Not *just* Death Eaters. I think Slytherins are being recruited here. Everyone saw what Mulciber did to Mary last week. That was Dark Magic, but since they can't prove anything, he's getting away with it."

"There's no denying it now," Remus said, putting a hand on Mia's shoulder. "We don't know who or how, but the Slytherins are learning Dark Magic."

Mia did not miss the look of sorrow that crossed Lily's face as her gaze fell.

"It's also why none of them is allowed in this group, and why you've all signed a secrecy pact." Remus held up a parchment with all of their names on it.

"I should probably also inform you that this parchment is jinxed," Mia admitted, though she had not bothered to the first time around—not in depth. "If you speak about this group or its location, your face will breakout in pimples that spell SNEAK across your face. I will *not* remove it, so keep your mouths shut."

"We should have a name for the group," Lily chimed in, trying to brighten the otherwise suddenly tense moment.

Mia smiled. "I agree."

"How about . . ." Sirius stood up and grinned, "the Disillusioned Invisible Circle of Kids?"

After a moment of thinking about the name, James burst into laughter with Peter snickering beside him.

"No." Mia glared at Sirius.

"Cultivation Of Combative Knowledge?"

"Sirius!" Mia hissed at him.

"Training Wands Against Tyrants!" Sirius shouted.

At this one, even Remus broke into a short burst of laughter, doing his best to cover it up with a series of coughs.

Mia glowered ahead, ignoring the giggles echoing around the room. "I'm warning you, Sirius Black."

He held his hands up in what looked like actual surrender. "Fine, fine. Have it your way. We can be adults about this. Now, all in favour of Club of United Novices—"

"Jamie, get him out!" Mia screeched.

"It's called Assisted Defence," Lily quickly chirped to put an end to Sirius's behaviour, "and that's it! I mean . . . if that's okay."

Mia let out a sigh of relief. "That's fine. The A.D."

"Who exactly is going to teach us, though?" Peter asked.

"Remus and I," Mia answered quickly, and there were whispers and murmurs all around the room. "Is there a problem?"

"No offence," Otto Bagman from Hufflepuff spoke up. "I know you two are some of the smartest in our year, but . . . what makes you qualified to teach the rest of us?" he asked, and the few Ravenclaws in the room nodded their heads in agreement.

"Disarm us," Mia challenged. "Any of you."

She stared sternly at her brother and Sirius, who had been previously instructed to keep their wands holstered—the Gryffindors had already agreed that Mia and Remus were the most qualified students who also had the ability to lead with responsibility. Sirius and James, while talented duellists, were too easily distracted.

"Go ahead," Remus repeated the challenge. "I'll even accept a few hexes or jinxes, that is, if you can *land* any."

"*Expelliarmus!*" someone from the back shouted.

"*Protego!*" Remus called back, wand still tight in hand.

"*Expelliarmus! Glacius!*" a Ravenclaw yelled, aiming her wand at Remus.

"*Protego! Levicorpus!*" Mia called and watched as the challenging witch lost her wand and then flew up into the air by her ankle, hovering her at an angle to prevent her from revealing her knickers to anyone below. Mia wanted to make a point, not be unnecessarily cruel.

James had a grin splitting across his face, and Sirius's eyes lit up.

Mia winced, realising that she had used a jinx created by Severus Snape—one that she knew, for a fact, James and Sirius would later use *against* him.

"*Liberacorpus,*" she said and lowered the Ravenclaw to the ground. "Are we done? Or would any of you like to see what a Stunning Spell feels like?"

## Chapter Forty-One

### *Cue to Leave*

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*Let's go all the way tonight  
No regrets, just love  
We can dance, until we die  
You and I, will be young forever*  
(Teenage Dream - Katy Perry)

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**October 24th, 1975**

"I don't *have* a happy thought, Mia!" Sirius snapped as the two faced off against one another inside the Room of Requirement a week before Halloween.

The Assisted Defence group—which Mia was still struggling not to mentally refer to as Dumbledore's Army—excelled at disarming, though it took some of the younger students a little longer than the rest. Remus helped everyone catch up with spells they *should* have perfected during their first four years at Hogwarts, and James and Sirius had been helping Mia handle the pairing for duels, where both boys shone.

Mia had taken it upon herself to begin teaching the Patronus Charm.

"Try harder, Sirius. You have happy memories, I know you do," she insisted and watched as he struggled to maintain the smallest silvery wisp at the end of his wand.

"I do *not*!" he said, admitting defeat. "Fucking Higgs has me in detention every bloody Friday, which means I'm not allowed to go to the Halloween Ball."

The dance was not something Mia was particularly excited about. She knew it was all a ploy on the staff's part to try and distract the students from the fact that the Wizarding world was on the brink of a war.

"Girls everywhere must be devastated," she said dryly, rolling her eyes.

"They *are*!" Sirius pouted like a child as he moved back into the corner to sit beside his best friend. James, considered the best in the group, and Frank—who had become quite quick on his feet during weeks of exclusive duelling training—were taking a break.

"You doing okay, Lily?" Mia approached her friend, who was struggling with her Patronus. So far, no one had been able to create a corporeal one, save for Mia, whose

silvery fox danced around the room playfully, interacting with everyone except for Peter, who nervously shied away from it.

Lily frowned, clenching her wand with determination. "Having a hard time thinking of happy thoughts. Everything from Hogwarts feels blurry. Like time's going too fast, so it's hard to focus on one thing, and everything before Hogwarts . . ."

"Severus?" Mia whispered.

Looking to be on the verge of tears, Lily nodded, turning away to wipe her eyes. "He was my best friend, Mia. How could he be friends with Mulciber and Avery? After what they did to Mary, he still hangs around them, and I'm not naive enough to think that he doesn't know when the Carrows are up to something."

Mia knew how this story began and ended. A lonely half-blood boy and a confused Muggle-born girl met and became friends. Hogwarts separated them into different Houses, and somehow, the influence of others ruined everything. The boy grew bitter and dark, while the girl remained bright and joyful. There would be a great deal of hurt, pain, and love lost; by the end of the story, the main characters would be dead.

"Do you want to know what I think?"

Lily looked back at her. "Of course. I trust your advice."

Mia thought of Draco, her own bullying wayward Slytherin. "I think just because a boy can be cruel, hurtful, and unbelievably stupid, doesn't mean he won't grow up to be a good man. But—" She hesitated, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth, "—he's *still* a boy, and therefore *can* be cruel, hurtful, and unbelievably stupid. You're my friend, and I don't want you to be the one he hurts."

Lily nodded, looking slightly mollified. "Thanks."

"Don't be afraid to make new happy memories."

"Easy for *you* to say." Lily chuckled, using her wand to gesture across the room. "*I'm* not the one who has the lusty eyes of a werewolf staring at me," she whispered, and Mia levelled her with a stern look. "Don't worry. I've known about Remus since first year. Kept his secret this long, haven't I?"

"Thank you. About keeping the secret, *not* calling my boyfriend's eyes lusty." Mia laughed and turned around to spot Remus staring at her intently.

"Go," Lily urged her with a giggle. "See if you can't help Remus find his happy thought."

"You're awful." Mia rolled her eyes and moved to join Remus.

"It's getting there," he said when she approached, redirecting his focus on his wand as it struggled to hang onto the silvery wisp it was emitting.

Mia grinned coquettishly. "You thinking of something happy?"

"Can't think of anything *too* happy. Prongs is right there." He gestured to James, who was in the corner, consoling a bitter Sirius who was still pouting with his arms folded over his chest.

"What's your happy thought?" Mia asked, wrapping her arms around her boyfriend's waist from behind and snuggling her cheek into his back, breathing in his wonderful scent of parchment and grass. The scent was calming, grounding, and she was sure she could summon a Patronus just by breathing him in.

"Happy thoughts? Well, there's Hogsmeade Station, the woods out behind my house," Remus said with a grin and added, "broom cupboards. Broom cupboards make me very happy."

She smacked him lightly on his arm. "*Happy* thoughts, not . . . frustrating thoughts."

He wrapped one arm around her waist and pulled her flush up against him. "Oh, are you *frustrated*, Miss Potter?"

"You have no idea, Mr Lupin. Now, stop flirting. Do the charm. Focus on something less . . . anticipatory. Something from the past," she said with a helpful smile as she pulled away from him.

"That's easy then," Remus said quietly and then looked ahead. "*Expecto Patronum!*"

Unlike the struggling wisps everyone else was having trouble with, a silver wolf fluidly formed out of the end of Remus's wand to stand tall and regal in front of the group.

"Whoa!"

"Did you see what Lupin did?"

"That's amazing!"

"It's . . . a *wolf*," Remus said, his expression tense and confused.

"A Patronus is a manifestation of who we are. The purest part of us." Mia placed a hand on his arm and watched as he struggled with her words and the image of the wolf in front of him. "This is who you are, Remus."

"That's *not* who I am." He shook his head and withdrew his wand, the Patronus vanishing into mist.

"You are the wolf the same way I am the fox. I imagine James and Sirius's Patronuses will echo their forms as well. Stop trying to separate the two of you," she pleaded, taking his face into her hands and staring deep into his beautiful green eyes. "I love the wizard *and* the wolf."

"I love the witch *and* the fox," he replied with a silly grin on his face, though it looked a little forced.

"As long as you don't call me Foxy," she said after a quick kiss.

"As long as you go to the Halloween Ball with me next week," he replied with a grin.

"One condition. We come back here at the end of the dance."

"Here?" Remus raised a brow and smirked. "Are you wanting to duel your date?"

"This room can turn into *anything* we ask it to." Mia swallowed, her eyes focused and serious as she stared up at him.

Remus slowly nodded, but his lips formed a nervous, tight line, and she could practically see the wheels in his head spinning quickly.

"Stop thinking too hard."

"You're one to talk. The only reason I don't get to lecture you on overthinking things is because I'm sure you do all your stressing in private, collecting yourself so you can impose your thoughts on my unexpecting brain," he finished with a laugh.

"I just like the way you blush, love." Mia smiled sweetly. "What memory did you use? To conjure the Patronus?"

"The river. That first time with all of us out behind your orchards; perfect day, all of my friends." He let out a relaxed breath and put an arm around her shoulders. "You in a swimming costume. Everyone seemed happy."

"It was a good day."

"Plus, Sirius was eavesdropping while you were getting ready, and he heard you telling the girls that you fancied me." He chuckled and fought her when she struggled to get out of his grip.

She glared across the room at Sirius. "I'll kill him."

**October 31st, 1975**

Mia's flowing, lilac-coloured dress hung in smooth layers around her legs. The bodice was soft and loose, and the multiple straps holding it in place were thin, showing off the golden hue of her shoulders. She let her hair go—different from the way she had confined it during the Yule Ball in her original fourth year—using only a ruby-encrusted gold comb to hold back her rich curls. Remus loved when she left her hair wild and often expressed how he felt in control when his fingers were buried in their depths, so she was all too willing to forego the Sneekeazy's Hair Potion for the night.

She walked down the stairs from the girls' dormitory and smiled at the sight of her boys in the common room. Sirius was missing, of course, forced into detention with Professor Higgs as he had been every Friday that month—writing lines, washing chalkboards, and even polishing the professor's shoe collection. James and Remus turned from their place at the foot of the stairs to look up as Mia descended toward them.

"Merlin," Remus whispered.

His lingering gaze burned her skin. She was certain that if she broke eye contact and looked down, she would see a brand on her flesh anywhere he was looking. She blushed under the intensity of his eyes and almost entirely missed the fact that her brother was staring open-mouthed at something behind her.

Mia turned and smiled as she watched Lily walk down the stairs, wearing a brilliant shade of green to match her eyes. Her long, red hair had been curled at the ends, pulled to one side, and tied with a simple, gold ribbon.

"We'll see you all down there," Lily said with a smile for Mia as she linked arms with Mary and left.

James stared after her.

"You really aren't going to attack her verbally? Embarrass her over how she looks?" Mia asked, but James just shook his head side to side slowly, staring at the door long after the portrait closed behind Lily. "Jamie? You're not going to go and tell Lily how pretty she looks?"

"There aren't words," James whispered. "They should've sent a poet."

Remus groaned and nudged James in the ribs. "Ugh. Knock it off, mate, you're upstaging me here." He held Mia close, his hands tenderly resting on her waist. "You, my witch, are a vision. Lilac is a good colour on you."

Mia's smile dropped for a moment, and her breath caught as she remembered dancing with Future Remus at Bill and Fleur's wedding, wearing another lilac dress and hearing him tell her those same words. She wondered if she had picked this dress out specifically because of that.

She let out a shaky breath, and her smile returned as she looked him over, trying to push the past—or future, as it were—from her mind. "And you," she leant up and kissed his cheek, "my handsome wizard, are simply dashing in dress robes."

James cleared his throat. "Ahem!"

Mia rolled her eyes and in a sardonic, dry tone, said, "Oh, Jamie, you are the very definition of dapper." She chuckled as James preened like a peacock under her compliments. "In fact, if you weren't my brother—"

"Ugh!" James grimaced and flinched away from her like he had been scalded.

Mia giggled, burying her laughs in Remus's arm.

"You always take things too far, Mia." James stormed away from her to the sofa where he lifted something from the cushions.

"Where's your date, Jamie?" Mia asked, leaning into Remus's embrace, relishing the warmth of his arms around her.

"No date. Even Peter ditched me to go with some witch from Hufflepuff. I'm going *stag*."

Remus and Mia both groaned as James grinned at his pun.

"That was funny." He walked back to them, a large bottle in his hands, and summoned three shot glasses that flew toward him from a corner of the room behind an armchair. "Courtesy of dear Padfoot, who shall be with us in spirit tonight."

Mia shook her head but accepted the shot of firewhisky after James poured. "Leave it to Sirius to cause problems and not even be there for it. I still don't know how he can drink this stuff," she said before tossing it back and shivering as the liquid burned its way down her throat and settled in her stomach, warming her body instantly.

"It'll be easier when it's mixed in with punch."

"You will *not*," Mia scolded him with wide eyes.

"I'm under a Marauder's Oath to do as much damage as possible in my best friend's stead." James shrugged his shoulders and then patted Remus on the back. "Don't worry, my perfect, pristine prefect. I'll do it when you're not looking. Your virtuous reputation will remain intact."

"Unfortunately, so will yours," Remus said with a wry grin. "If Lily sees you spiking the punch, you're going to wake up with missing bollocks."

"If I wake up next to Evans, I'm willing to risk that," James said, waggling his eyebrows before leaving the common room with the bottle tucked in his robes.

Remus chuckled. "Is it sad that I almost hope he succeeds? Poor Lily."

"He won't succeed. Not yet."

He smiled and nuzzled the side of her neck, leaving a trail of soft kisses along her skin that felt like fire in his wake. "You really do look lovely."

Mia whimpered under his touch, certain that she would be a pile of ashes come morning. When his lips touched her pulse point she felt the firewhisky in her belly ignite while, at the same time, Remus breathed in deep and let out a vibrating growl against her skin that only made the flames burn hotter. Her cheeks flushed when she realised he had *smelled* her.

"Do you want to skip the dance?" She could feel Remus's movements still, and she knew he was trying to collect himself and calm down.

His eyes flashed gold as he swallowed. "No. You . . . looking like you do, *smelling* like you do . . . I'm going to need a few cups of James's special punch to dull a few of my more primal senses." He leant in and kissed her cheek before taking her hand and grinning. "Plus, I want the whole of Hogwarts to see how pretty *my* witch is."

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When they arrived in the Great Hall, Mia smiled at the decorative pumpkins that lined the walls. As usual, there were candles lit above them, hovering mid-air. Though the Weird Sisters were not in attendance—or born yet, for all Mia knew—there was a nice instrumental band playing in the corner of the room.

Before she even had a chance to wonder about being asked, Remus swept her out on the dance floor, wrapping her in his arms and swaying to the music. She laughed at his

bold move and smiled up at him as he draped one hand around her waist, the other laced with her fingers. The moment their eyes connected, he brought their entwined hands together and brushed his lips against her knuckles. She swallowed hard and closed her eyes, wondering why every moment of life could not be this wonderful.

"Don't mean to cut in," Lily said as she approached them, "but *we're* supposed to dance next." She gestured to Remus and herself before offering an apologetic look to Mia. "Professor Dumbledore's idea; the Head Boy and Girl, and then each set of prefects."

"Go ahead. I'll go find Jamie and see how much trouble he's getting in." Mia chuckled as Lily rolled her eyes and took Remus away by the hand.

Mia made her way around a few tables that had been set up on the edge of the large dance floor. She saw Alice and Frank dancing close together. Mary was being adored at the other end of the hall by a small group of Hufflepuffs trying to get on her dance card. Otto Bagman stood next to her with Davey Gudgeon, who was wearing an eye patch after he had gotten too close to the Whomping Willow a few days ago.

Alecto Carrow was on the arm of Mulciber, and Amycus was missing—banned from attending the dance like Sirius had been—after he had been caught hexing a third year by Professor Sprout. Elora Zabini was being scolded by Professor McGonagall for snogging her current boyfriend, Adrian Abbot—her third "victim" that year. She was still wearing a locket given to her by her last beau, who was currently nursing a broken arm after *someone* cursed his broom, knocking him off of it mid-Quidditch practice.

Snape sat alone in the corner, pouting and glaring at the dance floor, while Remus whispered something in Lily's ear, so that she tilted her head back, laughing. The sight made Mia smile, knowing that the two were just friends, but the hateful look on Snape's face made her pause on her way toward James, who was lingering suspiciously by the punch bowl.

"Are you even going to bother asking her to dance?" Mia asked Snape.

"I don't know what you're referring to."

"Oh, please. You can't even answer that without taking your eyes off of her. You have no right to sit back and pout that she's not with you when you don't have the courage to get up and ask her to dance yourself."

"Perhaps it's not jealousy, in fact, that lights my anger." Snape turned and glared at her. "Lily is more than free to dance with whomever she pleases. I do, however, have a problem with her dancing with . . . *whatever* she pleases."

Mia's eyes darkened, and her jaw twitched. "I would be very careful if I were you, Snape. I have no problem smacking that sneer right off your face . . . *again*."

She felt a tug on her hand, spinning around involuntarily until she hit something hard. She looked up at the grinning face of Sirius, who moved quickly to the dance floor.

"Sorry, you looked like you needed a save from Snivellus over there." He smirked, looking her over. "I'd hate for his greasy hair to stain your pretty dress."

Mia laughed as he dipped her dramatically. "What are you doing here? You're going to get in so much trouble."

"I came to dance with the prettiest girl in the whole school. But seeing as Remus seems to be keeping her occupied, I settled for you." He laughed as she slapped his shoulder. "You really didn't think I'd miss this, did you? I can't stay long, though; I'm almost done writing one thousand lines of 'I will not be taught by stupid snakes.'"

Mia gasped. "You didn't?"

"Oh, he's not actually going to *read* them." Sirius rolled his eyes. "Do I smell firewhisky? Did Prongs *actually* do it?"

"No. Well, probably," she admitted and looked over her shoulder as she watched her brother consume a large cup of punch before subtly walking away from the table and disappearing into the crowd. "We actually all had a drink before we came to the dance."

"Sweet, little, innocent Mia, drinking firewhisky and shagging werewolves," Sirius tutted as he spun her around. "What is the world coming to?"

"What? We aren't . . . I . . . We haven't—"

"I'm just teasing, love." Sirius smirked. "That's a pretty colour on your cheeks, though."

Mia frowned. "Sirius—"

"I have my moments, you know," he continued, ignoring the look on her face. "Moments where I think, 'Now how did I fuck that up?' Times when I watch you looking at him and wonder if you'd have looked at *me* that way."

"I did," Mia admitted sadly, "but you ran, and I told you that I wasn't going to wait around for you."

"I'm glad you didn't. You're happy, he's happy. How can I be pissed about any of that? Jealous, sure," he confessed with a smile. "Which is why I took this little moment of your time. I'm nothing if not a little selfish. Needed one quick dance to keep me going."

"What happens when you need another fix?" she asked him, frowning.

"Ah, kitten, I didn't take Divination. At your recommendation, I skipped the very class that could have foretold the future and let me know how this whole story ends."

Mia rolled her eyes. "Divination is rubbish."

"There're those claws we're all so fond of."

"Am I interrupting?" Remus spoke from behind Mia, and she went to separate herself from Sirius. Instead, he dipped her again.

"Moony, you're looking suave and sophisticated. Care to cut in?" Sirius asked, pulling Mia back up to a standing position. "Little witch can't keep up with me."

"I'll do my best, Pads," Remus said, smiling.

Sirius reached for one of the cups in Remus's hands, downing the contents quickly and then laughing a little. "Oh, Prongsie. Poor boy dumped the whole bottle in. Better get your fill now before McGonagall has a taste. Now, if you two are done occupying my very limited amount of time, I have a Defence professor to pester."

While Sirius slipped out of the Great Hall with great haste, Mia turned back to look at Remus, who was coughing a little after sipping the punch.

"He's right, this is awful." He winced and handed her the cup to let her have a taste, smiling when she mimicked his expression.

She laughed and dragged him back over to the punch bowl where several others had quickly gravitated, filling and refilling their cups. "We better follow his advice and drink up before it's too late."

Two songs later, James was in the corner of the room being yelled at by an irate Lily, who was pointing at the punch bowl. James held his hands up innocently, but Lily grabbed him firmly by the collar of his dress robes, dragging him through the centre of the dance floor, and over to where Professor McGonagall was sitting.

"That's our cue to leave," Mia said, swiftly taking Remus's hand and rushing toward the exit before an intoxicated James could accidentally admit that they had known his plan all along.

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Giggling, thanks to the help of firewhisky punch, Mia and Remus ran up the large staircase, making their way around the long corridors on their way to the seventh floor in front of the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy.

Before Mia had a chance to ask the Room of Requirement anything, Remus had her pinned to the wall, lowering his mouth to hers. Soft, warm, and tasting of citrus, sugar, and firewhisky, Mia melted in his grip, shivering as she felt his hand press against the outside of her thigh, hiking her leg up over his hip and pressing firmly against her.

"Room," Mia moaned against his lips.

"Hmm?" Remus replied, still kissing her.

"The room, Remus." She begrudgingly pulled away. "I need to create the room."

"Fuck the room," he growled and broke away from her lips to suck at the place behind her ear. When she mewled quietly, Remus chuckled against her skin and moved in to taste her once more, grinning when she repeated the noise.

"Remus," she moaned, and he moved from her neck to capture his name as it left her lips, grinning against her as he dug a free hand through her hair, using the leverage to deepen the kiss while his other hand lazily stroked her thigh through the soft silk of her dress.

Mia playfully nipped at his lower lip, and the reverberating sound he made against her triggered something in her body, and she felt a rush of warmth cover the skin of her cheeks before moving south, bathing the flesh of her chest, stomach, and thighs in heat. Something deep beneath her navel began to tighten and coil, and she fought tooth and nail against the voice in her head that was screaming out, begging for friction.

"Remus, we have to stop."

Remus immediately put space between them, looking at her worriedly. "Did I do something wrong?"

Mia exhaled, breathing heavy. "Merlin, no. *Too* right. But there is no way I'm ending this perfect evening getting caught by Filch whilst shagging my boyfriend against the wall."

Remus paled when she said "shagging," and Mia felt her cheeks flush again.

"Okay." He nodded, his recent confidence suddenly failing a little.

"Do you trust me?" Mia asked him after a long pause.

Remus nodded again. "Of course. Do you trust *me*?"

"With my life." She kissed him lightly again before she closed her eyes and paced back and forth in front of the stone wall.

## Chapter Forty-Two

### *Moonlight*

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*Deep in the dark  
You'll surrender your heart  
But you know  
But you know that you can't fight the moonlight  
(Can't Fight the Moonlight - Leann Rimes)*

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**October 31st, 1975**

"I don't understand," Remus said as he walked into the Room of Requirement—which was no longer a room, but rather what looked to be the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest. Everything felt so real: the smell of the grass beneath his shoes, the breeze moving through the leaves in the trees ahead of them, even the bright moon reflecting off of the water on the Black Lake.

*Moon?!*

Remus took in a sharp breath as his focus turned up. Painted across a sky of black velvet was the brightest, fullest moon he had ever seen with his own, human eyes. Something tightened in his chest, and he closed his eyes as he waited for the itching, the aching, the pain to come, but instead of sharp stabbing against his skin, he felt something soft, pliable, and warm.

"Love, look at me."

Remus opened his eyes, still breathing heavily. A hazy mixture of chocolate brown and amber looked back at him, and he could read the love in their depths. Mia's soft hands touched his face, beckoning him toward her where she placed a kiss full of promises against his mouth, chaste and sweet.

He looked skyward again, and only then did he realise that he was still shaking against her, a hand firmly gripped on her arm as if he needed it to steady himself. "I don't understand. Mia, what did you do?"

"This is where I trained to become an Animagus," she told him. "I asked the Room of Requirement to place me in the forest where I could see the trees, touch the dirt, and smell the air. I asked to be able to see the shack—" She pointed to the shadowy silhouette

in the distance. "And for the brightest full moon it could summon." Her eyes were full of guilt at the fear she had brought out in him, but something told Remus she knew that this would happen, at least initially. "I wanted to be connected to you during my training; to remind myself why I was doing it."

"How am I not—?"

"Transforming? That's not a *real* moon."

"Why did you bring me here?" he asked, focus still fixated on the orb in the sky.

"I . . ." She hesitated. "I wanted to give you something. I wanted you to see it with those beautiful, *green* eyes. See it and not fear it." She traced her fingers along the lines of his mouth and then leant in, capturing his lips tenderly with her own.

He closed his eyes and let the light of the moon—real or not—wash over him as he relished the warmth of the girl in his arms. Remus turned away from the brightness in the sky, still not entirely sure about what Mia had done, but suddenly very grateful that she had. He was desperate to show her his gratitude.

He kissed her deep and slow, reverently running his hands over the silk of her dress, feeling the outline of her waist, the dip in her lower back, and the curve of her hips that made him keen at the touch.

She responded in kind, her small fingers playing at the clasp on his robes. When she unhooked it and began to push the fabric over his shoulders, Remus pulled himself away from her as he opened his eyes and looked down. "Here?"

"Couldn't think of anywhere better," she admitted with a shy, nervous smile. "You, me, the earth, and the sky."

Remus held her in his arms and dipped her backward as Sirius had done earlier that night while they danced, but instead of a smug grin, Remus smiled softly. Instead of bringing her back to her feet, he placed her gently there upon the soft grass. Kneeling close beside her, he brushed a lock of hair from her face and drank in the image of her, bathed in the light of the moon—something he might never see again, not with his *own* eyes, not in *this* form.

"Would you think less of me if I admitted that I was scared?" His brow furrowed, and his eyes were set with worry. She looked so small lying beside him, beneath him, as he leant over her to kiss her cheeks. She looked too fragile, too tender, too breakable. Much too easy to devour.

She whispered the words she had been repeating to him for years, "I'm not afraid of you. I'm a little scared, but not of *you*."

Desperate to comfort her, as he noticed she was shaking, Remus kissed her soft and slow until he could hear the beating of her heart calm down as she relaxed. He pulled away from her, not entirely sure what to do. He never thought a moment like this would have been possible for him, so when Sirius and other boys talked endlessly about sex, Remus generally tuned them out.

"If the moon smiled, she would resemble you." Mia smiled up at him, stroking his cheek with the tips of her fingers. "You leave the same impression—"

"Of something beautiful," Remus said and breathed in deep as though her words began to set him on fire, and he needed to finish them or burn up from the inside out, "'but annihilating.' Sylvia Plath."

"Muggle or witch?"

"Who cares?"

He dove forward, claiming her mouth with passion and drive, rekindling the slow burn that they had ignited against the stone walls outside the Room of Requirement. She pushed the robes from his shoulders completely this time, but he refused to break the kiss when she deftly played with the buttons of his shirt until they all opened to expose the skin of his scarred chest to her.

He hesitated when she pulled away from him, tugging the sleeves off his arms to draw the shirt away from his body before her hands traced the outlines of the scars that ran across his ribs. He frowned and closed his eyes tight, unable to watch her touch him, fairly certain she would find him lacking if she looked too close. His eyes were still closed when he felt her lips brush against the scar that cut across his chest, and the sudden contact sparked something deep and primal—sparked something old and feral but new to him all the same.

He found himself suddenly above her, wedging a knee between her thighs. He breathed her in deep, setting his lupine senses aflame. Her scent lingered in the air, and he could taste it in the back of his throat. She smelled like a forest after a rainstorm. She tasted like honey and something he could not put into words, something that felt like hope burning inside of his chest.

Remus bent forward and captured her lips once again, trying to remember that last, lingering taste until he found it on the tip of her tongue. He pulled away and whispered, "You taste like the sunrise."

His erection grew more uncomfortable in his slacks as her hooded eyes lifted to meet his, and her words whispered against his lips, "You taste like moonlight."

Suddenly, he was unable to hold the wolf back any longer.

Capturing her mouth once again in a bruising kiss, Remus reached down and touched the skin of her ankle, then slowly followed the trail of flesh upward until his hand met creamy thigh, the silk of her dress bunched up against his forearm. The tips of his fingers brushed against lace; he shivered and tucked his knuckles beneath the band of fabric, tugging down at the same time that her hands found the buckle of his trousers, unwilling to break the kiss or open his eyes in worry that he would look into hers and see fear. They fumbled awkwardly, limbs tangling as they desperately fought to remove their clothing. He was working on instinct now, each move he made fuelled by the whimpers, mewls, and soft cries escaping her throat.

Settling into the cradle of her thighs, Remus finally broke their kiss to look down at her, waiting for silent confirmation, trying like hell to stay out of his head like she always told him to. He worried that if he questioned himself and hesitated now, she would assume it was because of *her*, and Remus could not bear to have her think of herself as anything but absolute perfection. So he kept quiet and waited, watching her eyes closely and inspecting her for any hint of anxiety.

"Please," was what she finally cried, and the wolf inside him howled in victory.

Adjusting himself with a shaking hand, Remus pressed forward until he felt a wet warmth encase him, a tightness that was so suffocatingly perfect it made him dizzy. His body begged him to move forward, so he did, and he heard her gasp just as he felt her tighten painfully around him.

His eyes opened wide the moment he realised what had happened, and he looked down at her, terrified. He had *known* what would happen but had forgotten in the moment, and he cursed himself for being so ignorant.

Her face and body were tense, and Remus breathed deeply, begging for forgiveness with his eyes.

*Our job. Our job to protect her. Not to hurt her.*

*Never hurt her.*

"I . . ." he began, choking on an apology.

"Yours," Mia said on a slow exhale.

She took another breath, let it go, and he felt her grip on him relax just a touch.

He looked down at her confused until he remembered her words earlier when he had questioned her about the moon in the sky above them: "*I wanted to give you something.*"

"Yours," she repeated, touching his chest.

The wolf inside of him keened. *Ours.*

Remus swallowed hard before slowly moving once more. Pulled into eyes that were filled with love and acceptance, he felt a flood of emotions fill him. The girl beneath him, covered in silk and moonlight, *loved* him—loved Remus and accepted the wolf inside. She had given him everything he never thought he deserved and more. He felt honoured that she had somehow found him worthy of this moment—this painfully beautiful moment bathed in the light of the moon where he was more man than monster.

"Remus," she moaned, and it fuelled him further, pushing him, edging him ever closer to something he had never known, not like this.

She smelled like a rainstorm, she felt like heaven, she tasted like honey and a sunrise and . . . and something else he could not quite place, but it burned deliciously.

He felt her undulate beneath him, and he seized the cry of her lips with his mouth, drinking in her pleasure until his own broke inside of her.

Remus let out a low growl against her lips, quivered when she kissed him lightly, and collapsed into her arms beneath the brightness of the moon above them.

It was absolute, utter, infinite, complete, and outright perfection.

*Almost*, a voice whimpered in the back of his mind.

Almost perfection.

But not quite.

Just in case, when his energy returned minutes later, Remus tried again.

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Hours passed, and the moon still hung in the faux sky above them, covering their sweat soaked, naked bodies.

"That was . . ." Mia panted, every nerve in her body tingling, over-sensitised, and a little sore.

"Yeah . . ." Remus breathed heavily against her, his hot breath dampening her collarbone where his face had landed. He inhaled and moved up, hissing a little as he pulled out and away from her, landing next to her on his back.

Mia exhaled. "Wow."

"Really?" Remus turned and grinned at her.

"Not wow for you?" She frowned, her swollen lips pouting.

She had not expected their first time to be that great. Reading books and hearing gossip in the dormitory during both times at Hogwarts had prepared her for bland, awkward, disappointment. She knew that she and Remus had passion unlike anything else she had ever felt for a boy before, but she anticipated that even if she got over the pain that sometimes came with sex, it would not be swiftly followed by pleasure like *that*.

"No. Wow! *Very* wow for me," he promised with a chuckle as he continued to try and catch his breath. "I just didn't think wow for *you*."

"Oh, *very* wow." She joined in the laughter, a bit delirious, until they both fell into a strange silence as they stared up at the sky.

There was a heaviness to the air, and after a pregnant pause, Remus broke the silence: "But?"

"I'm not your mate," Mia admitted automatically.

He stared at her. "How do you know that?"

"Don't *you*?"

Remus thought for a moment. "Well, yeah, I guess."

"You *guess*?"

"Okay, I *know*. I just didn't want to hurt your feelings by saying it."

"Why would that hurt my feelings?" She frowned at him, leaning over on her side and resting her head on her open hand. "If something's not meant to be, it's not meant to be."

"You sound like someone who buys into Divination."

She would have scowled at him, but she had been screaming his name just minutes earlier, and she felt that her intimidation tactics would need to be recalibrated when it came to Remus. "There's a difference. Werewolves have mates; there are studies that prove it."

"You're not upset?"

"Are *you*?"

"A little," he confessed.

Mia reached over and brushed the sweat-soaked hair from his forehead. "Tell me why."

"Because I . . ." He turned and stared into her eyes, reaching out to stroke his knuckles tenderly against the skin of her cheek.

She smiled. "I love you too, Remus."

"I *do* love you."

"I know."

"Plus, you're my best friend."

"You're more than that to me." She pulled herself forward, melding her body against his and sighing as he wrapped his arms around her to kiss her forehead. "You're . . . I don't know. *Mine*," she said possessively, and Remus chuckled. "You belong to me. At least until you find *her*."

After a tense moment, he whispered, "What if I don't?"

"You will," she promised as the vision of a pink-haired woman and a blue-haired baby came into her mind.

"You don't know that, Mia. Do you know the chances of someone like me finding their mate? Rare. *Beyond* rare. I thought you . . ." He sighed sadly. "You've always been good to me. You've never been afraid to touch me. I just assumed."

"You'll find her. I promise."

"You don't regret it?" he asked hesitantly.

"Honestly, I'm having a hard time feeling guilty enough to *not* want to do it again." Mia laughed, tracing her fingers over his ribs, following the lines of scars down to the taut muscles of his stomach. He was beautiful, and she could stare at him all day and night.

He blinked down at her. "Why would you feel guilty?"

"I don't know," she lied. "It feels like . . . I'm helping you cheat on her."

He shook his head in disbelief. "A future mate I might never meet."

"You'll meet her, and then what? What will *I* be? How can she not *hate* me?" she asked and gasped at the very real thought of a very real person waiting for Remus in the

future. Tonks. His mate. His *wife*. Mia covered her face. She had slept with Tonks's husband!

Another thought jolted her. Remus—*Future* Remus—he knew!

That was how time worked. He said it in his letter. Anything she did had already been done, which meant that when Future Remus sent her back in time, he knew *exactly* what was going to happen. He knew that on Halloween their fifth year, she would take him into the Room of Requirement and they would make love beneath a full moon. He had known that she had been his girlfriend, that they had been *in love*!

Mia suddenly remembered a conversation she overheard between Future Remus and Tonks the day before they had gone into the Ministry to fetch Sirius from the veil.

*"But you know I love you, right?"*

*"Yes, Remus, you love me. You'll never leave me. I'm your mate; I get it."*

Mia silently gasped at the thought: *Tonks knew everything.*

"You'll be my best friend." Remus kissed her temple, unaware that she was having a complete internal crisis. "You're mine too, you know. You belong to me. It's like . . . if I were an alpha wolf, you'd be my beta."

Mia chuckled, calming down at his words, always happy when he referenced his wolf without words of self-defamation. "What about Sirius, James, and Peter?"

"They're in the pack too, but you're . . . I don't know. Is there a word that means soul mate but doesn't?"

"Ever the poet." Mia beamed up at him. "You're thinking of a kindred spirit."

"Yeah. You're *mine*. It's like you're my heart, but not . . . my soul. Does that make sense?" he asked, looking guilty when she adjusted their bodies so that she could look at him.

She nodded. Remus was her heart. She could admit that.

"If I meet my mate, she'll understand that. If she doesn't, then she's not really my mate."

"So you don't feel bad?" Mia asked. "Like, you don't think you should be out there looking for her?"

"Why?" He raised a brow. "What other person our age starts any relationship thinking, 'Wow, this is it. I'm going to marry this person, and if it's not meant to be, then I'm out of here?'"

Mia laughed. "Jamie."

"James is a special case."

"You're saying you'd rather be like Sirius?" She frowned a little at the thought of Remus having the reputation that Sirius had.

Remus laughed, shaking his head with a defeated sigh. "Isn't there a safe and less horrible middle ground between James and Sirius?"

"Yeah. I call that safe middle ground 'Remus.'"

"I'll never get used to you thinking of me as safe."

She kissed him softly, whispering, "You'd never hurt me."

"You say that like someone else would." When she did not answer, Remus sighed and pulled her tighter into his arms. "I'm not *your* mate either."

She frowned at the truth of his words. "No."

"But you *know* who is."

Mia sniffed, irritable. "I don't want to talk about it, Remus."

"He'll figure it out. He's just—"

She scoffed. "Stupid?"

"Oh, incredibly." He nodded with wide eyes. "I was thinking more along the lines of ignorant, though. Sirius needs to grow up first. You've always been more mature than the rest of us, and I know I'm different too because of my condition. James, Sirius, and Peter are the ones who get to cling to their childhood a little longer than us."

"Please don't ever mention my brother or Peter while we're naked."

Remus smirked down at her. "I can mention Sirius, though?"

"I'd prefer it just be the two of us, but considering I brought *your* future mate into the bedroom . . ." She ran her hand along the grass between them. "Figuratively," she added with a chuckle. "I suppose you have the right to push my buttons when it comes to Sirius."

"You love him," Remus whispered.

Mia groaned and put her hands over her face. "You suck at pillow talk."

"Ask the room something for me," Remus insisted.

"What?" she asked, pulling her hands down to look at him.

He smiled at her. "Tell it to take the moon away. Make it disappear. I want to show you something."

Mia silently agreed, closing her eyes and making the small request of the room. When she opened her eyes, the brightness of the forest was gone; they were still on the grass, now under a blanket of open, black sky, speckled with stars.

"*You're* the sky, Mia," Remus whispered in her ear. "You're this amazing, endless, magical entity. We've just established that you can't have the moon," he said, pointing to himself.

"Okay."

"So tell me what do you see without the moon in the sky?"

"A terrible metaphor," she said, earning a poke in the ribs. She let out a heavy sigh, already knowing where he was going with his point, but she let him anyway because when it came to her, Remus got away with anything. The man—and boy—could do no wrong. Everything he ever did was for her benefit. "Stars. I see stars."

"What star do you see first?"

She pointed straight ahead. "The brightest. Alpha Canis Majoris," she said, using the technical term for the star stuck inside the beautiful constellation. Then she sniffed, resigned. "Also known as the Dog Star."

"We like to call that star—"

"Sirius," she whispered with a heavy breath. "The brightest star in the sky is Sirius."

"So what now?" Remus asked, looking oddly pleased with himself after psychoanalysing her and tricking her into some semblance of acceptance. "What about us?"

"What do *you* want?" Mia asked.

"I don't want to be alone," he confessed sadly, "but I don't want to stand in your way of anything that could happen."

"No dating each other?"

He cringed, looking awkward. "Might get complicated."

"I agree," she said, hesitation in her voice.

"But . . . ?" he prompted, a hungry look in his eyes.

She leant forward, kissing his neck. "But there's no reason *not* to take advantage of the fact that we're physically compatible?"

"You don't think I'm just a randy bloke looking to get a girl in the sack?"

"You already got the girl in the sack."

"Three times," Remus said the words through a cough and then pretended like he was clearing his throat, but she looked up and saw the amazingly smug look on his face that could rival that of James during a Quidditch match.

She laughed and rolled her eyes. "Yes, well done, you."

Remus shrugged. "I think I earned an O.W.L."

She smirked, wiggling against him. "Lose the ego, and I might consider you for a N.E.W.T."

"So, we're really okay?" He pulled away from her to look into her eyes. When she smiled, he leant forward and kissed her sweetly. "No weirdness?"

"No weirdness. Strangely, no weirdness. I think in twenty years we'll look back and laugh at the fact that there's no weirdness." She could just imagine *that* awkward conversation. The fact that he would grow up to become her professor would certainly add to the tension in the room.

"You do that a lot," he said, observing her while running his knuckles up and down the flat plane of her stomach, watching closely as she shivered in response.

"What's that?"

"Say 'In twenty years,' like it's some goal you've got in your head. Where exactly do you think you'll be in twenty years that you add everything up to it?"

She smiled sadly, thinking of everyone back at Grimmauld Place in 1998. "I'll be with you, and Sirius, and . . . everyone else. Family, friends. I see the war over, and I see you with a wife and family, and Jamie's family . . ." She frowned as the thought of Harry came into her mind.

"*You* don't have a family?"

She smiled as brightly as she could, blinking away the tears that were pricking at the corners of her eyes. "You're my family."

"I love you, Mia."

"I love you, Remus."

"Round two?"

She burst into laughter, and he snatched the noise right from her lips with his own before rolling over and pinning her beneath him, grinning when her leg hitched itself up against his hip.

"Don't you mean round *four*?"

"Semantics."

He chuckled, placing a kiss to her throat that relit the fire in her belly. If she did not know him any better, she might have accused him of trying to condition her. Pavlov's dog. Lupin's witch. Drooling at the sound of sexy growling instead of a bell.

"How are you *not* exhausted?" she asked through short breaths.

"Wolf thing," he whispered against her skin, slowly moving south where he placed kisses against her collarbone and in the valley between her breasts.

"I thought you were very . . . animal." She chuckled at the thought and then whimpered as his lips reached her navel, her fingers moving into the depths of his shaggy hair.

"My wolf likes you," he mumbled against her stomach.

"I *really* like your wolf," she admitted with a grin, licking her lips as her eyes closed.

Remus sighed, and she felt his head rest on her hip. "Why can't *you* be my mate?" he whined. "You're perfect."

"Your *mate* will be perfect. I just happen to be a close runner-up."

"Close?"

She felt him move lower once more, his hot breath on her thighs, making her whimper. "Mmm. Very close."

"How close?" he growled, sending vibrations across her skin.

Mia quivered against the grass. "Very close!"

## Chapter Forty-Three

### *Just Enough*

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*Heart beats fast  
Colors and promises  
How to be brave?  
How can I love when I'm afraid to fall?  
(A Thousand Years - Christina Perri)*

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**December 19th, 1975**

"What do you want for Christmas?" Remus groaned the question into a pillow as Mia kneaded the muscles of his back. He was extremely sore and exhausted. It was nearing time for dinner, and he had spent the whole day recovering in bed.

Mia was almost just as exhausted, having helped him with his recovery. Her soreness, however, was much more pleasant than his.

The night before had seen the four Marauders and Mia in the Shrieking Shack. James and Sirius suggested letting Moony out a little to run through the forest, but Remus had been insistent that they keep him properly shut away until he felt in complete control, which he admitted might not *ever* happen. Drinking the Wolfsbane Potion the week prior helped him stay in control. Having four Animagus friends around him during the full moon kept him calm.

Mia suspected that having a naked girl waiting for him in his bed once he left the hospital wing might make enduring the full moon almost worth it.

Though they put an end to their *official* relationship the night they had given their virginities to one another, Remus and Mia did not tell a soul. It certainly made it easier when they were occasionally caught snogging on the sofa in the common room, empty classrooms, or dark corridors.

Despite knowing that their stories ended with different people, Mia and Remus had found a safe solace in one another. He would use her during his more aggressive moments as the full moon approached, allowing him to wear himself out a bit, which he admitted helped control his temper. She would use him to fulfil the most important rule in the guide that his older self had left for her: enjoying life.

The days before the full moon, anyone searching the dark alcoves of the castle would find Mia pressed up tight against some rough surface as she coaxed the animal out of Remus, nipping at his lips and neck and roughly pulling at his hair while he drove into her, growling behind golden eyes as she moaned, "Harder," into the shell of his ear.

He still had not lost control with her, and Mia almost wished that he *would*. His aggressive side was becoming addicting, and she felt guilty that he would feel anxious and worried after the rougher moments they shared together, nervous that he might have hurt her. She did not *dare* tell him just how much she enjoyed it.

The morning following the full moon was a day of recovery. After his potions and healing in the infirmary, Remus would return to the dorms, citing the need for sleep. His understanding friends—who had all caught up on their lack of sleep during the morning hours—would vacate the room to allow him to recuperate. The moment James, Sirius, and Peter were off to the Quidditch Pitch where they always ended up, Mia would slip up the stairs and into Remus's bed, where they would shut the curtains and put up the strongest of Silencing and Locking Spells.

They lazily made love beneath the comfort of clean sheets. She traced the lines of his scars, kissing away the new scrapes, and they fell asleep in one another's arms with whispers of "I love you" on their lips.

Remus and Mia were the perfect safety net for one another—having the ability to express and feel love in a way that kept them free from heartbreak. He did not have to be alone while he waited decades for his mate to suddenly show up in his life. She did not have to force herself to deal with the issue of her bond with Sirius and the future where she knew he was waiting for her—the day after her nineteenth birthday.

They could use each other to escape their entwined futures with other people.

They used each other well.

And often.

"You *still* haven't gotten me a gift?"

She sat straddled over the back of Remus's bare legs, moving her hands down to the strained muscles of his lower back, still sore from the transformation the night before. His skin was littered with various scars that she found surprisingly beautiful, as though they told the story of his character. She leant down and pressed her lips to each one affectionately.

Beneath her, Remus let out a satisfied sigh. "Haven't had a chance to do much shopping. I'll have to stop by Diagon Alley sometime before Christmas. That is," he offered with a chuckle, "unless you just want your present to be a repeat of today."

She tried to control the shiver that went through her. The tone of voice and confidence he used when privately flirting made her muscles clench and her nerves ignite like fireworks. Aside from running for her life during the war, she had never been one to regularly exercise, but Remus was doing wonders for her now when it came to working up a sweat.

"I hardly think I can open *this* in front of my parents and brother on Christmas morning."

"Do you want something . . . boyfriendish? We haven't told anyone. I don't want your parents to think poorly of me if I'm inconsiderate enough to buy you something ridiculous like sweets."

Mia shrugged, digging into a particularly rough knot that caused him to hiss and then groan as it released. "You're *not* my boyfriend. You're under no obligation to do anything of the sort. Just because we didn't take out a page in the *Prophet* announcing our 'torrid breakup' doesn't mean we're hiding our sudden lack of relationship."

He rolled over and looked up at her. Despite their abundant lack of clothing, he kept his gaze on her face. "*Aren't* we?"

She frowned, awkwardly picking at her thumbnail until he took her hands to still them from fidgeting. "Not exactly. I mean, we're not correcting people when they assume we're still together, but—"

"I think you're scared," Remus said. "You're worried that if we start telling people that we're not together that they'll—"

"Find out we're still shagging and think I'm some scarlet woman?" she asked with a mocking tone.

Remus chuckled, kissing her fingers. "No. I think you're afraid that once Sirius knows we're not together, he'll be forced to make a decision about you, and no matter what choice he makes, it terrifies you."

She glared down at him as though the accusation of her being afraid was the lowest thing he could ever say to her. "I'm a Gryffindor."

"You told me that the Sorting Hat wanted to put you in Slytherin," Remus challenged her.

"That stupid hat was just trying to rile me up," she snarled. "That's beside the point. I am *not* afraid of Sirius."

To try and change the subject, Mia rolled her hips over him and grinned when he let out a low keen. She could feel him stirring beneath her and smirked that she could silence him with such a simple gesture.

"No, you're in love with Sirius," he countered.

Mia sighed; maybe she *wasn't* so talented at shutting Remus up.

He looked like he was trying to fight back the urge to take her again so soon. His face showed a stern concentration, but she felt him swiftly growing hard again beneath her.

"You're worried that he'll find out we're not together, and he won't tell you that he loves you as well." She clenched her teeth and schooled her expression, trying not to let him see how his words affected her so strongly. "And he probably won't, because he's *just* as terrified as you are."

"I'm pretty sure we made a rule to not talk about Sirius while we're naked," Mia said firmly, and Remus rolled his eyes.

"I have sex with you to work out pent up aggression. *You* have sex with me because you're hiding," he accused her.

She stared down at him, her mouth falling open in shock. "I have sex with you because I *love* you."

"And I love you, but you know it's different. It would be different if I were Sirius."

"Jealous?" she teased, trying to ease the tension and securely bury her rising fears of inadequacy and rejection that Sirius tended to bring out in her.

Remus laughed. "Hardly. *I'm* the one you're on top of, aren't I?"

"And what if it was suddenly Sirius?" she asked him point-blank. A part of her worried that Remus was not being entirely honest with her. This was their safe place, here in the arms of one another, and she knew that Remus would be alone for years. A part of her did not want to pursue anything further with Sirius because she did not want to leave Remus by himself. She did not want her friend, *her heart*, to be alone.

"I would be happy for you," he promised, and she frowned as she saw the sincerity in his eyes. "I'd be watching him to make sure he didn't screw it up. Your happiness would bring me happiness."

Her frown deepened. "You'd be alone."

"Not that our time together isn't anything short of, well, mind blowing, but I *did* manage to get along before we started shagging."

Mia smirked down at him, seeing the wonder of a confident Remus, who would have blushed at this conversation not two months earlier. Thinking of Sirius, however, pulled the amusement away. "He's wounded."

She broke eye contact with Remus and sighed, hating how easily he was able to read her. When the two friends-turned-lovers were caught in a moment of passion, it was helpful that he knew her so well. He paid close attention to the way her eyes clouded, the slightest gasp on the edge of her lips, or the smallest twitch of her nose. In the aftermath, when she felt vulnerable and exposed, he saw right through her and brought everything to the surface, forcing her to address her issues.

"So are *you*." He reached up and took her hand, tugging it forward until she fell on top of his chest, where he then wrapped his arms around her, holding her close. "I don't know why you are or *what* you're always holding back, but I can see it, smell it."

"I don't know how to deal with him at *this* age," she admitted, hoping to change the subject from her own wounds—wounds he could apparently see—to Sirius. Mia worried what would happen when the scars of her past began to *literally* come back to haunt her. How would she explain them, especially to Remus, who had seen all of her perfect, unblemished flesh?

"You're the same age," Remus pointed out.

"No we're not; you said so yourself. You and I are different. Sirius is . . . a child right now. He's spoilt and thinks he can get away with anything. He pouts when he doesn't get everything he wants, and he refuses to open up to me—or anyone—about his problems. I could never be intimate with him, not now, not like . . ." She sat up and gestured to the small space between them. "Not like *this*."

"Do you know what your problem is?" Remus asked, tracing his fingers over her hips. "You try to get everything right on the first attempt. You're so brilliant at Charms, you can alter them to create your own. You brew the Wolfsbane Potion with ease; and

from what you told me about it, one mess-up and *I'll* be the one that suffers. You became an Animagus in six months, while it took Sirius, James, and Peter three years. Not to mention that for a pureblood who's never taken Muggle Studies, you're astoundingly knowledgeable about things that *I* don't even know, and *I've* got a Muggle mother. Everything is easy for you."

She rolled her eyes. "Are you saying Sirius wouldn't be easy?"

Remus scoffed. "To get into bed? You'd barely have to blink your eyes at him. But to break through those defensive barriers he puts up around him? It could take years. Plus, you don't like that he doesn't just open up to you—that it's not as easy as magic."

"Not *everything* comes easily to me." She pouted, arguing with him in order to avoid the real issue. "I'm rubbish at flying."

"Maybe you should challenge yourself then."

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### **December 24th, 1975**

Christmas Eve found everyone in wonderful spirits. Charlus and Dorea had decorated the entire house, much to the great displeasure of Tilly, who wanted to do it all on her own. James and Mia were happy to be home from Hogwarts, enjoying the company of family and friends; Sirius was nearly a permanent guest, and the Lupins had come by to enjoy the festivities with the few friends they had left in the Wizarding world.

Presents had been exchanged with bright smiles around the largest Christmas tree in the whole manor. Charlus and Dorea, as per usual, doted upon the children as well as their guests, who all—save for Sirius—struggled with the lavish gifts that were given to them.

By the end of the night, Remus had more chocolate than he could possibly carry, so it was helpful that Mia's gift had been a new school bag with an Undetectable Extension Charm. Remus's gift to Mia had been a beautiful phoenix feather quill and new rolls of parchment.

As usual, James and Sirius got new broomstick servicing kits. James had the A.D. communicating Galleon that Mia had made with a Protean Charm turned into a necklace for her, and she in turn—as a gift—offered to allow him to teach her how to fly.

Sirius also presented Mia with jewellery in the form of mismatched earrings—the left, a sterling silver silhouette of a cat with the word *kitten* engraved on it; the right, a golden image of a fox. Mia presented him with a gift of her own creation: a plain, but beautiful, silver chain that had been charmed as an emergency Portkey.

"Touch it, and say *Portus*," she instructed, "and it'll bring you right back here."

She knew Sirius had issues with his family. After their encounter with Bellatrix at Narcissa's wedding, she realised that at some point in the future, Sirius was going to need a safe escape. She frowned at the thought that he could have used this gift while in Azkaban.

Sirius smiled softly at her. "It's great. I'll wear it always," he promised and slipped the chain around his neck. "If it's for emergencies though, what if I don't have a wand to activate the charm?"

"What do you think we'll be working on in A.D. when we get back to school?" she asked with a devious smile.

"You don't know wandless magic," Sirius whispered incredulously.

"I know a little." She smiled at the memory of her and an older Sirius in front of a tent late at night. Harry slept on inside, the Horcrux locket around his neck, while she and Sirius stood out, side-by-side by the fire—Hermione desperately trying to freeze the flames, and Sirius doing so with great ease, all wandlessly.

"Does anyone want some more pumpkin cider?" Mia asked as she stood to go into the kitchen. She was excited because for her Christmas gift from Tilly, she had asked her to take the night off. Begrudgingly Tilly agreed, allowing Mia a bit of a free run of the kitchen.

"Thank you, dear." Dorea smiled at her, and a few other hands were raised.

"I'll help," Sirius said as he moved to follow her.

Before either could make it toward the kitchen, however, they were suddenly stuck in place.

"What the . . . ?" Mia blinked, a slight look of fear crossed over her as she realised she was trapped in a near two-by-two box next to Sirius.

"Uh oh," James laughed, pointing up.

Hovering above them was a cluster of charmed mistletoe.

"Who did it?" Mia turned and glared at her brother.

James held up his hands. "To be fair, I set several mistletoe loose before you told me Evans changed her plans and wouldn't be coming over."

"Tricking a girl into kissing you won't win her affections, darling," Dorea amusingly reprimanded her son, looking completely nonplussed about Mia and Sirius's awkward situation.

"Take it off, James," Charlus instructed; his voice sounded amused, but the look on his face was clear discomfort.

"Can't. Only one way to get out of it." James laughed again and looked over at Remus, who preoccupied himself by seeing how many things he could fit inside his new bag, resolutely not looking at Sirius and Mia.

"Sorry, Remus. You heard Prongs, only one way out." Sirius wrapped his arm around Mia, brushing the hair from her face with gusto. "You might want to look away while I ravish your woman, Moony."

"No ravishing," Charlus said with a huff. "James, get that thing away from your sister."

"The mistletoe or Sirius?" James asked innocently.

"It's fine by me." Remus shrugged with a smile as he looked up at Mia. Everyone else went absolutely silent, and Mia's eyes widened as she stared at her traitorous ex. "She's a free witch."

"What do you mean, a free witch?" Sirius asked.

"We broke up," Mia admitted impatiently, casting a scathing look at Remus.

James turned on Remus, glaring him down. "What did you do?"

"Jamie!" Mia snapped. "He didn't do anything, other than out my single status just now with his big, stupid mouth. We broke up months ago. It was perfectly amicable."

"We're better as best friends." Remus smiled up at her. "Just not meant to be."

"How come you didn't tell anyone?" James blinked, looking both confused and hurt, likely because they had kept a secret from him.

"Wasn't your business," Mia said simply, wishing that she could hug her brother, but the damned mistletoe kept her in place. "Plus, there was no drama, and we knew once

it got out, there would be rumours going around. I had no desire to correct all of the stories that would circulate, declaring that I'd broken the heart of the handsome Gryffindor prefect."

"How come *you'd* be the heart-breaker?" Remus asked with a laugh.

"The girl is *always* to blame," she said.

Mia knew from experience that, when it came to rumours and gossip, she would always be the one in the wrong. She was surprised that her face was not plastered across the *Daily Prophet* by now. Then again, Rita Skeeter was not writing for them yet.

"Can I get out of this please?" she asked Sirius, who still had his arm around her as she pointed up at the mistletoe.

He stared at her, suddenly looking like he was lacking in the confidence he'd had only moments earlier when he was under the assumption that Mia was taken. Sirius swallowed, released her, and cleared his throat. He leant in, brushing his lips lightly over hers. It was a feathery touch, barely ghosting over her skin, and it still left her breathless.

Neither bothered to close their eyes as it happened so fast. Mia gazed into the storm grey irises in front of her, seeing as they momentarily bled silver. She inhaled the moment he came so close, and she smelled it all: parchment and grass—like Remus smelled—but also firewhisky, leather, and the lingering hint of tobacco that *should* have disgusted her had she not grown so accustomed to his scent.

It had been enough to break the mistletoe's charm.

It had been enough to leave her painfully wanting more.

It had been enough to reignite something deep inside.

It had been *just enough* to pluck a tiny gold string that connected their magic.

Walking away from one another was painful, but Mia forced herself to pretend nothing was amiss even though her hands were shaking. Bringing the cider back to her family and friends, she watched as everyone went about their business as though nothing had happened—everyone except Remus, who shook his head and looked away from her, and her mother, who pinned her with a scrutinising look. Mia fumbled as she handed a glass of cider to her mother, trying to look unconcerned; she was certain she failed.

Slytherins could be intimidating when they wanted to be.

## January 6th, 1976

The new year brought with it a new world.

James and Mia returned to Hogwarts wearing matching slings. She had fulfilled her gift to James, and the moment the two of them mounted his broom, everything went south. They ended up crashing in the orchards, each breaking an arm. Despite repairing the breaks with potions and magic at St Mungo's, they were forced to wear the slings under the insistence of their mother and Tilly until they were both fully healed.

Peter came back to Hogwarts looking sickly and haunted. Mia had read in the paper that his father, Evan Pettigrew, had been arrested for suspicious behaviour in Knockturn Alley. Though he had been released later on for lack of evidence, she knew that this was the beginning of the end for Wormtail. If Peter had not been involved in the Dark Arts before, he was now connected to them through his father.

Lily stepped off the Hogwarts Express in tears after Mulciber and Avery called her a Mudblood to her face, and Snape stood by, averting his gaze in front of his friends. Lily was not prone to emotional outbursts like that, but Mia knew this had been building over a long period of time. Soon, Snape and Lily would break permanently, and everyone but Lily would have seen it coming since the Sorting Hat had placed her into Gryffindor.

Though Sirius continued drinking and smoking over the holidays, he returned to school with a new nervous habit: fidgeting with the chain Mia had given him whenever he was visibly anxious. Even when he was able to control his expression, touching the chain became a dead giveaway to his emotional state.

He had not sent a single owl to his friends since leaving Potter Manor on Christmas morning to return to Grimmauld Place, but Mia could tell something was very wrong. Instead of stepping off the train and fighting his brother, the two Black siblings had scarcely looked at one another. When they did, instead of the typical look of repugnance in Regulus's face, Mia could see trepidation.

It unnerved her.

When she found Sirius sitting alone in the common room after the start-of-term feast, fiddling with the chain around his neck as though he were already contemplating using it to escape back to Potter Manor, she took a seat beside him. He had not rolled over

into her lap for well over a year—not since she and Remus became serious—but Sirius looked like he needed comfort. Silently, she tugged on his arm, encouraging him to tip to the side to rest his head against her thighs as she ran her fingers through the black silk of his hair.

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Instead of retiring to the common room with his friends the night they had all returned to Hogwarts, Remus had been pulled into Dumbledore's office to speak privately.

Mia worried that perhaps she and Remus had been caught in one of their private moments and someone had outed their torrid affair, but when Remus met up with everyone the following morning, she did not need him to tell her what was wrong once the owls brought in the morning paper.

*WEREWOLVES ON THE MOVE IN SCOTLAND  
IS HOGWARTS SAFE?*

"It's not me," Remus said, a look of shame and sorrow on his face.

"We know that, Moony," James insisted, putting a comforting hand on his friend's shoulder.

From the corner of her eye, Mia could see Sirius fiddling nervously with his chain. She reached across the table and took Remus's hand in her own.

"We're with you every moon," Sirius finally muttered. "You've never even left the shack once."

"You can't be with me anymore. Not for a while at least," Remus whispered, looking down at his empty place. When Mia moved to get him food, he held up a hand and shook his head. "Not hungry. Dumbledore knows it isn't me, but some of the staff know about my . . . condition, and they're nervous. So, they'll be watching me over the next couple of months. At least until the other wolves are caught."

"Are they sure it's werewolves?" Peter asked, clearing his throat nervously. "I mean, there's been . . . y'know . . ."

"Death Eaters," James said, his eyes fierce and angry.

"Yeah," Peter muttered. "Them."

"It's wolves. There've been . . . maulings." Remus frowned at the word, and Mia squeezed his hand tightly. He swallowed hard, and his face paled. He stared ahead at his and Mia's connected hands and winced a little as he unconsciously scratched at his shoulder where she knew the deepest of all his scars rested.

Her eyes widened as she realised that Remus was not *worried*. He was *afraid*.

She gasped as a horrifying thought entered her mind: *Fenrir Greyback is coming*.

## Chapter Forty-Four

### *Besotted*

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*Ring the alarm  
I been through this too long  
But I'll be damned if I see another chick on your arm  
Won't you ring the alarm?  
(Ring the Alarm - Beyonce)*

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**February 14th, 1976**

"Where the hell have you two been?" Sirius yelled as Remus and Mia approached the breakfast table Saturday morning.

Remus looked terrible despite having taken his Wolfsbane all week. The full moon was the following night, but knowing that his friends would not be able to be there with him had taken a toll. Even with Mia's multiple attempts to help him relieve some tension *together*, Remus was still strangely distant.

"Hospital wing," Mia muttered. "Remus had a . . . headache," she said quietly, realising that they were in mixed company as Mary, Alice, and Frank had joined the Marauders.

They sat down, and Mia worked to fix Remus some breakfast when she realised that Lily was surprisingly missing. The heartbroken look on James's face at the end of the table told her that something had happened. She snapped her fingers to get Sirius's attention. "What did he do?"

Sirius chuckled. "Broke his hand."

"What?" Mia shouted, climbing over the bench to rush to her brother's side. "Jamie, are you okay?"

James looked up at her with sad eyes, gesturing to his hand. "What? *This*? Hurts a hell of a lot less than my completely shattered heart," he moaned and flopped his forehead flat against the table with a loud thud.

"What did he break his hand on?" Mia looked up at Sirius, who was still laughing.

"Diggory's face."

"Amos?" Remus rose a brow. "Aren't Hufflepuff's generally a little on the . . . pacifist side?"

"They are." Sirius nodded as he filled his plate with an assortment of breakfast items, and then, being the doting friend that he was, did the same for James, pushing the plate in front of him. "Prongs asked Lily to go to Hogsmeade."

"So? That's not unusual. He asks her to go to Hogsmeade anytime he's allowed to and every other time he's not." Mia took a seat beside her brother, affectionately ruffling his messy black hair, and smiling a bit—she could just imagine a bird taking up residence right in the centre of it.

"He bought her a gift," Sirius said, gesturing to the small velvet box on the table.

Mia gasped at the tiny, unwrapped gift and snatched it up. "Jamie, please tell me Grandmother Black's opal ring isn't in here? You know Mum said if you tried to steal it again she would put a hex on it, and all your hair would fall out." She shook her head, unable to stop herself from thinking that the hex might be an improvement.

When she opened the small box, she smiled a little at the sight.

It was a pair of silver earrings, similar to the pair Sirius had given her for Christmas. Instead of a fox and a cat, the silver silhouettes were of a stag and a doe. Mia's heart warmed at the sight.

Though she had known what Lily's Patronus would be long before her friend ever actually cast it, Mia smiled in the Room of Requirement the moment Lily completed the charm. A brilliant silver doe had emerged from the tip of her wand and pranced around the room, exciting the eyes of every member of the A.D., but no one more than James whose eyes lit up in obvious joy at the sight before immediately casting his own Patronus, a noble stag.

James had been beyond elated at the pair. Lily had looked positively confused and took extra steps to avoid him at all costs in every subsequent meeting as well as class. Mia knew the gesture her brother was trying to send was amazingly sweet, however, she could understand why Lily might react poorly.

"Oh, Jamie, these are beautiful, but you should have known how she'd react."

"She didn't *get* them," James mumbled into the table followed by a string of swears and other unintelligible words that she struggled to make out.

"What?"

He, presumably, repeated his words, all still mumbled against the top of the table.

Frustrated, Mia looked at Sirius for clarification. "You speak 'Pouting Prongs' better than anyone else. What is he saying?"

Sirius winked at Mia, gesturing to his ears making her realise that she was wearing the earrings that *he* had given her. "The earrings that Prongs made *are* beautiful, though highly unoriginal," he said, "but Lily never got them. Poor Prongsie got up, asked the lovely Evans to go to Hogsmeade—"

"I was going to give them to her in Madam Puddifoot's," James bellowed as he sat up straight; there was a large red mark on his forehead from hitting it against the table. "She would have loved them."

Sirius sighed and patted James on the back when he put his forehead back down on the table. "She said no. As usual. When Prongs tried to be a little more convincing, Evans said she already *had* a date."

"Amos?" Mia asked with wide eyes, and Sirius nodded.

"That explains the broken hand," Remus muttered as he leant the side of his head against the table.

Mia frowned at the look on his face, assuming he had a pre-moon headache. She looked up at Sirius, gesturing to a large plate of scones sitting next to him.

Sirius nodded in understanding, reaching for the chocolate one on top and passing it over to Remus who managed to grunt, "Thank you," before picking it apart.

"So Jamie punched Amos?" Mia asked.

"Pretty much," Sirius said, grabbing a scone for himself. "Evans slapped him in the face and called him a hot-headed cretin. Then she told McGonagall what Prongs did, and the poor old boy's banned from Hogsmeade for the rest of the year."

She could not help but think of Harry and how he had clearly gotten his temper from his father. Harry always had a short fuse. While not nearly as bad as Ron, Harry never had the ability to let things go. He was always so quick to take the bait when provoked by people like Draco, or in some cases, his own friends. Mia was just glad that Sirius and Remus never played on her brother's weaknesses.

"Oh, Jamie. That temper of yours is going to get you into trouble."

"It already *did* by the looks of it," Remus muttered.

"So just the three of us then?" Sirius asked.

"Three of us what?" Mia looked up, smiling as poor Remus—despite being so ill—still shoved a bowl of porridge in front of her. She gently patted him on the head in thanks for the effort, silently telling him there was no need.

"Hogsmeade," Sirius replied.

"I'll be in bed. Not feeling up to sitting up, let alone walking all around the village. You two go," Remus insisted.

Mia caught a sudden change in the tone of his voice. She turned and looked at him and wondered if he was up to something.

"How about it, kitten?" Sirius smirked, waggling his eyebrows at her. "Come to Hogsmeade with me?"

"Umm . . . okay," Mia said, a bit on edge considering he was in such a good mood, which was drastically different from how he returned to Hogwarts after the Christmas holidays.

"It's a date." Sirius grinned and smacked his hands on the table. The loud slap reverberated through the table, causing James to yelp.

"You sure you don't want to go?" Mia turned and looked back to Remus, who was smiling softly, picking chocolate chips out of his demolished scone and eating them individually.

"No, no," Remus replied. "You two go and have fun . . . by yourselves. Enjoy the holiday."

"What holiday?" Mia asked.

Before anyone could answer, the owls flew into the Great Hall carrying an assortment of envelopes, boxes and packages. A few letters fell in front of Remus, but he pushed them aside, ignoring them completely. At least ten envelopes and three small rectangular boxes were dropped in front of James, a few landing on his head and falling to the floor, though it looked as though he did not notice.

One by one, over a dozen owls hovered over the Gryffindor table, showering Sirius with letters and boxes of all shapes and sizes—most of which were pink or red.

Mia paled in understanding, feeling her heart drop into her stomach. "Oh no."

Remus smirked up at her. "Oh yes. You, my dear Mia, just agreed to go to *Hogsmeade*, on a *date* with *Sirius Black* . . . for *Valentine's Day*."

"I didn't *mean* to," she hissed down at him quietly while Sirius collected his many deliveries, separating them into stacks. "You did this on purpose, didn't you? Remus, is that why you've been . . . avoiding me?"

He shrugged, pushing the plate of chocolateless scone crumbs away from him. "I figured if Pads was going to smarten up, this weekend would be an opportune moment."

Annoyed, she looked around the Great Hall for the first time since sitting down at the table. Couples all around the room were exchanging cards and gifts. Two rosy-cheeked Hufflepuffs with swollen lips were being escorted out by a perturbed-looking Professor McGonagall. A pair of Ravenclaws were snogging beneath their table. Three Slytherin girls on the other side of the room were taking turns shooting heart-shaped bubbles out of their wands. When the bubbles burst over the table, rose petals showered down.

Mia cringed in disgust. "Do I look like the kind of girl who can be swept off her feet with roses and hearts?"

"I'm being as considerate as I can be right now, but don't try my patience by asking me what kind of girl you look like." Remus stared at her, and she quickly noticed the change in his eye colour. He sat up for the first time since arriving at the table just to whisper into her ear, "I, of all people, know what it takes to sweep you off your feet."

Mia did her best not to blush but was failing.

"You'll notice, though, Sirius presented you with neither roses nor hearts, just the request that you accompany him to the village."

She huffed, deciding to ignore Remus. Looking at the stack of Valentines and boxes of sweets in front of Sirius, she gestured flippantly to the piles and asked, "What is all of this nonsense?"

"The usual." Sirius shrugged, using his wand to separate the piles further. Mia noticed that he was resolutely not letting his fingers touch a single thing on the table. "All right, are we ready? Peter get over here. Prongs, I know you're heartbroken, and Moony's under the weather, but I really don't think Frank is going to be enough if this gets out of hand."

Mia watched curiously as both Remus and James sat up, relocating on either side of a very nervous Peter. Frank sat beside Alice and an amused-looking Mary.

"Am I missing something?" Mia asked.

"Oh, that's right," Mary said. "You and Remus went down to Hogsmeade early last year and missed the deliveries. Sirius got a load of gifts last year on Valentine's Day, only he wasn't smart enough to inspect them all." When Sirius flipped her a rude hand gesture, Mary burst into laughter.

"What happened? I remember last year. Remus and I were running an errand for Dumbledore and were supposed to meet you three—" Mia gestured to James, Sirius, and Peter, "—at the Three Broomsticks for lunch, but you never showed."

"That's because they were locked in our dorm all day long wrangling Sirius." Remus smirked, and Sirius turned and gave him a scathing look in return. "He was still completely nutters by the time I got back."

"What *happened*?" Mia repeated.

Everyone turned and looked at Sirius who was turning a little red in the face. "It's nothing, Mi. Someone . . . just sort of . . . slipped me a Love Potion. It was no big deal."

"No big deal?" James yelled, wide-eyed. It was the first lively thing Mia had seen him do that morning. "You punched Peter in the face because you said he was keeping you from your true love, a third year Hufflepuff you'd never even met!"

"It wasn't that bad," Sirius said quietly.

Peter glared at him, clearly still not happy about being punched a year earlier. "You tried transfiguring a bag of Galleons into a diamond ring so you could go and propose marriage."

"They're exaggerating."

Remus chuckled softly. "Am I exaggerating when I say that when I walked in the dorm room, James and Peter were trying to get your clothes back on you because you said that you couldn't possibly wait a minute longer to ravish your blushing bri—"

"Exaggerating!" Sirius snapped. "Can we please ignore the past and get a move on?" He growled under his breath, and his three friends all shared a laugh at his expense. Mary and Alice were giggling, and Frank was shaking his head at the sight.

Mia was annoyed, glaring at the envelopes and boxes. "Poor you. It must be *so* awful to have girls literally throwing themselves at your feet. Or on our breakfast table to be more accurate. If I get glitter in my porridge from one of those insipid cards, I'll throw a fork at your head. It's looking a little big."

Sirius leant across the table and smirked at her. "Green is a good look on you, kitten."

"Maybe I should go sit with the Slytherins then," she snipped at him with narrowed eyes. "You are incredibly presumptuous. So what's your little plan for getting through all your fan mail?"

"Peter taste tests all the chocolate. James and Remus keep him in check to make sure he doesn't end up accidentally betrothed to some strumpet on my behalf."

"You're *willing* to do this?" Mia stared at Peter, who simply shrugged. She rolled her eyes. Of course Peter would do this. He had no backbone whatsoever. She was surprised that his Animagus form was not an earthworm. "Why don't you just throw the chocolate away?"

"Because it's not *all* tainted," Sirius answered, with a tone that had an underlying *dub* to it.

"Is it really worth all this trouble?"

"It's not for *me*." Sirius shrugged and turned to look at Remus, who looked slightly abashed by Mia's sudden stare.

She rolled her eyes so hard she nearly went cross-eyed in the process. "Really?"

"It's a *waste* to just throw it all out," Remus argued.

"You lot are utterly astonishing. Fine, let's get on with this nonsense." She waved her hand as if she were giving her express permission for the boys to continue.

The first box was opened by Peter since Sirius refused to even touch it, James was wounded, and Remus was still ill. The long, red box wrapped in paper with tiny pink hearts on it was tied with a golden ribbon that reminded Mia a little too much of the crimson box she had been given by Future Remus for her nineteenth birthday.

Peter opened the top of the present, revealing an assortment of chocolates inside.

"Any sign of evil tampering?" Sirius asked, peeking over James's shoulder as though he were waiting for the box to explode.

James, in turn, retrieved a card attached and opened it carefully, watching as nearly a pint of glitter mixed with tiny pink and red paper hearts fell out of the envelope and onto his lap.

Mia covered her breakfast.

"I wouldn't eat *any* of these," James cautioned. "This letter is . . . graphic." He blushed and made to hand the letter to Sirius, but Mia snatched it from his grasp with narrowed eyes.

*My Handsome Black Lion,*

*Come to Ravenclaw Tower tonight. The answer to our door's riddle is "Water." My bed is up the stairs, fourth on the right. I'll be wearing nothing that you can't lick off me.*

*Callista Hitchins*

"Who the *fuck* is Callista Hitchins!?" Mia snapped viciously as she finished reading the letter, her face reddening. The people around the table all went wide-eyed, but Remus had an amused grin on his face as though this were exactly what he was waiting for.

"The future Mrs Peter Pettigrew, that's who!" Peter shouted and stood up, his eyes glazed over and chocolate smeared on his open mouth as he began frantically searching the Great Hall.

Both James and Remus reached up and took a hold of one of Peter's shoulders, holding him down. "Told you this one was tainted. Bin it," James said, passing the box down to Frank, whose job was to toss the poisoned pile.

Mia seethed. "Are any of them anonymous?"

"No." Sirius shook his head, chuckling in amusement. "They all seem pretty intent on making sure I know exactly who they're all from."

"Mary, do you have a quill and parchment?" she asked. "I've left my bag in my room."

"Umm . . . sure," Mary said nervously, reaching into her bag and pulling out the requested items for her friend. "Do I even want to know? You've got that scary look in your eye, Mia."

"I *love* that look." Sirius grinned, his grey eyes darkening.

Despite being completely distracted, Peter was given another box to unwrap. They had little time to get through the large stack of gifts, seeing that Sirius fully intended on taking Mia down to Hogsmeade, but he was apparently not going to miss watching Peter humiliate himself just a little for the sake of being on time.

"Do you think Callista would like these?" Peter asked, his eyes misty as he chewed on one of the chocolates.

"Sorry, mate." James grinned and patted Peter consolingly on the back. "These are clean and, therefore, belong to Mr Moony." He passed the box to the side where Remus began a small collection, replacing Peter's empty plate with a new box.

"Ooo. Another card." James chuckled as he opened the envelope. "Aww, Pads, she wrote you a poem."

Sirius grabbed the card before Mia had a chance to, and he laughed, reading it aloud after clearing his throat, "'Roses are red, violets are blue. Meet me in the dungeons, for a right seeing to.'"

The entire table—sans Mia—burst into laughter.

She narrowed her eyes, feeling sick to her stomach. "Who was that?"

"Umm . . ." Sirius looked at the bottom of the card. "Kathleen Birchgrove. Name doesn't ring a bell," he admitted, handing the card over.

Mia passed the envelope over to Alice while writing the name down on her list.

"Well, this card's not so bad." James passed the box of sweets over to Peter, who immediately began eating. "Seems like something *you'd* write, Mia."

Sirius smirked as he grabbed the card, reading the verse aloud. "'This bud of love, by summer's ripening breath. May prove a beauteous flower when next we meet.'"

"THAT!" Mia shrieked, "is Shakespeare!" She snatched the card violently out of Sirius's hands. Her eyes lit up, and her hair sparked in fury. "It is uncreative, pretentious, and I wouldn't be caught dead quoting some thieving wizard posing as a Muggle poet!"

Remus burst into laughter so loud that he had to bury his head in his folded arms as he leant forward on the table, one arm eventually moving to grasp at his side as he continued to howl.

"Shut up, Remus!" Mia snapped.

By the end of breakfast, Peter had confessed his eternal love for seventeen individual witches from three of the four Houses in Hogwarts. Apparently, Gryffindors knew better. He attempted to propose to ten of them and began trying to take his clothes off during the last three boxes of chocolates he was forced to sample. By the time Frank had thrown every last tainted treat in the bin, Remus had Peter in a full body bind. For the sake of their friend's dignity, James placed a temporary Silencing Charm on him to keep

him from singing sonnets to a few confused Ravenclaws who had come over to take a peek at Sirius's Valentine's stash.

Mia had a list of seventeen girls that had tried to slip Sirius a Love Potion. In addition to Callista Hitchins, eight other Ravenclaws joined the stack, including Sophia Buckley, Mirabella Ellis, Abbie Snow, and Adelia Chapman. A small collection of Hufflepuffs—whom Mia previously thought too sweet to do something so devious—included Heather Hopkirk, Ophelia Shaw, and Lavinia Sheppard. There were even some Slytherins including Bonnie Penrose, Kathleen Birchgrove, Ambrosia Mablethorpe, and even the infamous Elora Zabini.

Mia fumed, very much lacking the strict sense of morality that she had once possessed as Hermione Granger.

"Give me all the cards. All the ones from girls who tried to poison him." She reached her hand out fiercely to Alice, collecting the pink and red envelopes from her.

Sirius rolled his eyes. "I'd hardly call it poisoning. A little pushy, but—"

"Pushy?" Mia growled out the word, hair sparking, leaving small scorches on the Gryffindor table.

She placed the pile of envelopes in front of her and glared down at them, muttering a quiet incantation and waving her wand over the bundle. They glowed dark red for a moment before disappearing from sight.

"Mia?" James stared at his sister. "Do I want to know what you just did?"

Remus raised a brow. "Better yet, do you need an alibi?"

She shrugged innocently. "I just returned them to the sender."

One by one, each letter magically appeared in a puff of red smoke before girls across the Great Hall. The Gryffindor table fell eerily silent as they watched and waited for any sign of explosion as the returned cards were reopened. Upon opening, instead of the original Valentine inside, there was a small untraceable note:

*Love Potions are IMMORAL and should be BANNED at this School.*

As if the notion of being caught sending Love-Potion-tainted chocolates were not enough, one by one, seventeen girls began screaming. Their shrieks of horror echoed off of the surrounding walls and vaulted ceiling. Covering their faces, the witches dashed toward the exit, but a few stopped, tears in their eyes to turn and look in the direction of

the Gryffindor table where they met the shocked expressions of James, Peter, Remus, Frank, Alice, and Mary.

Mia, however, looked full of righteous anger, and Sirius sat wide-eyed.

"You're horrible!" one girl screamed, running out of the Great Hall in sobs, and Mia growled, as her inner Animagus stirred.

The formerly beautiful brunette Ravenclaw, along with sixteen other girls, had their faces horribly disfigured by a series of red and purple pustules spread across their foreheads, clearly spelling: *S-L-A-G*.

Those who were in the A.D. knew exactly who had set the jinx upon the girls, so Mia knew her time was limited if she wanted to stay ahead of the rumours—true or not—that she had cursed her fellow students.

"I'll be going to the hospital wing," she explained with a calm tone as the rest of the Gryffindors stared up at her in silence. "I'll collect an antidote for Peter while I'm there."

The struggling boy let out a distraught cry, breaking James's Silencing Charm in displeasure at the idea of being forced *out* of love with one Elora Zabini.

When her friends continued to gape at her in shock, she sighed. "Don't worry. I'll tell Madam Pomfrey how to take the jinx off of them."

She knew back in her original timeline, the *sneak*, Marietta Edgecombe, still bore the scars of her betrayal of Dumbledore's Army, but this, Mia could admit, had been a little extreme. She had merely wanted to make a point: no one messed with what was hers.

"We still on for Hogsmeade?" she asked Sirius.

"*Fuck* yes," Sirius said, staring at her as she stood there, looking just a bit crazed. When she smirked at him, his grin widened, and he leered at her excitedly as she walked out of the Great Hall in the wake of the chaos she had created on his behalf. When she opened the doors to leave, Sirius could still hear the echoing sound of crying coming from Mia's victims.

Clearing his throat, he sat back and tried to subtly put his hands beneath the table to adjust a sudden problem. The moment he cupped himself through his trousers, James punched him in the arm, causing Sirius to accidentally hit himself in the dick. Groaning, he leant forward and put his face on the table, coughing. "You . . . c-cock."

"That's still my sister!"

Leaning to the side so he could look at his best friend, Sirius forced himself to smile through the pain. "I've never seen her so furious. I can't help that her hair sparking turns me on."

"Knock it off, Padfoot!" James growled and tried to punch Sirius in the arm. Sirius grabbed James's hand with a devious grin.

As expected, James used his broken hand to hit Sirius with instead. "Ow!"

## Chapter Forty-Five

### *Incredibly Stupid*

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*Are you aware of what you make me feel, baby  
Right now I feel invisible to you, like I'm not real  
Didn't you feel me lock my arms around you  
Why'd you turn away?*  
(Losing Grip - Avril Lavigne)

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**February 14th, 1976**

"Am I incredibly stupid?" Mia asked as she stood in front of the full-length mirror in the dorm room she shared with Lily, Alice, and Mary, looking over her outfit of choice.

She had yet to fully adjust to the Muggle attire of the 1970's, and it was rarely a concern considering she wore her robes and uniform at school and at home all of her clothing was made by Tilly. However, the older she got, the more she was forced into shopping trips with her female friends, which always seemed to land them somewhere in Muggle London. Over the summer, Lily had all but insisted that Mia purchase the tightest pair of denim bell bottoms that possibly ever existed.

Mia paled at her reflection, shaking her head and laughing at the fact that she looked almost identical to old photos of her Muggle mother. Her ensemble came complete with a flowy blouse, and the only jewellery she ever wore: the charmed Galleon necklace James had given her, the earrings from the younger Sirius, and the goblin-forged bracelet from the older Sirius.

"Stupid for what?" Lily asked, grinning as she slipped herself into a dark blue jumpsuit, her long red hair curled slightly and hanging over her shoulders. "You look amazing, by the way."

"I look ridiculous. These are too tight. Why do trousers have to be this tight?"

"It's the Muggle fashion," Lily explained with a smile. She chuckled a little as she helped Mia with her belt, ignoring the withering glare being sent her way. "You purebloods are so much fun. Besides, I never see you complain about tight trousers when boys are wearing them."

Mia blushed. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Lily laughed. "Oh please."

Mia sighed, annoyed with how self-conscious her reflection looked in the mirror. "Lily, am I incredibly stupid?"

"Are we talking about you cursing twenty girls in the Great Hall this morning for hitting on Black?" Lily asked using her perfect voice. Mia rolled her eyes.

"It was seventeen. And they didn't *hit* on Sirius, they tried to poison him. Besides," she said as she took in a slow, deep breath to calm herself, "I already gave the counter-curse to Madam Pomfrey. They'll be fine."

"So your self-imposed stupidity must be in regards to your rumoured date with the infamous Lothario?" Lily asked with a raised brow.

Mia knew her friend was only teasing, but the stack of Valentine's Day cards on the breakfast table, and the rumours she had heard over the years, not to mention the few times she had actually seen Sirius sneaking off with some random witch behind corners and down dark corridors made her feel terribly inexperienced by comparison.

Awkwardly, she smoothed her hands down her blouse, frowning at her reflection.

"Oh, Mia, I was just kidding." Lily grabbed her hand and pulled her over to sit on the bed beside her.

"I'm not good at this, Lily. I can't look at him and not think about . . ."

"His past?"

*The future*, Mia thought but said nothing.

"Does it upset you? The gossip about him?"

"No," Mia said, surprised by her answer, but then she had known the older Sirius's reputation long before she had ever been sent back to meet his younger self. "What bothers me is that he's unreliable. I can't trust that he'll tell me the truth. He's all sarcasm and jokes, and while it's endearing—slightly," she allowed with a roll of her eyes, "he's not open about anything. It scares me."

"You dated a werewolf for a year," Lily pointed out.

"Yes! And I'm more afraid of Sirius Black!" Mia shouted. "What the hell does that say about me?"

"Probably that you really like him. And you're afraid of getting too close and getting hurt. Do you think he'd hurt you?"

"He can't," Mia said, thinking about what her mother had told her about the Soul Bond and how she and Sirius would be incapable of truly harming one another. Although, she knew that's not what Lily meant. "I've known Sirius for years. He's always bordered this strange line between protector, friend, and . . . something else."

"Is he the reason you and Remus broke up?" Lily asked, her brows furrowed.

"Yes," Mia admitted, sighing as she put her face in her hands. "And no. It's complicated."

"Uncomplicate it."

"I don't think I can."

She almost laughed at the idea of confessing her secrets. Telling Lily all about how she was sent back in time by an older Remus—who had a wife and child but never before thought to mention that he had dated *her* in the past. How Sirius had been dead, and how she had brought him back to life, thus provoking an ancient and rare bond that tied the two of them together.

*Oh and you're also my best friend's dead mother, and his father—aka your husband—is my brother.*

"Let's just say that Remus and I aren't meant to be."

Lily smirked incredulously. "Do you really believe in soul mates?"

"Lily, there are some things that as a Muggle-born you're going to need to open your mind up to," Mia said and then silently laughed, realising how pissed off she would be if someone had said that to her. "Werewolves have mates. I am not Remus's. If I was, believe me, I would be with him."

"Oh." Lily frowned. "Does he know . . .?"

"Who his mate is?" Mia shook her head. "It's rare that werewolves ever find them. I believe she's out there, but he's not so sure."

"So, that means he can't be with anyone else?"

Mia could see the sadness in Lily's green eyes, and she smiled at the pure empathy in their depths. "He can, it's just . . . I don't know. He's described it as knowing that perfection is right there, but not being able to reach it. Like trying to scratch an itch on your back. You can stretch and contort yourself all you want, and it might feel good, but if you can't reach that one spot, then it's a little frustrating."

"That's awful. Poor Remus. How does Sirius fit into this?"

"You could say . . . our magic is compatible." Mia shrugged not knowing how else to explain it without confessing too much.

Dumbledore had cautioned her to keep her secrets for the safety of others, and if there was anyone she wanted to keep safe just as much as her boys, it was Lily Evans. She knew, in the end, what would happen, but if there was one thing Mia was not going to chance it was the eventual birth of Harry Potter.

"I think you should give it a chance," Lily said with a look of determination. "If the only reason you're holding back is because you're scared, then that's not very Gryffindor of you. So—" She took in a deep breath, and Mia smirked at her sudden gusto. "—suck it up! Take your tiny little arse in those tight little trousers downstairs, and have fun on your date!"

"Your optimism is both infectious and incredibly irritating. Speaking of dates, how's Amos?"

Lily glowered. "He'll live. Your brother on the other hand . . ."

---

Sirius watched as James paced back and forth by the front doors of the castle as the other students began filing out to leave. Remus was already upstairs in his bed resting up for the full moon tomorrow night, and Peter was in the hospital wing—apparently, seventeen love potions required more than one simple antidote. James would have been on the pitch, except he had come to see Mia and Sirius off.

"Do *not* snog my sister. Do *not* touch my sister's arse. Do *not* touch my sister's waist. Do *not* touch my sister's . . . Do *not* touch my *sister*."

Sirius blinked at him, feigning ignorance. "So you don't want me to touch . . . your . . . *aunt*?"

"Pads," James warned, seething.

"What if she slips and falls and hurts herself?" Sirius asked with a smirk. "You expect me to just leave her there on the ground? That's not very gentlemanly of me."

"You are not a gentleman, Padfoot. Hence this little speech."

"I remember the speech you gave to Moony, I think I can switch out my name for his and we can be done with this."

"You get a different speech, arsehole," James snapped. "My sister will not be another notch on your bloody bedpost."

"So little faith in me, Prongs?" Sirius said with a light-hearted voice, but his eyes had narrowed in annoyance at the fact that his best friend clearly thought so little of him.

Sirius wanted to tell James that Mia could have been his girlfriend a long time ago, but he had sacrificed that potential for her sake. He tried not to think about that. His reasons before had been sound, and they had not really changed. Had they?

It was moments like these that made him regret every one night stand and quick shag in the broom closet he had ever taken part in. Sure, when it happened it was helpful in burying the shitty feelings inside of him. Shagging Muggle-borns and half-bloods always made him smile a little, as though he were somehow ruining the Black family name in the process. The short, sweet moments he shared with random girls helped to make him forget that he would eventually have to go to a home where he was constantly reminded of his duties to his family. His family, who did nothing but tell him what a worthless piece of blood-traitor trash he was. Good for nothing.

Well, Sirius knew that there was at least *one thing* he was apparently very good for, and he had a long list of girls to verify it. Loudly. Multiple times.

Over Christmas holidays, his parents sat him down and told him they were in the process of looking for his future bride. Suddenly, the scandalous nights with random Ravenclaws stopped being fun. He had turned sixteen in November, and Walburga bitched and moaned about how he should have been marked for the cause over Christmas, but their guest of honour had business elsewhere. Sirius did not want to know who they were talking about, but he knew *exactly* what they meant when they said the word "marked."

Most nights he struggled to sleep, dreading summer holidays when he knew he would have to go home. Ridiculous days like Valentine's Day made him live in the moment, forget that he would have to face the expectations of his family soon. He could be a stupid, impulsive teenager, for now.

But James was quick to remind him that he could be neither stupid nor impulsive with Mia.

"Fine. I won't fucking touch your bloody sister."

"Wow."

"Oh fuck," Sirius muttered and turned, cringing to see Mia scowling at him from the bottom of the staircase. "You're an asshole, Prongs."

"Lovely way to start off our date," Mia said scathingly as she stormed past both of them, shoving Sirius in the shoulder as she moved. Lily, just behind her, gave James a burning glare as she pushed her way through the door, linking her arm with Amos Diggory's as she reached him.

"Fan-fucking-tastic," Sirius groaned, patting James on the back. "Thanks for that, mate."

"Well, I didn't want her upset," James murmured under his breath.

"I know, I know," Sirius said. Then, with his friend distracted, he slapped James in the dick with the back of his hand, sending him groaning to the ground while Sirius darted off after Mia.

"Mia!" He called after her, but she was not stopping. "Mia—Fuck!" He slipped, his dragonhide boots not having much purchase in the snow. "Kitten, will you wait up?"

"Careful." She turned and glared at him. "Don't get too close. Wouldn't want you to accidentally touch me."

"You know that was because of your bloody brother," Sirius rolled his eyes as he used a nearby Hufflepuff to help regain his balance. Smiling gratefully, he scooted off after Mia before she had a chance to outrun him. "I'm apparently good enough to be his best friend, but a far cry from being worthy enough to even hold your bloody hand."

"Do you really think Jamie is capable of just forgetting your reputation?" she asked him sharply.

"Considering how often he asks me for details, I'm pretty certain it's impossible. Unless you know how to Obliviate him for me," Sirius suggested with a smirk. "Look, you don't want this to be a real date, you let me know right now, kitten."

Mia said nothing.

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"Why'd you and Remus break up?" he asked, splitting the silence between them that had lasted the whole walk down to Hogsmeade. High Street was flooded with other students, mostly couples rushing off to Honeydukes or Madam Puddifoot's. Mia rolled her

eyes at the sight, and Sirius took notice and let out a laugh. "I'd have thought you'd be the romantic. Aren't you and Moony always quoting poetry at one another?"

"Not always poetry," Mia argued, turning back to look at him. "As for our breakup, I told you. We made better friends."

"But you're willing to come on a date with *me*?" Sirius asked. "Does that mean *our* friendship isn't worth saving?"

"Where do you want to go first?" Mia asked, ignoring his questions.

"You lead." Sirius shrugged and began following her through the street. "So, if you and Moony are better as friends, why do the two of you still sneak off together?"

Mia turned, gaping at him. "What?"

"You and him are hiding something." Sirius stared at her. "I know you are. He sneaks off in the middle of the night sometimes, comes back into the room smelling like the soaps from the prefects' bathroom."

"I imagine he's leaving to shower, then. What does that have to do with me?"

"You smell like the same soaps," Sirius pointed out, and he felt a growl deep inside his chest forcing its way out when he noticed the skin of her neck flush at his words. "Taking trips together up to the private baths for a little post-breakup snog?"

She turned and snarled at him. "Green is a *hideous* colour on you."

Sirius glared back at her, feeling the hair on the back of his neck stand on end the way that his fur did in his Animagus form. "I don't share."

"I'm not *yours*."

"Funny, the way you cursed all those girls this morning sure seemed to say otherwise."

"I would have done the same thing for Jamie or Remus," she insisted.

He rolled his eyes, not believing her for one minute. "So, let's get some things in the air, kitten," he said as he continued following her, casting a dirty look at Snape while he watched him enter Dervish and Banges. "Are you pissed at me because I kissed you a few years ago and then walked off, kissed you last Christmas and then walked off, or because I told James that I wouldn't touch you?"

"None!" she snapped. "All!"

He sighed irritably. "Merlin, you're bloody frustrating. When did you and I stop being able to just . . . I don't know? Talk?" He reached for her hand, pulling her around to

face him. "We've been friends since we were eleven, Mia. You seemed just fine with me, for the most part, the whole time you dated Remus. Now you're either pissed off at me all the time, or . . . petting my fucking head in the common room."

Mia scowled. "Want me to stop?"

"Being pissed? Yes!" Sirius yelled. "What the hell do you want from me?"

"I don't know! I don't . . . I don't know."

"Can you try and figure it out?" he asked sincerely.

"Learn Occlumency," she blurted out. "Learn Occlumency, and I'll tell you everything."

"So you are keeping secrets?"

She chuckled quietly. "All girls have secrets."

The two made their way into the Three Broomsticks. Sirius ushered Mia into a booth with his hand on her lower back, tossing his usual charming smile up at the bartender. "Rosie, two of your best butterbeers for me and the lovely lady."

They ate in virtual silence. Sirius gave her the time she needed, though he would never offer such peace to any other girl who all but ignored him while on a date. After a long while, she looked up at him and smiled; the sparkle in her eyes had returned. It lit something inside of Sirius and made him grin at her. Not his usual flirtatious act, but a true grin. A genuine smile, and he gave it to her because, in this moment, he was actually happy.

"I'm sorry about earlier," Mia admitted. "I just . . . I feel like I'm having trust issues lately."

Sirius smiled in return, not placating her with audible forgiveness as they left the Three Broomsticks and walked back up the street.

"Do you care if I stop in at Honeydukes?" she asked. "I promised Remus I'd get him some Chocolate Frogs."

"Getting the ex presents while on a date?" Sirius teased, tucking a lock of hair beneath the wool knit cap she wore. "You're not doing much for my ego here, kitten. Go on," he said, gesturing toward Honeydukes. "I was thinking about heading into Zonko's myself."

"I'll just be a few minutes." Mia smiled and squeezed his hand, rushing off into the shop.

"Was wondering if you'd show up."

Sirius turned to see Marlene McKinnon approaching him. *Well, shit.* He nodded at her, trying to be polite. "McKinnon."

"You didn't answer my card this morning." She pouted, her blue eyes flashing as she tossed her long blond hair with one hand. "Hurt my feelings."

"If you didn't notice, I had quite the pile-up of mail." Sirius chuckled, purposely not making eye contact.

He had gone back to his room after the debacle in the Great Hall, fully intent on finding some good sweets that he had sneaked away in his trunk. He wanted to bring them down to Peter in the hospital wing. A card on his pillow stole his attention, however, and he recognised Marlene's handwriting immediately. He burned the thing without opening it.

"What can I say? I'm a popular bloke."

"I see that."

"My date's in Honeydukes," he explained when he saw her looking up and down the street as though she were preparing to Disapparate away with him Side-Alonged against his will. Considering the shitstorm of Love Potions that came in his mail, he would not put it past her. She had not exactly been amicable about him *not* wanting to shag her again.

"New girlfriend?"

"You know me better than that." He laughed, hoping to remind her of how unreliable he was. "When have I *ever* had a girlfriend?"

"I thought *I* came a little close." She leant in, touching the collar of his robes. "Wouldn't you say? I thought what we had was pretty special."

"Special, sure," Sirius acknowledged, not wanting to hurt her feelings. "Fleeting, though. I'm not good with the commitment stuff. You know that." He shrugged his shoulders, hoping that it would shrug her off of him, but she held on tight.

She stared hard into his eyes, and Sirius groaned in irritation. He knew that look. It had been the look she had given him the morning after he left her in front of the Shrieking Shack after their first snog. It was the same look she had given him later when she saw him after their first shag—where he also up and left her. It was determination. Marlene McKinnon did not take rejection well, and Sirius did not like needing to give a firm no to the girls that got a little clingy.

The Ravenclaw, however, was pushing it as she leant in much too close for his liking—at least for his liking while he was on a date with another girl.

He froze, shocked, wondering if he should shove her into the nearest snowbank. He pulled away from the girl too slowly.

Marlene's lips landed on his.

"Sirius?"

*Fuck.*

He turned quickly, pushing Marlene off of him as he spotted Mia standing outside of Honeydukes, glaring at the scene in front of her.

"*She* kissed *me!*" Sirius shouted, pointing at Marlene. He turned back and glared at the blond, only to see her grinning up at him with a vindictive look on her face. "You planned this? What the hell, Marlene?"

"See how *you* like being left alone!" Marlene huffed and then turned to walk away.

When Sirius turned back to explain and apologise, Mia was gone.

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Remus was too restless to sleep. A headache from that morning had edged itself away, but the lingering symptoms of unease continued to plague him. If there were not three feet of snow on the ground, he might have thought to go outside and run the energy off. As it was, he tried to force himself to relax in the common room with a book, until he felt something hot in the pocket of his trousers and curiously reached down to retrieve the charmed Galleon that Mia used for their A.D. meetings.

Looking at the coin, Remus raised a brow.

*RoR?*

*-MP*

She wanted to meet in the Room of Requirement *now*? Worried that something happened, Remus stood and made his way over to Peter's bed and dug through his friend's trunk, knowing that Peter never kept the Galleon on him—always afraid of accidentally spending it. When he found Peter's charmed Galleon in a pouch in his friend's trunk, Remus saw that there was no message on it. So Mia was not calling a group meeting. This message was specifically for *him*.

*Your date?*

*-RL*

Remus tapped the Galleon to relay the question to her.

A moment later he got a reply.

*Need you.*

*-MP*

He sighed, shaking his head, already running through the list of how many ways Sirius had fucked this up.

---

On the grass of the recreated Forbidden Forest in the Room of Requirement, Mia sat, embracing her knees against her chest. She had to focus on swallowing the emotions that had threatened to show since the moment she stepped out of Honeydukes. Or maybe before that. Before, when they had walked High Street screaming at one another. Would that be her life? Fighting with Sirius?

"It's day."

Mia turned at the sound of his voice to see Remus looking curiously around the room.

"Normally when you turn the room into the forest, you make it night."

"I didn't want to remind you of the moon right now," she lied. The truth was, she could not bear to look at the stars.

Without another word, she stood and rushed forward, running into Remus's arms as they opened for her. She clung to him tightly and sighed with relief when she felt him nuzzle her neck and breathe her in. *Safe*. Here in his arms, she was safe. No speaking was necessary.

Mia turned her chin up and pulled him down to meet her lips, trying to convey her need. This close to the full moon and having lacked "affection" all week, she knew that he would break easily. A part of her felt bad about it, but Remus did not fight back in the slightest, responding to her immediately and aggressively, delving into her mouth with his

tongue while his hands took her by the hips—hard—and tipped her backward until she fell to the grass with him on top of her.

"Remus, please," Mia moaned as he pulled away from her mouth to stare down into her eyes.

His were golden, and for at least a moment, she knew that hers would be amber.

He tore his fingers into the unbelievably tight denim surrounding her arse and thighs while she simultaneously pulled her blouse over her head. She felt him shiver when his hands touched her bare skin. He grinned as he removed each and every last scrap of fabric from her form, leaving himself fully clothed in the process.

Mia looked up at him eagerly, and despite his golden eyes, the growl in his throat, and his flaring nostrils—all the obvious signs that the wizard shifting above her was more Moony than Remus—she felt safe. She tried to reach for him, but he smacked her hands away as he undid his own buckle, taking full control as he pulled his cock free of his trousers.

*Fix me*, she thought with tears in her eyes.

With no preparation or warning, Remus sheathed himself inside of her to the hilt, and Mia cried out at the intrusion that caused a lustful mixture of pain and pleasure to churn inside of her body.

She closed her eyes and let herself get lost in the moment, ignoring the fact that she was doing exactly what she had always accused Sirius of doing—using sex as a way to distract from pain and hurt. Despite the fact that her body was growing tenser with every thrust, Mia tried to relax into Remus's hands—though his grip was so tight, she knew she would be bruised come morning.

There was nothing but the two of them, the sky, and the earth. Remus was rarely one to speak during sex, especially this close to the moon when he offered her his primal grunts and growls, but between her own gasps and building moans of ecstasy, she heard him lace words between each thrust—"tight," and "wet," and "deep,"—and a very possessive tone when he groaned out, "Ours."

He hitched her leg over his hip and the new angle let him drive deeper, hit harder.

When he bottomed out inside of her, Mia fell over the edge.

She gripped his shoulders, digging her nails into his flesh, wrapping her legs tightly around his waist, and holding him against her, bringing him down quickly in the aftermath

of her shattering. She relished the muffled sound from his lips that he cried into the crevice of her neck as his body went rigid above hers.

It was easy. Being with Remus was easy. It was a dance that she knew all the steps to. A song where she knew all the lyrics. He was *Hogwarts, A History*, and she had memorised every single word of him—could see every page behind closed eyelids.

*My heart. My heart. My heart.*

Her soul protested.

The moment she came down from her high, reality flooded back. Somehow, the intense physical pleasure she had brought her walls down for, left her open and vulnerable. Unable to stop herself, Mia burst into tears.

Remus reacted immediately. Pulling away from her and looking down into her face with guilt, he gasped. "Mia? I didn't mean to . . . Are you okay? I'm so sorry if I hurt you . . ." He tried to apologise, but a look of confusion crossed his face when she shook her head and tried to snuggle further into him.

"Mia?" he asked, clearly worried. "What did Sirius do?"

She could not tell Remus the reason she was really crying. She had been upset at seeing Sirius kiss another girl—or as he claimed, another girl kissing *him*. She had been angry over their fight and bitter about the way he always treated whatever relationship they had with such frivolity, but she was not angry with *him*.

She was angry with *herself*.

It was easy to be with Remus in this time, to be open with him, because she had his letter to guide her. A letter where he begged her to not blame herself for what the future had in store. Remus did not blame her for not changing the outcome of the war. He did not blame her for not saving his friends. He did not blame her for leaving him alone for decades.

It was hard to look at Sirius and see the pain he was quietly suffering through because of his family. He was already turning cold and hard, and anytime he pulled away from her, closed himself off from her, all she saw was a stoney, angry face. Waxy skin, sunken eyes, and the long, matted hair of escaped murderer, Sirius Black. The man she met in the Shrieking Shack all those years ago.

By not changing the future, she would leave Remus alone, and he forgave her for it.

By not changing the future, she would leave Sirius broken—twelve years in Azkaban.

Who could possibly forgive her for that?

"Mia?" Remus asked her again, drawing her back to him. "Mia, what did Sirius do?"

*Nothing*, she thought. *He's an innocent man. He didn't deserve it.*

She had to tell Remus something, so she whispered, "McKinnon," knowing it made the most sense right now.

"That asshole." Remus sighed and kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry, love. I pushed you into this too soon."

"Remus? I . . . I think something bad is going to happen to Sirius, and I don't know how to stop it." She frowned, thinking of everything in the future. Sirius blasted off his family tree, framed for the murder of his friends, losing everything and everyone, and imprisoned for twelve years.

"Mia, it's not your job to fix the world," Remus whispered softly, rolling off of her and wrapping an arm around her waist, pulling her close up against him and moulding her back to his chest. "Sirius needs to figure out how to take care of himself."

Remus tucked himself back into his trousers and relaxed against the grass. Eventually, Mia stopped crying, and he could make out the soft puffs of breath against his neck indicating sleep. Knowing she needed it, and he could use the rest as well, Remus stayed put.

Minutes later, something burned in his pocket, and Remus carefully reached into his trousers, removing the Galleon and glaring at it.

*Where's Mia?*

*-SB*

Remus remained silent as he replied, not wanting to disturb the girl in his arms.

*Our job!*

*-RL*

He glared down at the message that he sent back to his friend, reminding him of the oath they had taken years ago. When Sirius did not reply immediately, Remus sent another message to further his point.

*You fucked up.*  
*-RL*

It was several minutes before the Galleon grew hot in his hand again. When Remus looked down, he saw the reply:

*I know.*  
*-SB*

## Chapter Forty-Six

### *Firewhisky and Honey*

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*Cause I may be bad  
But I'm perfectly good at it  
Sex in the air  
I don't care, I love the smell of it  
(S&M - Rihanna)*

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**March 13th, 1976**

The Room of Requirement was turned into a replica of the Gryffindor common room, as Remus said it was one of the few places where he felt at home. Mia worked on the room, while the other girls collected treats from the kitchen, and the Marauders sneaked into Hogsmeade to acquire drinks. The only difference in the faux Gryffindor common room was the distinct lack of other students. A large table was provided in the centre where gifts—all from Honeydukes—drinks and food were set out like a feast.

It had taken a plethora of promises, pleadings, and many called in favours to get Lily to look the other way when the Marauders brought in firewhisky for Remus's birthday party. She finally relented after Remus pulled the "sad, lonely werewolf who only turns sixteen once" card. The only things Lily insisted on were that the party happen on the weekend—so that the preparations for upcoming O.W.L.s would not be disturbed—and that it take place in the Room of Requirement—so that younger years would not walk in on the older Gryffindors (prefects especially) setting a terrible example for the future of the Wizarding world.

"A toast!" James announced with a grin, pouring the first of what was sure to be many shots of firewhisky for the gathered fifth year Gryffindors. "To Remus. Happy birthday, and many happy returns to you, Moony!"

The small crowd toasted to Remus and downed their firewhisky, though Lily, Alice, and Frank were more than happy with the butterbeer that had also been brought into the castle, courtesy of Madam Rosmerta.

Mary leant forward with a curious expression, setting her glass down on the table. "I have a question. I've wanted to know for a while now. What's with the nicknames?"

"What nicknames?" the four Marauders chorused, their tones innocent despite the identical smirks adorning their faces.

Mia began to chuckle quietly, intrigued to see how the boys got out of this. Playing stupid was not something Mary would likely tolerate.

"Moony," Mary said. "Why do they call you that, Remus?"

"Once, during summer hols after third year, Remus pulled his pants down in front of a group of Muggles," Sirius joked.

James and Peter burst into laughter.

Remus punched Sirius in the arm, indignantly shouting, "I *did not!*"

Mary snickered, red-faced. "Okay, and Padfoot?"

"I have very delicate feet," Sirius said, winking at her as though stating the texture of one's soles was the ultimate pickup line.

Mary, in turn, rolled her eyes and moved on to Peter. "Wormtail?" she asked with a scrunched nose. "Honestly, how do you even *like* that name?"

Peter meekly shrugged. "I'm not exactly a fan. *They* picked it."

"Why?" Alice asked.

"Peter was born with a tail," James said. "They had to cut it off. His mum keeps it in a jar on the mantle."

Both Remus and Sirius howled with laughter, while Peter, wide-eyed, vehemently denied the story in its entirety.

"Care to know why we call James, Prongs?" Sirius asked Mary, a strangely seductive tone in his voice as he waggled his eyebrows.

"Not with *that* look on your face." Lily scoffed, rolling her eyes. "It's probably just as equally disturbing as the rest of your stories, and there'll be just as much truth to it. Honestly, Mary, you shouldn't believe a word they say; it's nothing but sarcasm, arrogance, and exaggerations."

"I exaggerate *nothing*, Evans." James winked at her, the firewhisky clearly helping him shift his love-struck antics into genuine flirting. Neither, however, worked on Lily, as she folded her arms and scooted closer to Mary, further distancing herself from James. He scooted closer to *her* in response.

"I take offence at being called a liar," Sirius declared. "If *anyone* here is a liar, it's Mia. She almost ended up in Slytherin, did you know?" He was glad when Mia smiled at him, though her eyes were slightly narrowed.

After their epically failed date on Valentine's Day, Sirius returned to the castle to find Mia had disappeared somewhere with Remus. Once the two had returned to the common room, Sirius had apologised profusely for what happened with Marlene, and Mia forgave him, hugging him tightly and apologising as well. They both agreed that a first date on Valentine's Day had been a bad idea and that in the future, they would just try to be casual about whatever it was that was happening between them.

Remus had given Sirius the cold shoulder for a week.

When James found out what Sirius had done on his date with Mia, he broke Sirius's nose, being the good brother that he was. Being the good *friend* that he was, he escorted Sirius to the hospital wing where Sirius, being the good friend that *he* was, concocted an amazing story about a Fanged Frisbee flying into his face—the culprit having mysteriously escaped. When Mia heard about what happened from Remus and confronted James and Sirius about it, they both gave her the rehearsed Fanged Frisbee excuse and refused to make eye contact with her until she let it go.

Things mostly went back to normal after that, though Mia could often feel Sirius's gaze on her when she was not looking.

"You were almost a snake?" Mary gasped at Mia.

Mia smirked, remembering her conversation with the Sorting Hat. "It's not a bad thing. My *mother* was a Slytherin for crying out loud, and she's one of the best witches I've ever known. That doesn't make me some sort of *liar*."

Sirius beamed at her. "There's only one way to find out. I suggest we play a game!" he shouted enthusiastically, reaching into his pocket to pull out a small phial, presenting it with a flourish.

Remus gaped at his friend. "You were serious about that?"

"Aren't I always?"

"What is he talking about?" Mia asked.

"Veritaserum or Dare." James poured himself another shot of firewhisky and then leant over to refill a few empty glasses around the table. "The Prewett twins taught us. You put Veritaserum in a shared bottle of firewhisky. Every round begins with someone issuing

a dare to everyone. Each person can choose to perform the dare. If they don't want to, they can choose to drink the Veritaserum. The person who issued the dare *then* gets to ask the table of drinkers *any* question."

"Any question *except* the truth of how we all got our nicknames," Sirius added quickly. "Those are absolutely off limits. The stories are better, trust me."

"Where did you get Veritaserum?" Lily asked, tossing a scathing look at Sirius, who was already reaching for the second bottle of firewhisky in the centre of the table, twisting it open with practised ease.

The four Marauders grinned at each other before answering Lily in a way that sounded suspiciously rehearsed:

"I *brewed* it," said James.

"I *bought* it," said Remus.

"I *found* it," said Peter.

"I *nicked* it," said Sirius.

"I'm in!" Mary said with a delighted look on her face. "Come on, girls. There are things I've been dying to know about these boys."

"There are things I would rather remain in the dark about," Lily said flatly. "I don't want to play."

James grinned and winked at her. "Come on, Evans. Are you afraid I'll ask you how often you dream about me?"

Lily scowled in response. "Fine," she said, accepting the challenge. "I'll play. But just so that I can set the record straight, once and for all; then maybe you'll get off your bloody high horse."

"High horse?" James tilted his head. "Is that like a Pegasus?"

"Muggle phrase," Mia muttered to him.

"So, we're all in?" Sirius asked, adding the drops to the bottle.

"Do you know what you're doing there?" Alice asked nervously.

"Yep. Just following the instructions left by the Prewetts. Too much, and we'll all end up confessing our deepest secrets without provocation. Too little, and we'll manage to get in a lie or two. Needs to be exact."

"I think this is a bad idea," Remus said, shaking his head.

"Nonsense, Moony. This is your birthday party, and therefore, you think it's a brilliant idea. I promise. Now, each shot glass will have enough Veritaserum to answer one question, so each round you have to drink another shot."

"You realise we're both prefects, right?" Lily pursed her lips, looking at Remus, who only shrugged his shoulders in defeat.

Sirius grinned and held up his glass. "I'll go first. I dare everyone to take off their shirts!"

"So we're just easing into this then?" Remus asked sarcastically.

"How is *that* fair?" Mia huffed, crossing her arms over her chest defensively. "We've already seen all you boys without your shirts on!"

Sirius smirked, raising a brow challengingly. "Then take the Veritaserum, kitten."

Mia hesitated. She knew this was a dangerous game. She knew too much and had too many secrets that she could never divulge. A part of her imagined that in the worst case scenario, she could easily stun them all and ask Professor Dumbledore to Obliviate their memories. She reasoned, however, that nothing too life-altering would come out of this game, since Sirius's intent was, apparently, just to see the girls topless.

"Fine," she agreed, pouring herself a shot of the laced firewhisky.

"I'll take the drink," Lily decided, reaching for the bottle after Mia, followed swiftly behind by Mary, Alice, Remus, Peter, and even Frank. By the time all the drinks were poured, Sirius and James already had their shirts off, both grinning.

Mia scoffed at Sirius. "You completed your own dare?"

"Something tells me it's going to get hot in here. Everyone drink!" Sirius ordered.

One by one, they downed their shots. Mia, Remus, Peter, and Mary were used to the feel of firewhisky. Lily, Alice, and Frank, however, all started coughing as the liquid burned a path down their throats.

"Answer truthfully," Sirius insisted as if they had a choice. "Why didn't you accept the dare?"

"*That's* your first question?" James gawked at him, wide-eyed. "You can ask them *anything*, and you want to know why they didn't take the stupid dare?"

Sirius shrugged as he rolled his shirt up tightly, tapped it with his wand and transfigured it into a headband he then used to hold his hair back from his face. "I'm

curious. Plus, the good questions will come once we're all good and sloshed; now answer the question."

"I don't want Jamie to see me topless," Mia answered immediately, realising that she could have also included others in her answer, but the Veritaserum provoked the topmost reasoning.

"I'm shy," Alice answered.

"I thought it was a stupid first dare," Mary replied.

"I didn't want Potter to pass out," Lily answered, glaring at both Sirius and James.

"I was just doing what everyone else was doing," Frank answered honestly.

"Same here," Peter said.

"I don't want people to see my scars," Remus replied, mirroring Lily's glare at Sirius. Sirius winced apologetically. "Sorry, mate."

"What scars?" Mary asked.

"I fell down a mountain," Remus answered immediately, looking relieved that the Veritaserum had already worn off.

Mia was impressed with Sirius's ability to follow the Prewett twins' instructions. The Veritaserum clearly only lasted the one question.

"My turn!" James said eagerly, staring at Lily beside him as he revealed the second dare: "I dare you all to kiss the person to your left."

"Veritaserum," Lily refused immediately, glaring at him.

One by one, they all twisted to look at the person to their left. Mary laughed and leant over, planting a quick kiss on Lily's lips before she had a chance to think twice.

Alice, next to Mary, blushed and reached for the bottle, muttering, "No offence," under her breath to her friend.

A grinning Frank, however, blushed as he leant over to kiss his girlfriend. Alice giggled at their rare public display of affection.

"You're really not my type, Pete," Remus said, shooting his friend a good-natured smirk as he reached for the bottle.

"Sorry, Frank." Peter chuckled and grabbed his shot.

Mia turned to Remus, sitting to her left, and smiled. She had no problem with this dare, and she proved it by leaning over and kissing him gently and sweetly, *nothing* like what

they had done earlier that week when they had celebrated his *actual* birthday in the prefect's bathroom.

When they broke apart, Mia heard someone clearing their throat behind her and turned to look at Sirius, who was smirking at her.

"Hello, lady on my left."

Mia rolled her eyes, motioning with her hand to silently tell him to get it over with.

Sirius leant in close to Mia, closing his eyes.

However, before their lips could connect, James blurted out the question, "Why don't you like me?" whilst looking directly at Lily.

No one had taken their drinks yet, so the table fell silent. Sirius groaned, and Mia echoed him, knowing that this could get ugly now that James had taken a fun game and made it personal. While looking at her brother and Lily, Mia felt Sirius kiss her on the cheek to fulfil his part of the dare.

"Ask a different question, mate," Remus suggested.

"No," James insisted, his eyes a little glazed from drinking so much already. He gestured to Lily's glass. "Drink up, Evans."

With narrowed eyes and her lips pressed together, Lily snatched her shot of firewhisky off the table and slammed it back, wincing at the burn before turning to James. "I don't like you because you think you're better than everyone else. You never talk about *anything* but yourself unless you're embarrassing me. And while you *are* talented at many things, you lack any form of humility. You're spoilt, you refuse to take no for an answer, and you're mean to my friends!"

The room fell silent as Remus, Peter, and Alice drank their shots and all whispered something along the lines of, "I actually like you, James."

"All right, someone else go and lighten this shitty mood. It's Remus's birthday for crying out loud!" Sirius snapped.

"I'll go," Mary offered.

They all watched as Lily furiously turned away from James, folding her arms tightly across her chest. With his lips still parted in shock, James was silent as he processed Lily's words. Mia frowned at her brother, knowing that Lily spoke the truth, but with the amount he was drinking, she worried that James would not remember enough in the morning to make the necessary changes to his attitude and actions.

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Half an hour later, they were sufficiently plied with firewhisky. Mary still ended up topless at one point, much to the delight of Peter, who had wilted when she refused to snog him on a dare. Alice and Frank were passed out in a corner, but only after confessing—under Veritaserum—that their shared worst fear was not surviving the war. Sirius had put his hand on Mia's knee when she paled at that, assuming that she was secretly afraid of the same thing.

The rest of the group—sans Peter who, too, had reached his limit and collapsed into a large fluffy armchair in front of the fireplace—began repeating old dares, knowing each of them would take the Veritaserum instead, finding that digging into everyone's secrets was far more entertaining than watching Mia give Remus a lap dance at Lily's amused suggested dare. James mumbled to Sirius that he thought Lily's dares were uncreative and needed work.

"Who was your first kiss?" Mary asked the group.

"Mia," Remus said fondly.

"Amos," Lily admitted shyly. James was clearly doing his best to ignore her.

"Sirius," Mia whispered, and Sirius's eyes widened just a little at the declaration.

"James," Sirius answered at the same time that James said, "Sirius."

Everyone turned to gape at them. "What?!"

"I don't want to talk about it," Sirius replied swiftly, pouring himself another shot of the *untainted* firewhisky as he recalled the moment in question and how he and his best friend had sworn each other to secrecy about the hows and whys of it.

James poured himself another shot, lifting it in apparent agreement with Sirius's sentiment while the rest of the group laughed at the sudden discomfort between the two. It did not last long as Sirius and James toasted glasses before downing their individual drinks.

Eventually, the dares stopped altogether and the questions turned personal.

"Why did you curse all those girls on Valentine's Day, Mia?" Mary asked with a smirk. "You've always been clever with your pranks, but that was just . . . something else."

Mia rolled her eyes, and Sirius watched as they glinted amber for the smallest moment. "Because it was sick that girls were trying to trick him into loving them. Also, if *any* of my boys choose to fall in love with a girl, that girl needs to be approved by *me*."

"So, you're okay if Remus falls in love with someone else?" Mary asked.

Mia smiled. "Of course, but only if she's perfect for him. Until then, he's still *mine*."

Sirius heard it when Remus whispered, "Bloody right," in Mia's ear, making her blush. The colour spread down her neck, and he watched as she adjusted her seating, leaning just a touch closer to Remus in the process. His eyes narrowed, head full of jealousy and firewhisky, and his nostrils flared when he inhaled sharply, catching a scent on the air that made something inside him twist with envy.

"I dare Potter to go ride his broom around the Quidditch Pitch!" Mary declared, distracting Sirius from his shifted mood.

James stared blearily at the girl, one eye half-closed. "I've done that a thousand times. For the record, I could still do it in my current state," he insisted, taking another sip of his drink, not even noticing that, ten minutes earlier, Mia had charmed his glass to refill itself with water.

Mary smirked. "I dare you to do it . . . *naked*."

"Done!" James said loudly with a determined look on his face as he clumsily got to his feet. "Evans, come on, you'll want to see this!"

Lily rolled her eyes. "I *really* don't. You and Mary go ahead, I'm heading off to bed. Happy birthday, Remus," she said before heading to the door, ignoring James, who was still clearly under the impression that she was coming to watch him fulfil his dare.

As the door closed behind them, the three remaining friends sat beside a near-empty bottle of firewhisky.

Sirius leant forward and poured them each another shot.

"You're not going to watch Prongs?" Remus asked.

Sirius shook his head. "Not this time. As funny as it'll be if he falls off, even *I* don't want to see what'll happen if he gets splinters. Besides," he handed the glasses to them, watching closely as they drank, "I still want to play."

"I think we're done with the game," Mia murmured as she moved to sit up.

She had evidently forgotten that Sirius had poured her drink from the laced bottle, and he used that to his advantage when he asked, in a deceptively casual tone, "So how long have you two been shagging?"

"Since Halloween." The words spilt out of her mouth before she even fully processed the question. Mia gasped, covered her mouth, and then turned to glower at Sirius.

"I *knew* it! I fucking *knew* it!" He stood up and kicked over the small ottoman he had been resting his feet on, feeling the betrayal as it shined through in the heat of his glare. "I could *smell* him all over you. I've been smelling it for months!"

"So what?" Mia shouted furiously. "*You've* been going around shagging every Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Gryffindor that bats their eyelashes in your direction. I've never been with *anyone* but Remus. Is *that* your problem? That I chose *him* and not *you*?"

His skin was hot, burning with anger and covetous energy that felt like lightning rolling beneath the surface. He remembered the kiss in the secret passageway and how something inside of him just clicked together the moment he tasted her for the first time. The look she had in her eyes then was only for him. Her kiss belonged to him. Her words were his alone.

"You *did* choose me!"

"And you didn't want me!" Mia yelled, her voice breaking.

Sirius could see her eyes glistening as tears threatened to overflow, and that same clicking thing inside of him turned into a dull ache at the thought that he had made her cry.

Mia spun on her heel, her hair slapping him across the face in the process as she fled the room. Before he had a chance to go after her—and he wanted to—the light in the room shifted, and Sirius was suddenly in Remus's shadow.

"You're such an asshole."

Sirius stared up accusingly at his too-tall friend. "You told me you split on Halloween!"

"We *did*," Remus said with a glare. "Right after the first night we were together. But she's the closest to perfection I'll ever see unless I find a true mate, and—"

"And that makes it okay to fuck her without actually being her boyfriend? You're *using* her!"

"*She's* been using *me* too! She uses *me* to forget about *you*, because you're too stupid to see that she wanted you first, and you fucked it up!" Remus snapped, his eyes turning golden. The smallest part of Sirius told him that it would be smart to be afraid, but he was too stubborn to care.

Sirius cursed Remus's recent growth spurt and his own poor genes that kept him shorter than his friend. Remus took a step forward, forcing him to take a cautionary step backward as the common ground was taken from him.

"So, I go to her, and I'm with her, and I take care of her while she waits for *you* to figure out what it is that you bloody want from her! *I'm* there so she doesn't have to be alone, 'cause Merlin knows *you* never have to worry about that!"

Sirius tried to defend himself. "I haven't even touched another girl since—"

"Since Marlene on Valentine's Day?" Remus growled, eyebrows raised. "Yeah, Mia told me about that. Came to me crying her bloody eyes out. You are not supposed to hurt her! It's *our* job to protect her!"

"I *know* that, Moony!" Sirius yelled, throwing his glass down on the floor and feeling a sense of short-lived enjoyment when it shattered. "I'm trying!"

Remus glared at him. "How are you trying?"

"I'm screwed up, mate." Sirius sighed, running a hand over his face. "I'm . . . I'm protecting her from *me*. But fuck, I can't keep away from that girl. It's like she's . . . like she's *mine*, and my body and soul knows it," he said, pounding his fist against his chest angrily.

He knew it. He knew she was his, and he needed to be with her, but then he thought of his family and the sick and twisted way his parents had looked at him during his last visit. He had seen the way Bellatrix had looked at Mia when threatened. He could not expose her to his family. It was too dangerous.

"But my brain keeps telling me that I'm never going to be good enough for her. So, I try and keep away, because it's better." He sucked in a deep breath to calm his nerves only to have Mia's lingering scent of arousal in the air flood his senses. "I wouldn't have if I knew she was just going to go running to *your* bed!"

"You stupid mutt," Remus snarled.

Sirius glared up at Remus. "Bloody fucking wolf."

"Sort your life out, mate," Remus ordered him, a challenging look in his eye. "Get over this jealousy, because until you make a final decision about Mia, I am going to be there *anytime* she wants me . . ." He leant in close, and Sirius could see the wolf behind his friend's eyes. Remus growled low with a provoking tone, "And she wants me . . . *often*."

Shaking with envious resentment, Sirius declared, "She wanted *me* first. She *wanted* me first, and she *kissed* me first. I can still remember every detail. I bet her lips still taste like firewhisky, don't they?" He smirked, attempting to ruffle his friend's fur.

Remus merely grinned at him, completely unperturbed. "The *rest of her* tastes like honey."

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Once he left the Room of Requirement, Sirius's plan was to track Mia down in the Gryffindor common room and give her a piece of his mind. He wanted to be angry with her but knew that he did not have any right to be. Still, drunk as he was, he let his emotions carry him through the corridors. He did not even make it back to the Gryffindor tower before he caught her scent in the air and turned, spotting her in the corner of a dark alcove in the back of a corridor on the fifth floor.

She was crying.

He could see the moonlight reflected on her tear streaks, the large window letting in enough light to illuminate her face. He frowned and slowly made his way over to her, no longer determined to yell or scream, instead intent on apologising. Merlin, he hated it when she cried.

Swallowing hard as he approached her quietly, he softened his gaze as he whispered, "Mia."

When she lifted her head, he did not see the sadness he expected; he saw righteous anger flashing in the depths of her glare. He was shocked at the sight—but far too inebriated to react—when she slapped him hard across the face, turning his head to the side from the strength of it. His head turned back, slow and deliberate, a dangerous growl crawling its way out of his throat as he set his gaze upon her.

She drew in a sharp breath. It looked like she had a torrent of angry things on the tip of her tongue ready to fling at him, but she did not have the chance to say any of them

as he swooped in, stealing the words from her mouth and the breath from her lungs as he covered her lips with his own.

With his hands on her waist, Sirius lifted and slammed her body up against the stone wall behind her. He ravished her mouth almost violently, all lips, tongues, and teeth, drinking in every bit of her. A part of him worried that the lingering drops of Veritaserum on her tongue, mingled with his own, would force him to confess his deepest secrets to her. Confess that he loved her, that she terrified him. Confess that he was worried she would be used against him by his family. Confess that it was painful *not* to touch her—to taste her at every waking opportunity.

When she moaned his name and bit his lower lip hard enough that he tasted blood, he was reminded of who he was: Sirius Orion Black. Sirius Black, who was selfish, impulsive, reckless, and greedy, and *damn the consequences!* He needed the girl to know what she was doing to him and everything that he *wanted* to do to her.

Frantically, his hands skimmed down her ribs and over her lower back to her arse, lifting her hips upward. He pushed himself between her thighs and let them wrap around his waist. Breaking his territorial marking on her lips, he gently pressed kisses to her neck as he tilted his hips forward, pressing his erection against her.

"Do you see what you do to me?"

She whimpered in reply, raking her nails over his scalp. She took hold of his hair and tugged, trying to pull him back to her lips, but Sirius resisted. The harder she pulled, the tighter he gripped her hips, and the harder he ground himself against her.

He let a hand wander away from her side, over her bare thigh, pushing the hem of her skirt up around her hip as he drew patterns across her skin, watching with egotistical amusement as her lips parted, holding her breath, waiting for him to keep going.

Snaking his fingers beneath the edge of her knickers, Sirius groaned and rested his forehead against her collarbone, breathing down against the lush skin of her breasts, which he was desperate to see, but lacked the additional hands necessary to divest her of her clothing without leaving her untouched.

Stroking his index finger softly over her slit, he marvelled at the silky wetness that coated his fingertip. "Tell me, kitten," he said with a low, gravelly voice, pulling away and pressing his forehead against hers to stare deeply into her eyes. "Is this for Remus or *me?*"

He chuckled when she refused to answer. She was always so defiant—never the one to be bossed around. He wanted the answer she refused to give but relented in hearing it for himself when she mewled as he stroked the pad of his thumb upward, circling her swollen and soaking nub of nerves.

Her eyes were wide when she gasped, her lips parting when he dipped a finger inside of her, curling it and stroking her from the inside. He added a second finger, grinning smugly when she whimpered in response and tightened her fingers in his hair.

"Merlin, your eyes are the colour of chocolate," he whispered, refusing to break his gaze, "but I bet they look like firewhisky when you come."

And they did.

Mia's eyes practically glowed amber when her body shook and her hips snapped forward.

Sirius stole the cry from her lips as it tried to escape, taking it, claiming it as he had claimed her climax for his own, feeling her tighten and pulsate around his hand, her nails digging into the back of his neck as he kissed her deep and hard.

They were both left gasping when he finally broke away from her. He lowered her legs to the ground, but she refused to remove her hands from around his neck, her breath hot against his mouth.

Slowly and deliberately, Sirius brought his fingers to his lips, watching her flush as he took one into his mouth, sucking her essence off of the digit without breaking eye contact, moaning.

Fuck, if Remus wasn't right.

She tasted like honey.

## Chapter Forty-Seven

### *Supposed to Be a Good Man*

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*Regrets collect like old friends  
Here to relive your darkest moments  
I can see no way, I can see no way  
And all of the ghouls come out to play*  
(Shake it Out - Florence + The Machine)

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**March 13th, 1976**

"I'm not going to apologise for sleeping with Remus," Mia said, breaking the silence now that she and Sirius were seated in the dark alcove on the fifth-floor corridor, the scent of arousal lingering in the air.

After he had touched her, tasted her, and brought her to blinding rapture with only his talented hands, Mia and Sirius fell to the floor, the combination of alcohol and an emotionally charged night rendering them helpless against exhaustion.

He leant to the side and dropped his head onto her lap. Keeping his face forward, he decided to ignore the fact that he wanted to turn around and pet her some more instead of letting *her* pet *him*. A soft smile appeared on his face when her fingers ran through his hair, gently this time, unlike the passionate pulling they had been doing minutes earlier.

"Can you blame me for being jealous?" he asked, looking up at her.

Mia sighed looking down at him, pressing her lips together. She looked caught off guard when she was met with sincerity.

"No," she finally answered, "but you still don't have a right to be."

"Do you hate me? I know I got a little carried away there. Okay, *a lot* carried away." He frowned, feeling sick with himself. He had meant to ask permission at the very least. "I didn't mean to . . . take advantage."

"I think *I* took just as much advantage as *you* did, and I wasn't exactly complaining. Do I hate you after that?" She chuckled softly but then sighed. "A little. Not because of what we just did, but because I know it meant nothing to you."

He sat up and stared at her, offended. "What do you mean nothing? I came chasing after you. I tried to apologise before you bloody hit me, and then . . . Merlin, Mia, you know how I feel about you!"

"How?" she asked point-blank.

Sirius froze.

"See? *You* know how you feel, and I know how *I* feel, but you can't say the words."

"I have my reasons," he said softly, his eyes downcast.

"Your family?"

"I . . . I have to keep you safe," he admitted in a low voice. "It's like there's something inside of me . . . the deepest part of me that needs to keep you safe. It's always been there. Since the first time I ever saw you. When Snivellus shoved you down, I just . . . I felt anger—something triggered inside of me—and I needed to make sure you were okay. That sounds ridiculous, right?"

"No. You've always kept me safe. You're my constant protector, Sirius."

He looked up at her and saw the way she stared past him, through him, as though he was not there. Sometimes she looked at him like she expected something—someone—that he was not.

When she reached out and gently touched his face, he flinched regretfully. He could not remember the last time that he had done that. Fear of touch had been instilled in him from a young age. Walburga had never been affectionate with him, but she had turned cruel when he started mimicking the voices he heard from the front windows of Grimmauld Place. Muggles walked back and forth to and from work, and Sirius listened to them with curiosity. They all sounded so different from one another and especially from his parents. When he echoed their accents and language, Walburga struck him hard across the cheek. His father, predictably, did nothing to stop her.

Thinking about what he wanted to protect Mia from caused him to remember too vividly. He hoped that she had not noticed the way he briefly pulled away from her, but the sympathetic look in her eyes said otherwise.

Sirius closed his eyes. *Please don't pity me.*

It hurt to see the way he pulled back at her touch. Sirius looked like he was in pain the moment her fingers grazed over his cheek. She knew that he had never received a gentle hand at home, and she wondered if he bothered to intimately, gently, touch all the girls he

slept with over the years—or let them touch him like this. She thought of her older Sirius who had spent twelve years in Azkaban, a year on the run, one more imprisoned inside Grimmauld Place, and then alone, trapped inside the veil. Had he ever known any kindness or gentleness apart from his friends?

It broke her heart to think about.

"I have to keep you safe too," she whispered when he turned his face into her hand, kissing her palm.

She thought of him falling off his broom over the edge of the Quidditch stands, lying broken in the hospital wing. She thought of an older Sirius trapped in a cell, waiting for the Dementor's Kiss. She thought of pulling Sirius from the veil and feeding him potion after potion to make sure he survived the ritual. She thought of throwing herself over his body as Death Eaters tortured him while Voldemort turned the Elder Wand on her.

"You don't understand, Mia." Sirius sighed, looking pained. "I have to keep you safe . . . even if it's from me."

"You would never hurt me," she reminded him firmly.

"No, but my family would." He looked up at her. "And until I know that they won't be a problem . . . I don't know what I could ever be to you. I'm not good for you. I'm not much good at all."

"You are a good man, Sirius Black!" she snapped, pulling his face into her hands to kiss him soundly on the mouth as if she could force him to take back his words.

"One day, maybe," he said as he pulled away from her, "but in the meantime . . . I can't."

"Then what was tonight about?"

"Me lacking any form of self-control." Sirius laughed sadly, putting his head in his hands. "Merlin, it's like the same feeling deep down inside of me makes me want to keep you safe but also makes me need you. Fuck. Mia, you have no idea the things I want to do to you."

She took in a sharp breath that hitched in her throat, her cheeks warming over.

Sirius groaned. "*That's* not helping by the way. The sounds you make, and the colour of your skin . . . Bloody hell, I could smell you all night."

Mia scrunched up her nose, grimacing slightly. "I really wish you and Remus would stop doing that."

"Oh, don't act like you can't do it too. You're just as much an animal as I am."

She had the decency to look away from him but did not deny his accusation.

After a long moment of silence, Sirius asked, "Is Remus the only one?"

"Yes."

"Can you keep it that way? I know I don't have the right to ask, but I trust Remus and only Remus."

Mia shrugged wondering what Remus would say if he was there. "That depends. Are *you* going to want me, too?"

"Yes," he admitted right away.

She narrowed her eyes. "I'm not sleeping with *both* of you."

"I didn't mean it like that." Sirius scowled but then added, "Not *exactly* like that. Remus told me why the two of you are still shagging. He keeps you safe, not alone. Makes you forget about me."

Mia frowned, feeling just a bit betrayed. "He shouldn't have said that."

"I'm not going to have sex with you. It's crossing a line that I don't think I could ever go back from. So, I don't want you to wait around for me. If you . . . I guess, *need* someone, then be with Remus, but *only* Remus."

"Fine, but as for you, no Gryffindors. Do what you *have* to do," she said with a bitter tone. "I'm not naive enough to think that you're not going to go off and keep shagging the school. At least until it's safe like you say, but no Gryffindors." Her eyes narrowed at him. "I don't *ever* want to hear about you with other girls in my own common room."

Sirius nodded, agreeing immediately. "Done."

"And no McKinnon," she growled viciously.

"Fuck, I will make an Unbreakable Vow over that crazy bitch."

"And you need to apologise to Remus," Mia insisted, her voice firm. "I don't even want to know what the two of you talked about after I left."

"No, you don't." Sirius rubbed his hands down his face looking ashamed. "I will, I promise. He's not going to stop being one of my best mates simply because he's shagging my . . ."

Mia stared at him, eyebrow raised.

"*Our* girl?" he offered with a small laugh. She huffed in reply, and he laughed harder. "You know it's pretty much the truth. You've been ours for years, kitten. Mine and Remus's, and to a lesser and not at all sexual extent, James's."

"Thank you for that clarification," Mia said with a disgusted shudder. She then took in a deep breath, exhaling and letting the stress from her shoulders release after a long moment. "It feels like we're creating terms for some sort of pre-engagement."

"Aren't we?" Sirius smirked. "We basically just created a short list of people we're each allowed to shag while the world rights itself to create the perfect situation for the two of us to finally be together. Which may or may not ever happen."

"It will. Even if it's not for another twenty years, it'll still happen." After a brief pause, she teasingly asked, "You think tonight will hold you over until then?"

"Fuck no." Sirius barked a laugh, looking at her with a familiar twinkle in his eye. "Speaking of which . . . You wouldn't be terribly inclined to return the favour, would you?"

"Absolutely not." She laughed, shaking her head as she moved to stand up. "I'll consider what *you* did an apology for tricking Remus and me into confessing our secret to you. We're currently even, Padfoot."

"Wait!" Sirius called after her as she began making her way back toward Gryffindor Tower. "We need to include one last, very important thing in regards to our . . . arrangement."

Mia looked back, raising a brow. "Never tell Jamie?"

"Never."

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### **March 16th, 1976**

Despite the regular meetings of the Assisted Defence group in the Room of Requirement—where the advanced students began learning basic wandless magic courtesy of Mia—they still had to attend *official* Defence Against the Dark Arts classes with Professor Higgs. The former Slytherin had not toned down his prejudices against creatures and beings, who he referred to as "half-breeds," but thanks to the multitude of complaints

from everyone except the Slytherins, the professor was no longer allowed to show graphic photographs of attacks, nor was he to refer to defence against any creature as "killing."

Despite the minor improvement, the class still felt like a preparatory course for future Death Eaters. Mia would have bet good money that, had she not looked like a toad, and they had both been capable of human emotions, Professor Higgs would have fallen madly in love with Dolores Umbridge.

Professor Higgs met them in front of the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, his teeth bared in a way that barely qualified as a smile. "Pair up! Separate Houses."

When the students refused to acknowledge one another, save for Lily, who out of pure habit gravitated toward Snape only to have him shake his head at her, the room came to a standstill.

"Abbott with Longbottom!" the professor hissed impatiently, pointing his long, skinny finger as he paired everyone off. "Belby with Brown, Zabini with Macdonald. Lupin and Evans with the Carrows. Potter with Snape, no . . . *Miss* Potter," he corrected when James became visibly excited about the potential of duelling his nemesis.

"Mr Potter and Mr Black, I'd like you to pair with one another, and I expect *actual* offensive and defensive measures to be taken this time." Professor Higgs glared at the two before turning around and pairing up the rest of the students.

"What about me, Professor?" Peter called from the back, the odd Gryffindor out.

"Pettigrew? I didn't see you, boy. Wait on the sidelines until Longbottom inevitably faints or becomes otherwise incapacitated."

"Lily, keep an eye on Remus for me," Mia whispered as both prefects took their place opposite the Carrow twins.

Remus was barely holding himself together as it was the morning before the full moon, and if it were not a danger to his fragile ego, Mia would have insisted that he leave class immediately and go to the hospital wing instead of facing off in a duel.

Lily nodded to Mia, shooting her an understanding smile. But before she could even face her own opponent, let alone keep an eye on Remus, a hot spark snapped her in the leg. "Ow! You're supposed to bow first!"

"I don't bow to Mudbloods," Alecko Carrow said.

All of the Gryffindors turned to stare at their professor knowing it was impossible that he did not hear the slur, but he looked perfectly content to ignore the word.

When Professor Higgs did nothing, Lily turned her eyes to Snape, who pretended not to have heard the exchange as he stared daggers across the room at Mia.

"Some *friend*," Mia muttered under her breath.

*That*, however, the professor clearly heard as his eyes narrowed into slits. "Don't wait around all day!"

James and Sirius were the only pair to offer a proper bow to one another, but they were both more intent on watching their friends duel the Slytherins instead of facing off against each other.

The moment Professor Higgs turned around and made his way to his desk to take a seat, as he always did during practice duels, every Slytherin made the first attack.

*"Expelliarmus!"*

*"Stupefy!"*

*"Flipendo!"*

*"Verdimillions!"*

*"Petrificus Totalus!"*

*"Impedimenta!"*

The Slytherins all yelled, followed by a united, simultaneous echo from the Gryffindors: "PROTEGO!"

Not a single attack landed.

Adrian Abbott and Damocles Belby followed the proper instructions, so Frank and Alice were able to have a legitimate practice duel, though both Gryffindors—being members of the A.D.—were levels above the Slytherins and easily disarmed them in the end. Frank, being the kind of person he was, walked across the room and extended a hand to Adrian, helping him up before returning the boy's wand. Alice followed his example with a smile.

Seeing this somehow infuriated the other Slytherins, and someone—Mia could not see who—threw a stunning spell at Frank, knocking him backward, rendering him unconscious.

"Hey!" Lily shouted, outraged.

She made her way across the room to revive Frank, but before she could reach him, the Carrow twins attacked, each sending a Stunning Spell, only one of which Lily managed to block. The other hit her hard in the shoulder, knocking her to the ground.

The sight triggered something in James, causing him to leave Sirius's side to rush to Lily's aid. He easily defended himself against the onslaught of hexes and jinxes that came his way. The Slytherins could have been throwing Cheering Charms at him for all the good it was doing.

"Evans, you all right?" James asked, his concerned gaze running over her body for injury.

Mia did her best to keep an eye on the situation, but she caught a glimpse of Snape with his wand aimed at James's back.

"*Levicorpus!*"

An invisible hand snatched James by the ankle, tugging with the intention to levitate him upward.

Before James could even lose his balance, however, Mia stepped in front of her brother and shouted, "*Liberacorpus!*"

"How did you know that spell?" Snape demanded with a glare. "Where'd you learn that?"

Mia glared right back. "*Stupefy!*"

He blocked it deftly before casting an ineffectual Knockback Jinx, which she ducked. When his spell failed, he cried, "*Serpensortia!*" and a long snake erupted from the end of his wand, hissing and striking out at her.

Sirius and Remus both stepped forward to help, but she held up a hand to stop them, aiming her wand down, amused at the irony of the situation with which she was faced.

"*Vipera Evanesca!*" she cast, watching the snake vanish in a puff of black smoke. This only enraged Snape further, but he did not attack. She watched him carefully, waiting for a sign, but he made no move.

The Carrows *did*, however.

With Lily still unconscious and being revived by James, the Slytherin twins each sent a spell at Remus, who was distracted watching Mia.

"*Impedimenta!*"

"*Stupefy!*"

Remus—in his current condition—being knocked to the floor by the Carrows was enough to tear Mia's attention from Snape, and the moment her eyes turned away from him, he aimed his wand and roared, "*Langlock!*"

Rendered silent with her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, Mia was unable to cast any spells verbally. That was when Snape began attacking with a renewed vengeance. "*Locomotor Wibbly!*" he called, causing her legs to collapse beneath her. "*Expelliarmus!*"

Her wand flew across the room.

She glared at Snape and felt a slight tingle—similar to when she shifted into her Animagus form—and wondered if, in her anger, her brown eyes had turned amber.

"You son of a bitch!" Sirius shouted, rushing toward Snape, wand outheld. A sudden and silent shield flew up, blocking him from moving further. Sirius whipped his head around and caught sight of Professor Higgs holding his wand up with a smarmy smile on his face.

"Twenty points from Gryffindor, Mr Black, for interfering. Keep your distance, all of you. I'd like to see how this plays out." He chuckled at the sight of Mia, wandless, silenced, and immobile from the waist down. "Finish your duel, Mr Snape."

Snape looked confused at first, but then glowered down at Mia and raised his wand. His lip curled as his eyes filled with contempt. He began his spell, "*Stupe—*"

*Ginny, you'd appreciate this,* Mia thought, squeezing her eyes shut as she cast her very first non-verbal, wandless Bat-Bogey Hex.

Before Snape had a chance to finish his spell, he sneezed, letting out a loud scream as a massive, bat-shaped bogey crawled out of his hooked nose. It grew wings and began attacking him viciously, slapping its wings against the sides of his face.

"*Finite Incantatem!*" James hollered.

Mia let out a gasp as her tongue was released, her legs regaining sensation. "*Accio wand!*" Her precious vine-wood wand flew into her hands. Aiming the wood at Snape, she shouted, "*Stupefy!*" eyes blazing as Snape fell backward, hitting the ground unconscious.

She stood up and looked around the room.

Frank was sitting next to Lily while Alice helped him nurse a head bump he had received from being stunned. James hovered protectively over Remus, who had also been revived, though his eyes were trained on the unconscious Snape. Elora Zabini and Mary

had both, apparently, lost their wands in the duel and were now in the back of the room pulling each other's hair. Mary appeared to be winning.

Sirius, still blocked by Professor Higgs's shield, was pacing back and forth like an animal in a cage, his grey eyes glaring between the professor and Snape, looking positively murderous.

Mia remembered a similar look on the older Sirius Black in the Shrieking Shack when he first came face-to-face with Peter Pettigrew after twelve years.

Peter had been in the back corner the entire time, quietly watching as the chaos unfolded. He looked like he wanted to sink straight into the wall.

"Well, this was . . . illuminating," Professor Higgs drawled, as though commenting on a mildly interesting experiment. "A fifteen-inch essay due tomorrow on the effects of layering attack spells. Though it *is* the full moon tonight. Will you be able to finish your homework, Miss Potter, or are you hoping to stage an intervention for the werewolves that have been reportedly seen in the area?"

She glared up at him silently, refusing to let him provoke her into an outburst.

A clear dismissal, the students began to filter out of the classroom, but Sirius lingered, stalking toward Snape. "You ever *speak* to Mia again, Snivellus, and you're dead," he growled dangerously before storming out of the room.

Outside the classroom, Remus looked like he could pass out at any moment. Mia ran her fingers through his hair, pushing sweat-soaked fringe from his forehead.

"I still want to know where you found that spell, Potter!" Snape called, glaring in Mia's direction the moment he stepped out of the Defence classroom.

Sirius turned and launched toward him, fists raised. "I told you to never speak to her again! You're dead, Snivellus!"

"Whoa, hey! Back off!" Lily intervened, stepping in between them.

"Out of the way, Evans!" Sirius snapped.

"Sirius," Mia hissed, grabbing his hand as she glared at Snape from over Sirius's shoulder. "Sirius, please, don't. He's not worth it."

Sirius slowly backed down, but threw both Snape and Lily a dirty look before turning back to Mia and protectively wrapping an arm around her.

"Severus," Lily whispered.

He sneered at her. "Don't you want to go check on your friends and their . . . *pet*?"

Lily visibly recoiled at his words. When James and Sirius moved behind her, she held her hand up and turned to glare at them. "Everyone out of the hallway right now, or I'll start taking away points!"

"One of these days, you're going to have to choose a side, Evans." Sirius glared at her before turning around to storm out of the corridor, leaving behind James and Mia, who were busy holding up Remus.

"Ignore him," Mia said.

Lily frowned. "Which one?"

"Both? All?"

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### **March 17th, 1976**

"Mia? Mia, wake up."

"Peter?" Mia rubbed her tired eyes, looking down at the boy who was standing at the foot of her bed, practically quivering. "Peter, I swear to Merlin, if you're actually here in the girls' dorms I am going to hex you into next year. How the hell did you get in here?"

"Rat," Peter said, pointing at himself as though that were a fully articulated sentence.

"Fine. That answers the how; I'd like to know why. If Mary knows you can sneak into the dorms, you're a dead man. Not even Jamie can protect you from Mary's wrath."

"Mia, you have to come with me. Something happened. We can't get him to calm down."

She bolted up, throwing her legs over the side of the bed. "Peter, where's Remus?"

The full moons had been getting progressively worse since the werewolf sightings in Scotland. Attacks were getting closer and closer to Hogsmeade and, therefore, Hogwarts. Remus was a constant nervous wreck, and the fact that the four Animagi could no longer be with him in the shack made it all the worse.

"He's in the Room of Requirement; James was able to lock him in." Peter's small, watery eyes were as wide as they could be, the sight unnerving Mia as she jumped out of her bed, slipping on her outer robes as quickly as possible.

Not waiting for Peter, she rushed down the stairs, through the common room, and out the portrait hole in a blur.

When she reached the seventh floor, she followed the shouts echoing loudly in the otherwise silent corridor. Turning a corner, Mia spotted Sirius sitting on the ground with his back up against the wall, his eyes dark and rimmed with red. His head hung low in what looked like shame as a red-faced James held him at wand point.

Mia often compared James to Harry, but it was moments like this—when James lost his temper—that Mia was able to see the difference between father and son. While Harry had kept his Seeker's frame throughout school, James had filled out, and when he needed to appear intimidating he had no trouble standing taller and using his larger frame to do so.

"—should curse you right here!" James bellowed, looking close to tears himself. "You're supposed to be better than your bloody family, Sirius!"

Cringing at the volume, Sirius shrank further against the wall.

Mia gaped at the sight in horror. She had never seen James properly angry with Sirius. Even when the two had fought over Sirius's issues with her and Remus, James seemed to react as though it were his brotherly duty, regardless of how he felt about Sirius. Now, however, he looked furious with his best friend. It had been a long time since James had used Sirius's name instead of affectionately calling him Padfoot.

"I know . . . I-I can't . . ." Sirius stammered, looking anguished.

"Jamie?" Mia whispered, taking a slow step toward the scene. "Jamie, where's Remus?"

Sirius swallowed, getting to his feet and hesitantly taking a few steps toward her. "Mia."

"He's in the room," James said, holding out his wand to block Sirius from moving any closer. He turned his gaze on his best friend, glaring sternly before turning back to his sister. "There was an . . . accident."

"No." Mia shook her head, already knowing what he was going to say. How had she forgotten? Her eyes bore into Sirius's face, and he broke under her stare, turning away from her.

"Mia, I'm so sorry. I can't tell you how sorry I am," Sirius choked out, clearly grieving.

"Everyone's safe. But Sniv—*Snape*," James corrected himself, "found a way beneath the Whomping Willow. I got there just in time. Snape's with Dumbledore, but Remus was in a state when the sun rose. Professor Dumbledore asked us to deal with him, but Mia . . . he won't listen to us."

"How did Snape figure it out?" she asked, looking directly at Sirius, tears already welling in her eyes. Had it not been just days ago he refused to break eye contact with her as they held each other in a dark corner, confessing feelings of affection and making promises of safety?

"I let him overhear me," Sirius mumbled. "I made him think that we were keeping something secret up in the shack. Made him think that we'd all be expelled if we were found out. Then . . ." He brought his hands to his face and shook his head, exhaling shakily. "I'm so sorry, Mia. I let him hear me talk about the notch in the tree."

She closed her eyes, unable to yell at him. "Sirius, you could have killed him. You could have destroyed Remus over this. His whole life."

"Mia, please," Sirius rasped, voice raw. "Scream at me, hit me, tell me you hate me."

"I won't bother." Mia sighed, unable to give him anything but her quiet disappointment. "The saddest thing about you, Sirius, is that I expected something like this to happen. I don't even have the energy to be angry with you because it won't change anything. Nothing ever changes," she said sadly and looked at the door. "Jamie, let me in the room. I want to see Remus."

"Just be careful," James whispered as he walked to the door. "He hit Padfoot a few times."

"Good," Mia said.

"Mia, I'm so—" Sirius began, tears streaming down his face.

"I'm not the one you need to apologise to. You were *supposed* to be a good man, Sirius."

Her eyes widened once the door to the Room of Requirement closed behind her. James had apparently asked the room to recreate the Gryffindor common room like it had the night of Remus's birthday party. Was it really only four days ago that they were all in here, laughing and enjoying each other's company?

The room was virtually destroyed. Furniture was upended, curtains torn, and there were large holes in the walls. Mia frowned as she ran her fingers over one of them, noticing blood on the stone.

She heard a noise in the corner and spun to see Remus huddled against the wall, knees pulled to his chest with his arms wrapped around them. Even across the room and in the dark, she could see a new long scar cutting through his face, beginning at his left eyebrow and slicing against the bridge of his nose, ending in the centre of his right cheek.

"Hello, love," Mia whispered as she moved closer until she could kneel down before him. Remus turned his face away from her, quietly sobbing into his folded arms. She worried that he would flinch away from her like he used to when she would approach him about his lycanthropy after a rough moon. She worried he would snap at her, put up walls and block her out, or just ignore her altogether, but the moment she sat down and leant against him, Remus fell into her arms, crying into her lap.

"It's going to be okay," she whispered, stroking her fingers through his hair as she tried to hold back tears of her own. She kissed the top of his head, holding him close. "Dumbledore will fix everything. *You* didn't do anything wrong."

"I could have killed someone. I could have killed him," Remus said through gasping sobs. "I'm going to end up like the rest of them—like Greyback. I'm going to end up hurting someone."

"I will *never* let that happen. I swear on my magic, Remus, I will do everything possible to make sure you *never* become like Greyback."

## Chapter Forty-Eight

### *Get the Cloak*

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*I'll do whatever it takes to turn this around  
I know what's at stake, I know that I've let you down  
And if you give me a chance, Believe that I can change  
I'll keep us together whatever it takes  
(Whatever it Takes - Lifehouse)*

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**March 17th, 1976**

The Marauders, in addition to Mia, were called into Dumbledore's office once Remus calmed down.

The headmaster looked eager to take care of the situation as quickly as possible. "Gentlemen, if you wouldn't mind waiting on the other side of the door. I must have a quick word with Miss Potter on an unrelated issue," he said with a smile, his blue eyes twinkling.

James and Peter each took hold of Remus's and Sirius's arms, as their two friends were barely able to hold it together long enough to stand, let alone walk.

Once the door was shut, Dumbledore gestured to the chair opposite his desk, and Mia took the seat with a sad smile.

"I'm sorry about this, Professor. I should have done something to prevent it." She wanted to cry, but her eyes were dry and red. She had been emptied of all of her tears while comforting Remus in the Room of Requirement that morning.

"You and I have had this conversation several times over the course of the years, Miss Potter. And I reassert my position and advise to you to follow your Mr Lupin's letter. May I ask, have you tried to change anything since you've arrived in this timeline?"

She sighed, biting the inside of her cheek. She had put a great deal of thought into her time travel and what she could and could not do. "I don't know, sir. Sometimes I can't tell if I'm purposely trying to fix something or if I'm just reacting normally. There are days when I wonder if I'm not the catalyst you often talk about. If my being here isn't what triggered a reaction, to begin with."

Mia's biggest issue with being in the current timeline was always Peter. Had she been given the opportunity, she would have prevented Pettigrew from ever meeting James, Remus, and Sirius, and yet it was *she* who first came to Peter's aid on that first train ride. She thought of how difficult it had been to control her rage when face-to-face with the traitor—especially during the first night in the Shrieking Shack—and wondered if perhaps her bitterness toward him would be what eventually pushed him to become an irredeemable man.

There was also the more recent issue of Snape.

"I think I'm the reason last night happened, sir," Mia revealed. "There was an altercation in class between myself and Severus. Sirius took it personally. I think Sirius did what he did in retribution. It's my fault."

"The Chudley Cannons are in last place in the league right now; is this also your fault, Miss Potter?" Dumbledore questioned. "It rained last week; is this your fault as well? It has been some years since I've read your letter, but may I ask what it says in regards to blame?"

"Do not put blame on yourself over the future," Mia quoted the letter word for word with a sigh, understanding Dumbledore's point. She knew the words perfectly. She still read the letter often, as it connected her to the future. "What is meant to happen will happen, regardless of how it comes to be. I understand, sir."

He smiled. "Good. Now, while I have always tried to follow my own instincts when it came to your knowledge of the future, and avoid asking too many questions, I would like to request your advice on the matter at hand."

"What can I help with, sir?" she asked dutifully.

"I am struggling with how to handle the situation. Mr Lupin's secret will be kept; I've taken proper measures with young Mr Snape to assure that. However, I feel it would be irrational of me to look the other way when one student knowingly put the life of another in jeopardy." He frowned; the disappearance of his smile was unsettling. "I would like you to tell me a little of what you know about Mr Black's character."

Mia sighed. Why did it always come down to Sirius?

"I can't lie and say that I'm not biased. Sirius and I . . . There are complications. But . . ." She thought of her original third year and what happened in the hospital wing before she and Harry took the Time-Turner to save Sirius.

*"Sirius Black showed he was capable of murder at the age of sixteen," Professor Snape said. "You haven't forgotten that, Headmaster? You haven't forgotten that he once tried to kill me?"*

*"My memory is as good as it ever was, Severus."*

She and Harry had known of Sirius's innocence relating to the murders of James and Lily Potter, and they had fought to convince Snape, Fudge, and Dumbledore with everything they could, but in the end, they knew it would not be enough. The words of a couple of teenagers, an escaped convict, and a werewolf would hold no power.

*"If all goes well, you will be able to save more than one innocent life tonight."*

Innocent.

Sirius had been innocent of murder then but was sent to Azkaban anyway. Mia knew that Sirius, this younger Sirius, would suffer, and it didn't matter when or for what crime he had committed. He would suffer.

"He is a confused boy. A confused and angry boy who is fighting against the prejudices of his family by lashing out, but . . . he is a good man, and he's punishing himself enough for what he's done," she said firmly, recalling the red rims of Sirius's eyes as he waited outside the Room of Requirement, his remorse evident.

Dumbledore's smile returned. "Thank you, Miss Potter. I will take your words into consideration."

He had. Dumbledore had been amazingly creative with his eventual punishment of Sirius—who had spent years in detention and showed nothing for it. Rather than make him shine trophies or candelabras, or even go so far as expelling him, Dumbledore had insisted that Sirius—who was much too smart for his own good—tutor other fifth years who were struggling with preparations for their O.W.L.s.

The punishment forced Sirius to interact with the other Houses—Slytherins included—and also made his own revising mandatory. When Mia had been told what Sirius's punishment would be, she laughed as she remembered a conversation she and an older Sirius once had, where he promised to one day tell her how he managed to get nine O.W.L.s.

**April 14th, 1976**

"I'm not *mad* at him, I'm *disappointed* in him."

Mia leant against the sofa in the common room, an Arithmancy book in her hands. It had been two years, and she was still miffed that her boys had essentially tricked her out of taking the class. She would be glad when O.W.L.s were over so she could drop Care of Magical Creatures—*again*. While flipping through the pages of her textbook, she realised that, instead of reading them, she was using the motion as a distraction to avoid putting effort into the conversation with her brother.

"But *Remus* forgave him," James reasoned, sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of her, wearing his Quidditch gear and looking uneasy.

She frowned, lips pursed and eyes narrowed. "Well, maybe Remus *shouldn't* have. Sirius was selfish and foolish, and this bitter rivalry between the two of you and Snape has now grown far past schoolyard bullying—which I *also* don't approve of."

James immediately shifted his gaze elsewhere, looking chastened. She knew that expression. It was a James Potter Classic that would be passed down to his son. It roughly translated into: *I'm sorry my actions have made you feel this way, but I'm certainly not going to stop doing them*. At least Harry had the good sense to only use it when it came to risking his life to save the world. James used it to escape her wrath and to continue harassing Slytherins.

"No one died," James tried to remind her with a sheepish smile, "and Dumbledore put Snape under a Wizard's Oath to keep Moony's secret." She knew that he was purposely not calling Snape a rude name in an attempt to wheedle back into her good graces. "It's been a month, Mia. Remus is fine, Snape's fine, but you're still giving Sirius the cold shoulder."

"His fur will keep him insulated during the storm," she said with a bite to her tone.

"At least scream at him or something." He sighed, turning pleading hazel eyes up at her. "Mia, I've never seen him this bad before. I'm really worried he's going to do something stupid if you don't forgive him."

Mia stared down at her brother shrewdly, slowly arching a suspicious brow at him. Not taking her eyes off his face as she closed her book and set it down beside her on the sofa, she leant forward, studying his eyes intently. She watched as James slowly cracked under the pressure of her scrutiny, a calculating trick taught to her by Dorea.

"Jamie?" she began calmly, a storm hiding behind the soft façade she presented. "Did Sirius threaten to sit out the game if I didn't forgive him?"

Her suspicion was confirmed the moment James's eyes widened.

"Mum's right. You should have been put in Slytherin. Please, Mia, it's an important game. If we beat Slytherin today, we'll have another chance at the Quidditch Cup!"

She could not believe that Remus had forgiven Sirius so quickly. James, too, had been swift to accept the apologies, despite the fact that he had been close to cursing his best friend over the incident.

"Fine!" Mia snapped at James kneeling before her, begging her to forgive Sirius for the sake of Gryffindor pride. "Send him down and then both of you get to the pitch before the whole school thinks that the Gryffindor Quidditch Captain skipped out on his own game."

As though he had been waiting for her answer, Padfoot descended the staircase from the boys' dorm room and padded over to the couch, resting his large head on her thigh, looking up into her face with big eyes and letting out a low whine.

"Puppy eyes," she said with a scoff. "Clever. Go win your stupid game. You have my forgiveness. For now."

Mia followed the boys down to the pitch where she joined Lily, Mary, Alice, Frank, Peter, and an exhausted-looking Remus in the stands. There was a subtle chill in the air. The other students did not look like they minded, but she noticed Remus reacting poorly to it. She waved her wand over his body to cast a Warming Charm.

He let out a sigh of relief and smiled, pulling her in close for a hug. "Thanks, Mia."

She breathed in the scent of him in as though it were oxygen she had been deprived of for a long while. After the narrow miss where he could have killed Snape, Remus had been predictably withdrawn, though, thankfully, he had not reverted back to how he was during their first few years at Hogwarts. He did, however, tell Mia that it would be best, for now, to abstain from one another physically, at least until he had time to work through a few issues regarding his lycanthropy and how he was trying to deal with what happened the last full moon. She had been respectful, of course, especially since, if they *had* theoretically fallen back into bed with one another, she was not certain if she would have done it just to make Sirius angry, and Remus did not deserve to be used like that.

His hug made her happy to think that her best friend was coming back to himself, especially considering the full moon was in just a few hours.

Madam Hooch made James shake hands with the Slytherin Captain, Lucinda Talkalot. Then a whistle blew, and the players took to the sky immediately.

"Gryffindor in possession of the Quaffle; they are starting this game off quick. Captain James Potter never tries to lure the Slytherin team into a false sense of security. Potter to Florence, Florence back to Potter. Potter throws the Quaffle. Beater, Sirius Black, hits the Quaffle in and scores!" The announcer went on as the Gryffindor stands erupted in cheers. "Strange move by Sirius Black, reminiscent of Muggle batsball by the looks of it, but it's all legal play!"

Even after all these years, Mia smiled as she watched the game. While Quidditch had always been a stupid—and dangerous—sport to her, she had grown to love watching it. Flying right in front of her, Sirius caught her attention. When he turned to wink, she let herself gaze at his body in his red and gold jersey, with flowing robes blowing in the wind behind him. Her mouth briefly watered at the sight. When she was forced to swallow, her eyes narrowed. She would absolutely *not* swoon over Sirius Black in Quidditch robes! He did not *deserve* her swooning right now. She huffed and folded her arms across her chest defiantly and sought her brother out amongst the players, rolling her eyes as he dominated the game with ease.

"Slytherins have the Quaffle, and it looks like Captain Talkalot has spotted the Snitch!"

Everyone turned their attention to the diving Seekers, bobbing and weaving in between Bludgers and the other players after the small golden fluttering object as it flew just a bit faster than the Cleansweeps they rode.

Mia's attention was diverted elsewhere as she watched a man in Auror robes approach the stands where Professor Dumbledore sat with the rest of the staff.

Dumbledore suddenly stood, wand held outward. A bright light engulfed the pitch, putting an immediate stop to the game. The Snitch, along with speeding Bludgers, stopped dead in the air and fell from the sky, landing on the grass.

The headmaster pressed his wand to his throat, casting an Amplifying Charm before speaking in a voice that echoed loudly. "Apologies, but this game has been postponed for

the time being. All students must return to their Houses without delay. Access to outside areas of the castle is strictly forbidden until further notice."

"What's happening?" Alice asked, deferring immediately to Lily and Remus, both of whom were transitioning into prefect mode and ushering the Gryffindors out of the stands.

Lily frowned, dodging a stampede of flustered first years. "Who knows?"

"Remus?" Mia whispered as she approached him. "Are you all right?"

He shook his head, looking on edge. "No. They've forbidden access outside the castle. *I'll* be out there in less than two hours." His eyes flickered toward the Whomping Willow, which could be seen just over the edge of the stands in the distance. "Why would they forbid anyone to go outside the castle?"

Mia's mouth turned down in concern. "I don't know, but I'll find out."

After leading the students back to Gryffindor Tower with Lily, Remus left immediately for the hospital wing, where he was to meet Madam Pomfrey who would take him to the Whomping Willow. As the sun began to set beneath the horizon, Mia watched nervously from the common room window where she could see the treetops of the Forbidden Forest.

"He'll be all right," James said as he approached her, fiddling with something in his hand.

"What's that?"

James smirked. "Snitch."

She chuckled softly. "You're a Seeker now?"

"Nicked it. Didn't get much else out of today's game. Wanted a souvenir," he admitted, shrugging. "Why do you think they closed off the grounds?"

"I don't know. But I'd really like to find out. I'm worried about Remus. Before Dumbledore made the speech cancelling the game, an Auror came and spoke with him," she told her brother, brows furrowed in concern. "Something must have happened out there."

"I didn't even know Aurors were here," he said quietly. "You think it's about what the *Prophet's* been saying? About the . . . maulings?"

"Probably. Hey . . . is that . . . ?" She squinted at the sight of someone down below walking away from the forest. At first, she assumed it was Hagrid, but even from this distance, she could tell by size alone that this person was not half-giant.

"The professors are probably doing a security check," James said, following her line of sight.

"Jamie, get the Cloak. Something doesn't feel right."

Five minutes later, Mia, James, Sirius, and Peter were slipping out of the portrait hole and down the large marble staircase. Both James and Sirius struggled to remain beneath the cloak that barely covered their feet these days. Peter had already shifted into his Animagus form, scurrying along the edge of the wall, while Mia trailed behind them, Disillusioning herself.

"Go to the front," she whispered, trying not to accidentally run into them.

Once downstairs, she reached forward, grabbing the cloak and stopping James and Sirius when she heard voices down the hall.

"Have they identified the body yet?" Professor Sprout was whispering to Professor Kettleburn, who was leaning against the wall, using it as leverage to make his way through the corridor. Professor Sprout looked worried, while Professor Kettleburn looked annoyed.

"If there's anything left to identify."

"They're sure? It's the same one?" Professor Sprout asked.

"That's what the Aurors said. Reckons the wolf's been in the Forbidden Forest for a few weeks now, waiting the moon out and picking off people in Hogsmeade to bide his time," he answered her.

Mia held back a gasp as she waited for the two professors to get out of earshot. "We have to get to the Whomping Willow," she instructed the boys and made a dash for the door, figuring it would be easier to make a run for it outside instead of risking running into more professors within the castle.

Outside, they observed from the edge of the castle, opposite the bridge and the vegetable gardens, as Madam Pomfrey walked a nervous-looking Remus toward the tree. Mia watched as Remus paused, sniffing the air.

He turned to look in their direction, but would not be able to spot them in their current invisible state. He stared for a long while, though, until Madam Pomfrey nudged him gently with a hand on his shoulder.

"No time to waste, Mr Lupin."

He nodded, pressing forward beneath the tree.

Mia let out a sigh of relief when she saw Remus disappear from view and Madam Pomfrey make her way back across the grass.

"Something still doesn't feel right," James said.

Mia nodded in agreement, her stare held on the Whomping Willow long after Madam Pomfrey returned to the castle.

"Do you smell that, Mia?" Sirius asked, his voice anxious. "Something new."

"I don't think it's new." She worried her bottom lip between her teeth as a shiver crept up her spine. As if to confirm her suspicions, the passage to the Whomping Willow reopened, and all of the teenagers suddenly held their breath.

A large, familiar figure emerged from the passage dragging something at his side. As the remaining light of the setting sun angled over the person, Mia's eyes widened as she saw a vicious-looking man with matted grey hair. Even from this distance she could see the glint of sharp, pointed teeth.

Fenrir Greyback.

"Sufficient for you?" a sharp voice muttered from around the corner, and Mia almost let out an audible gasp at the sight of their Defence Against the Dark Arts professor.

"Reckon you've done well enough," Greyback rasped.

Mia shook with rage at the sight of him. *This* was the creature responsible for causing so much pain to Remus. *This* was the werewolf responsible for attacking Bill Weasley. *This* was the beast who had captured her, Harry, Ron, and Sirius and brought them to Malfoy Manor. She swallowed down the rising bile in her throat and pushed back the thought in her head that screamed *Attack! Kill! Death Eater!* forcing herself to remember that, in the end, the werewolf was to die at the hand of Draco Malfoy.

Unfortunately, that not-at-all-tragic death would not occur for another twenty-two years, and Future Remus had never relayed a story about running into Greyback whilst he attended Hogwarts. Mia had no idea what was going to happen.

"I've been at this school all year, just for one errand?" Professor Higgs snapped.

"I'd be watching the tone if I was you. If you haven't noticed, I've got a time limit here," Greyback said, gesturing to the quickly darkening sky. "So, if we're finished . . ." He made to reach down on the ground for something, but Higgs stopped him.

"Not a word," Professor Higgs sneered. "You and I are done."

"I don't normally take orders from wizards, but seeing as you play fetch so nicely . . ." Greyback laughed mockingly. "Fine, fine. No one'll ever know your secret. You still sticking with the story that your son drowned at sea?"

Higgs narrowed his eyes. "I have no son."

"Oh, *I* beg to differ. Saw him just last moon, I did. Right in my pack where he belongs. Bottom of the pack o'course," Greyback crooned, licking his lips, "but he's Pack all the same."

The knuckles of Higgs's left hand turned white with the deathlike grip he had around his wand. "And *this* . . . filthy half-breed?" He looked disdainfully at the ground. "One of yours?"

"Oh, *this*?" Greyback grinned darkly as he reached down and pulled up by the collar an unconscious Remus. "This here is one of my favourites."

Mia felt Sirius move forward, but she reached out and stilled his movement beneath the cloak. She had faced off against Greyback before and knew that they would not stand a chance against the vicious werewolf—especially if he were paired with Professor Higgs. Not when they had Remus as a hostage.

Greyback patted an unconscious Remus's cheek. "He and I have a past. Been waiting for him to grow up is all. Bringing him on in to meet the rest, come morning. Whole pack'll be in Wiltshire this time next week. Pass that information along to your Dark Lord, yeah? If he's as friendly to wolves as you all say he is, maybe I'll put in a good word for ya, Higgs."

"I'd appreciate it if you pretend that we've never met, half-breed. Get yourself and your . . . *progeny* into the forest before someone sees you. Or else we've both risked everything for nothing."

"I'll say hi to your boy for you then?" Greyback cackled as Higgs stormed off, throwing Remus's body over his shoulder and rushing quickly into the forest.

"What the fuck?" Sirius whisper-shouted, throwing the cloak off of him. "Fuck, fuck, what do we do? Do you know who that was?"

Mia nodded, wide-eyed after dispelling her Disillusionment Charm. "Greyback," she said in a terrified whisper.

"What're we standing here for?" James demanded. "We have to go after him! He's got Remus!"

"We have to be smart about this, Jamie." Mia nervously paced back and forth, trying to think. "We were lucky we were downwind. Remus only smelled us because we were familiar and so close. If Greyback knew we'd heard everything, we'd be dead. Or Remus would be."

"And Higgs, that prick!" Sirius growled dangerously.

James grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her hard. "Mia, we have to go before Greyback and Remus get away!"

"Jamie, the full moon rises in less than a few minutes. They'll both transform." He looked confused, so she tried again to explain, "Greyback is Remus's sire. And worse, an Alpha. Which means if we go into that forest to bring Remus back, even on the Wolfsbane, Remus won't be able to help us. Moony's instinct will be to submit to Greyback."

"We can take that bloody werewolf!" Sirius snapped.

"No, we can't, not in human form, and even then..." She paused before continuing in a voice she tried to make as clear and rational as possible, given the circumstances, "As big as the two of you are in Animagus form, you still have trouble reining in Moony when he gets out of control. We're talking about a fully grown, fully embraced werewolf. Did you see his face? His hands? He stays mid-transformation so he can maul and infect people in between moons. It wouldn't create werewolves, it just scars them for life and induces wolfish behaviours. He does it because society fears werewolves so much. He's as savage as it gets. Being an Alpha only makes him stronger."

Peter shifted back into human form, looking positively terrified. "What'll we do, Mia?"

"What makes him an Alpha?" James asked.

The solution thrummed under her skin, and Mia smiled. "A pack."

## Chapter Forty-Nine

### *Pack*

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*Blood on blood  
One on one  
And I'll be here for you  
Till Kingdom come  
Blood on blood  
(Blood on Blood - Bon Jovi)*

---

**April 14th, 1976**

Mia could not believe she never saw the signs.

*"You're mine, too, you know. You belong to me. It's like . . . if I were an alpha wolf, you'd be my beta."*

*"What about Sirius, James, and Peter?"*

*"They're in the pack too."*

"We're Pack," she whispered in realisation. "We have to go. I'll explain on the way, but I think I know how to save Remus." She smiled nervously as she took her first steps toward the forest, flanked immediately by James and Sirius who had no reservations about trusting her or following her after two werewolves.

"Wait!" Peter called. "I . . . I . . ." His round face was pale, and his eyes were wide; though he refused to make eye contact with any of them. "S-Someone should tell Dumbledore."

James looked as though he agreed with Peter, but Mia was already in predator mode, and she could smell the fear rippling off of him. She heard Sirius growl low in his throat—he could likely smell it too—but she held up a hand.

"Peter's right. If he wants to go and tell Dumbledore, he should. Tell him that Greyback took Remus into the forest and that you saw him with Higgs. Don't say a word about us. Remember, *you're* an illegal Animagus too," she pointed out, her threat clear. If Peter somehow got the three of them caught for being Animagi, Mia would take him down with them.

Peter nodded, shifted into his rat form, and scurried away.

Mia sighed and turned back to her *brave* Gryffindor boys. "Marauder does *not* equal Pack," she said firmly as she stormed past James and Sirius, her eyes fixated upon the shadowed trees in front of them. She knew what she needed to do in order to save her friend—her *Alpha*—and she felt a weight lifted off of her shoulders in knowing that Peter Pettigrew would not be a part of the pack they would create.

Where they were going, there was no room for cowards.

"Mia, have you been in the Forbidden Forest before?" James asked as he and Sirius followed his sister.

Her steps held no hesitation as she turned toward an unmarked path. "Sort of," she lied.

She *had* been in the forest numerous times over the course of her life. She remembered that the thestral herd generally lived to the right of where they were headed, and noticed the prints on the ground confirming her suspicions. She knew that the centaurs lived closer to the centre of the forest in a large clearing that was similar to the one where the final battle of the Second Wizarding War took place. Where Harry killed Voldemort. Where she, Remus, and Sirius almost died.

*Not again.*

"I turn the Room of Requirement into the Forbidden Forest sometimes. It replicates it perfectly, but since the room can't produce living beings, it's virtually empty. Allows me access to the forest without the element of danger. It's where I trained to become an Animagus," she explained, leaving out the part about how it was her go-to room to shag Remus.

"Moon will be up soon, kitten," Sirius said. "Better start explaining your plan before we have to shift."

"Werewolves are similar to regular wolves in that they can either belong to a pack or be a lone wolf. Remus is a lone wolf, but only because of circumstances," she said as she struggled to step over a large, broken tree branch, watching as both Sirius and James cleared the obstacle with the ease of their long legs. "Each pack has an Alpha, the strongest. He controls the pack, and amongst werewolves, the progeny of the Alpha don't have the ability to fight back. They aren't powerful enough. Remus needs to embrace his inner Alpha."

"But Greyback's the one who *turned* Remus. That makes him his progeny, right? So how can Remus be an Alpha?" James asked.

"Because Sirius and I *made* him one," Mia said. "We didn't mean to at the time of course, but we *did*."

Shock on his face, Sirius took hold of her arm and spun her to face him. "How?"

"It's a bond. I felt it during my training while I was reaching out for Remus during my meditations. I could feel the Familial Bond that reached out to you, Jamie," she said, refusing to speak of the Soul Bond she felt between herself and Sirius. "There was something else, though. An invisible string that took me to the Shrieking Shack during the full moon, but also brought me back to the forest where I knew you two were training. It was an unprovoked *Pack* Bond." She looked skyward, shook off Sirius's grip, and moved faster as the moon began to rise.

"I know about bonds. Unprovoked bonds don't mean anything, Mia," Sirius said as he followed her. "It basically just says we're all connected just by existing in the same world."

"For witches and wizards, yes," Mia agreed, though she noted that Sirius was ignorant to a lot of the details. "Werewolves are different. Regular bonds usually exist between family members or married couples; there's no hierarchy except with house-elves, and even then it's only one-sided. Werewolf packs have a hierarchy; it's necessary for their survival or else they'd all just kill each other."

"What does that have to do with us?" James asked as he leapt over a large rock. "We're not werewolves."

"Most bonds are provoked by emotions and actions, Jamie. Preparation and provocation. Sirius and I took the first step to prepare a Pack Bond with Remus the first night we were with him in the Shrieking Shack."

"We submitted," Sirius said, clarity written all over his expression.

"Translate?" James snapped, narrowing his eyes at them.

"Because Sirius and I are pack Animagi, we had to submit to Moony in order to show we weren't a threat to him. *Passive* submission at least; folded ears and tucked tails," she answered. "Then Moony passively scent marked us. When Sirius and I did that, we were recognising the potential for a Pack Bond, and in doing so, we established the hierarchy."

"We made Remus an Alpha by *literally* bowing at his bloody paws." Sirius barked a quick laugh. "Okay, so we can get him away from Greyback by what . . . *active* submission? That'll provoke the bond?"

She nodded quickly. "First, we have to get Greyback out of the way. Moony won't be able to see us provoking the bond until Greyback loses rank in front of him. That'll require bloodshed." She swallowed hard. *Of course it requires bloodshed, what bond ritual doesn't?* Her mind drifted back to pulling Sirius from the veil, the blood from her hand, the golden glow, and then suddenly, the pull toward him—*for* him.

"Okay." James nodded, looking nervous as they continued moving through the forest. "Us three against a crazed, blood-thirsty werewolf. No problem," he said sarcastically. "What's the next step after provoking a bond?"

"Sealing it," Mia answered and then cleared her throat. "Umm . . . we don't need to do that."

"Why not? Wouldn't it be stronger?" James asked with a raised brow.

"Yes, always, but . . . It's just that you and Sirius definitely wouldn't want to do it."

"Hey, if Remus's life is on the line here, Mia, I'd do just about anything," James defended adamantly.

Sirius laughed but then he cleared his throat in an obvious bid to be stern. "Prongs, werewolves seal their bonds by mating and then marking each other."

James stood still for a moment, his face turning an interesting shade of crimson. "Right. So he'll survive just fine with an unsealed bond?" he asked clearly, and Sirius stifled a laugh but nodded. "Is the plan to just—?"

James was cut off by a loud scream in the distance, followed quickly by another. The three looked skyward and saw the full moon in all its bright, damaging glory. They listened to the echoes of Remus's painful cries, and Mia winced, closing her eyes and burying her face in Sirius's chest as he wrapped a protective arm around her. Remus always had to suffer through the transformation, but she could not imagine what was happening to him now, knowing Greyback was there with him.

She could not fathom how afraid he was.

"We need to find them before they find us," James insisted. "Shift now and stay in sight."

"*You* keep to the back and sides," Sirius instructed. "Moony recognises Prongs, but to Greyback, you're nothing but prey."

James, looking indignant, nodded anyway, and turned from them both to shift. His arms fell forward moulding into long legs that had him hit the ground with hooves. He gave a shake of his messy hair, and his head formed into the face of the noble stag, antlers branching outward, large and sharp.

Mia chuckled at the sight. *Prey indeed.*

Sirius took a deep breath and leapt forward, shifting mid-air and landing on the ground with big black paws. Padfoot's eyes turned to look back at her, and he pressed his muzzle into her open hand, a silent gesture of comfort.

Mia inhaled sharply, trying to control her emotions. Was it really just a few hours ago that she had been so angry with him?

She closed her eyes and slipped to the ground in a movement that still felt like water pulling her down. Her eyes opened, and her pointed ears twitched as she listened up ahead. The screams had stopped, but she could hear noises. A look to Padfoot next to her, and Mia knew he heard it too.

Whimpering.

Stealthily, she and Padfoot followed straight ahead toward the noises, while Prongs stopped and lingered several yards to the side. She looked at her surroundings as she moved through the brush and felt a sharp, painful memory resurface.

*This is where it happened the first time.*

She knew that collection of trees just to the right, and as she checked behind her for a moment, she could see the pathway perfectly, as though she were looking back through her human eyes, but not just *Mia's* eyes. *Hermione Granger's* eyes.

Running through the forest with Harry's hand clenched tightly in hers, a recently spun Time-Turner around her neck, and a werewolf on their heels. Remus transformed. Those trees, that path, it was all the same, and Mia could almost see Buckbeak in the distance waiting for them. If she looked far enough ahead with her vulpine eyes, she was certain she could see the lake bank where Harry fought dementors. She could hear Moony howling in the distant memory, echoing in her mind as she ran, following Padfoot, and the scents and sounds that drew them both continually forward.

*"The Executioner! He's gone to get the dementors! This is it, Hermione!" Harry said before helping her on top of the back of the hippogriff.*

*They flew, flew far too high and much too fast for her liking, all the way back to the castle where she could see Sirius Black, escaped convict, sitting in a room and looking out of the thirteenth window from the right of the West Tower.*

*"Stand back!" Hermione said to Harry, and she took out her wand, still gripping the back of Harry's robes with her left hand. "Alohomora!"*

*The window sprang open, freeing Sirius Black.*

*Sirius climbed onto the back of Buckbeak, flinging a leg over the large flying beast and leaning forward, looking at Hermione with an apology in his eyes and . . . something else that she did not know how to place. She nodded to him with a sympathetic smile, silently saying it was okay for him to hold onto her as they flew away. While Hermione kept her eyes shut tight for most of the flight, she opened them the moment Buckbeak put his claws down on the top of the West Tower.*

*Harry jumped off immediately, but for a brief moment, Hermione could not move because Sirius still had an arm around her waist.*

*"Sirius, you'd better go. Quick," Harry panted. "They'll reach Flitwick's office any moment. They'll find out you're gone."*

*Suddenly, Sirius let go of Hermione.*

*She turned and smiled at him, and he looked on the verge of tears as his slate grey eyes met her gaze. She passed it off as gratitude, knowing that the innocent man probably had not seen kindness in a very long time.*

*Sirius Black smirked at her. "I owe you a life debt, little witch."*

*He'd known, Mia thought, her breath catching in her throat as she continued to run, the memory clearer now than ever before.*

It all started that night. The Shrieking Shack. Sirius, Remus, and Peter. A full moon and a transformed werewolf. Hermione had howled to distract Moony from their earlier selves, and he had come straight for her. She remembered the essay she had written for Snape: werewolves only respond to the call of their pack.

Future Remus was right; time was a circle. She was a catalyst, and everything that was happening was meant to happen. The night she had saved Sirius's life, he had recognised her. Recognized *Mia* in Hermione Granger's eyes. The night she created the life debt that he owed her. The *same* night she called into the forest, and Moony had responded.

Tonight was the night that made that moment in the future possible. Tonight, she would become one of Remus's own kind.

*Pack.*

The memories cleared from her mind as she noticed Padfoot slowing down ahead of her. She inhaled slow and deep. So many scents lingered in the forest that it was difficult, at first, to pick through them. She smelled a nest of birds in the trees above her and a herd of thestrals a mile behind. Somewhere in the far distance, she could smell the sweet lingering scent of a unicorn and its foal. She could smell Prongs moving around the small clearing; if she focused her eyes she could see him straight through the trees.

Finally, just up ahead, she smelled something wonderfully familiar: parchment and grass.

*Moony.*

And something horribly recognisable: blood and sweat.

*Greyback.*

She closed in on Padfoot, silently slinking beneath his bear-like frame and hovering around his giant paw, rubbing the side of her cheek against it as a silent way of letting him know that she was there, she was okay, and she was ready. She felt his confirmation when he breathed down against the fur of her head.

Moony was flat on the ground, whimpering softly, gold eyes looking up as the large, grey, matted wolf hovered over him dominantly. Stiff-legged and tall, Greyback was much larger than Moony, who, in the shadow of the Alpha, looked like a cub in comparison. Greyback growled, teeth bared, his hackles bristling, and his tail high as he leant down trying to pin Moony further into submission—forcefully nudging the younger wolf's snout with his own to push his neck to the side.

Moony was struggling, and Mia knew it was because of the Wolfsbane. Remus was in there, and he was fighting back even though she knew Moony would feel the need to submit to his Alpha. Moony let out a soft growl when Greyback pushed him again. As punishment for essentially speaking against his Alpha, the grey wolf viciously bit at Moony's flank, tearing his teeth into flesh.

Mia's eyes widened, and she went to move forward to attack, but Padfoot's mouth around the scruff of her neck prevented her from doing so blindly.

The smell of Moony's blood flooded her senses and made her feel sick. It made her think of every morning after the full moon she had ever been through with Remus. When he was eleven and sobbing into her arms. When he was thirty-eight and trying to hold composure so as not to frighten her. She had seen enough of Remus's blood. Too much of it.

She took in a slow breath to calm herself, and leant forward slightly, nipping Padfoot's paw to let him know it was time.

Padfoot crept slowly through the brush, advancing through the trees. He made no sound at first, but there was no need to be quiet; his size alone would draw Greyback's attention even if the old werewolf had not smelled him.

Greyback turned and growled at the dog, towering over him, but Padfoot did not back down.

Mia trained her gaze on Moony, who was staring at Padfoot and taking in short shallow breaths. *Calm down, love*, she thought.

Greyback gave a low growl of warning.

Padfoot ignored it, of course, leaping forward and sinking teeth into the werewolf's neck with abandon.

Greyback fought back, and suddenly, the two were struggling for the upper hand, each on their hind legs trying to force the other backward into submission.

Mia made a run for it, darting quickly over to Moony. She looked up into his eyes, and he backed away from her, his focus darting to Greyback as though he was trying to plead with her to run, to save herself and Padfoot. Moony could not help them.

There was a loud yelp, and she turned in horror to see Greyback fling Padfoot off of him, the dog's body slamming into a large tree behind him and crumpling to the ground with a thud, blood spurting from his front leg. A frenzied rage filled up inside of her, and she rushed forward, jumping high and landing on the back of the large wolf, digging her sharp, narrow teeth into the back of the beast's neck, biting hard and feeling powerful when she tasted copper. Greyback let out a loud howl and began thrashing, and she struggled to hang on. The motion was too rough; she lost her grip and flipped over his head, landing hard on the ground in front of the wolf, who snarled down at her, his lips curled back over his large fangs.

She tried to run but realised her back leg was injured. She would never escape in time. She bared her own teeth, not willing to show fear to the beast, even now, when the danger was all too real.

Her defiance appeared to only enrage Greyback more—or excite him, she could not tell.

The rushing sound of hooves drowned out Greyback's snarling, and she looked up to see Prongs charging, head bowed down and forward. *Prey indeed.* There was not enough time for Greyback to react as the pointed antlers of the mighty stag impaled him through his ribs and neck, running him straight to the ground. Prongs shook his head, bucking his back legs wildly, tearing fur and flesh. He eventually dislodged the wolf from his now-bloody antlers before turning around to deliver a fierce back kick to the open wound in Greyback's side.

Blood spurted to the ground. Greyback snarled in bitter pain as he tried—and failed—to move.

Another low growl filled the air, and the three Animagi turned to see Moony slowly stand, his snout high as the scent of Greyback's blood triggered something primal inside of him.

Mia limped toward Padfoot, who was licking at the large gash in his front paw. They both watched cautiously as Moony walked over to sniff at Greyback's shaking body.

Greyback snarled up at Moony, but Moony suddenly, confidently, and viciously growled back; his eyes a pure liquid gold, practically glowing in the dark of night.

Mia nipped at Padfoot's uninjured paw to get his attention, and she moved forward, creeping low before the sandy wolf, who immediately looked down at her. She lowered herself as far to the ground as possible, ears back and tail tucked, and Moony watched closely, approval in his eyes at the sight.

Padfoot followed close behind her, mimicking her movements exactly.

Following their instructions, Prongs kept his distance, stepping backward and keeping his eyes trained on the injured Greyback, just in case.

As Moony stepped forward, Mia and Padfoot turned their heads to the side at the same time, willingly exposing their necks to the werewolf who towered over them, looking larger now than even Greyback, who was monstrous.

Moony stepped forward, leaning down and sniffing at Mia before wrapping his jaws around her neck in a show of dominance. Showing that he *could* kill her but was choosing not to.

She remained firmly on the ground, her throat bared even as Moony moved over and repeated the process with Padfoot.

Once he had finished, Moony stepped back and turned to look at Greyback, who was snarling up at his progeny, slowly backing away from him, his golden eyes almost flashing red with absolute rage and yet a hint of fear.

Moony let out a loud howl and they all watched as Greyback turned and ran into the distance. The moment he was gone, a bright silver light swirled in the air, encircling the wolf, the fox, the stag, and the dog.

Mia remembered the bond she had provoked with Sirius. *By blood and sacrifice*, she thought just as light and magic burst all around them.

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### **April 15th, 1976**

Sunlight broke through the trees the following morning, and Mia opened her eyes to find that she had shifted back into human form overnight. She did not remember falling asleep, so she could only assume that when the bond was provoked and the light erupted around them, it knocked them all unconscious. She winced as the sun blinded her for a moment, and she pushed up but felt something warm both pulling and pushing her down.

She glanced downward to find Sirius peacefully asleep in her lap, arms wrapped tightly around her waist, his mess of black hair covering his face. Turning her head, she saw Remus and smiled, the weight of his arm around her shoulders making her feel safe like he always did. She exhaled slowly and leant back into his embrace while stroking her fingers through Sirius's hair, a habit that had become more soothing for her than it had for him over the many years.

"*You* look comfortable," James's voice broke through the silence.

She turned and looked over at her brother who was smirking at her, his black hair sticking up in the back and his glasses slightly askew. "I am," she admitted.

James chuckled softly. "Reminds me of when we were little."

She smiled a bit sadly. "Yeah. I miss those days."

James nodded and let out a loud sigh. "Me too. Mostly because I didn't feel awkward about you cuddling with my mates. Ah, the good old days when Moony wasn't naked behind my sister, and Padfoot didn't have a morning erection."

"What?!" Mia jumped and accidentally threw her hip bone into Sirius's forehead.

"Ow! What the fuck?" Sirius yelped, gripping his head.

James laughed.

Mia brought her hands to her mouth and gasped. "Oh, Sirius, I'm so sorry!" She pouted at the sight of him holding his forehead, then leant down and kissed the top of his head. "Are you okay?"

"Never better. Fought a werewolf, got injured," he groaned as he sat up, holding up his arm to show the gash in it. "Bonded myself to my mates, and woke up to a girl assaulting me. You know, just like any other morning." He hissed and scraped a hand through his hair, shying away from the sunlight. "All right there, Prongs?"

"Woke up with blood in my hair," James admitted. "Other than that, I'm good."

Mia gaped at him. "Blood in your hair?"

"Yeah, from the, you know—" He used his hands to mimic his antlers thrusting forward, "—epic werewolf skewering. I don't suppose this is a story we could tell Evans?" He chuckled, his overwhelming confidence clearly coming to the fore, much to Mia's dismay. "I come out of this looking pretty bloody heroic if I do say so myself."

"You were quite the champion, Jamie." Mia smiled at him and then laughed when his smug face turned to something looking like genuine appreciation.

Sirius smirked. "Absolutely! Prongs the Protector!"

James grinned back at his best friend. "Padfoot the Paladin!"

"And Vixen the Vanquisher!" Sirius turned and beamed at Mia.

She glared at him. "Stop calling me Vixen. I don't like nicknames."

"Mia the Marvellous!" James declared.

"Not to break up this little celebration," Remus mumbled roughly, his face buried in the crook of his arm as he curled up behind Mia, still naked, "but can someone please transfigure some trousers for me?"

## Chapter Fifty

### *Catalyst*

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*And you can't fight the tears that ain't coming  
Or the moment of truth in your lies  
When everything feels like the movies  
Yeah, you bleed just to know you're alive  
(Iris - Goo Goo Dolls)*

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**June 8th, 1976**

Peter had miraculously done what he had set out to do: inform Dumbledore of Greyback's appearance and Higgs's deception.

As the three Marauders and Mia—now a fully formed pack under Remus as Alpha—made their way through the forest, they had been cut off by a group of Aurors and professors with wands drawn. Before anyone caught sight of them, James, Mia, and Sirius ducked beneath the Invisibility Cloak and slipped through a small grove of trees, unfortunately, leaving Remus to handle the fallout.

He had explained to Dumbledore and the Aurors what had happened, leaving his friends' participation out of it, naturally. Greyback stunned him inside the passage beneath the Whomping Willow, but not before Remus heard him discuss his plans with Professor Higgs. It was a lie, of course; Remus had been stunned *long* before Higgs showed up, and it was Mia, James, and Sirius who had to inform him of their professor's participation in his abduction.

Remus said his memory was vague after that. He knew that he had transformed at the full moon and awoke alone in the forest that morning, though he had seen Greyback's blood on the ground and had assumed that they fought sometime during the night, especially since Remus himself was wounded.

The Aurors were rude and suspicious—and though they had a right to be, considering Remus *was* lying—their mistrust of him had everything to do with his lycanthropy and nothing to do with his ability to fabricate stories on a whim.

Remus had been escorted to Dumbledore's office where the Aurors questioned him for two hours, accusing him of being in cahoots with Greyback because of their

"connection." They had even gone so far as to accuse Remus of participating in the murders that Greyback committed in nearby villages.

Dumbledore drew a line at that point, bringing in Peter to make a statement. Since Professor Higgs's son had mysteriously gone missing two years earlier, the Aurors had enough to suspect foul play.

Remus was finally allowed to head to the hospital wing; a lot of good it did him at that point, considering the deep bite wound in his side from Greyback had already healed thanks to his lycanthropic regenerative abilities. Just one more nasty scar to deal with.

Sirius was proudly wearing a new scar across his arm from where Greyback had clawed him. Fortunately, he had been in Animagus form at the time, so there was no chance of Sirius getting infected. Of course, he wanted to brag about his grand adventure and trophy scar, but without revealing too many secrets in doing so, Sirius was forced to lie and say that Filch's cat attacked him.

After the long night, Mia nursed a sprained ankle from when Greyback threw her off of him, and James proudly declared that he was the only one of his friends to walk away from the altercation unscathed.

Sirius called James "Prongs the Protector" the rest of the month, and James's ego continued to swell to a record-breaking size.

Winning the Quidditch Cup again did not help matters.

By the time June rolled around, James was impossible to be near, always retelling stories of his grand adventures to those who were allowed to hear them, and tales of his Quidditch prowess to the rest of the student body. When he was not talking, he was playing with that stupid Snitch he had stolen—and subsequently carved Lily's initials into—proving that not only was he an excellent Chaser, but he could have been a Seeker if he wanted.

Since Mia was focused on her O.W.L.s, she had little time to try and rein in her outrageously arrogant brother.

She breezed right through her examinations, which was a massive difference from the first time around when she had spent weeks revising and re-reviewing, driving herself to the brink of a nervous breakdown. Knowing that she already received eleven O.W.L.s in her original timeline gave her the confidence boost she needed, and she even requested to sit for O.W.L.s for classes she had not taken. It was out of the ordinary, certainly, but

McGonagall pulled a few strings—mostly out of curiosity—and Mia was soon looking forward to breaking her previous record.

The last O.W.L. to be taken was Defence Against the Dark Arts. After Professor Higgs was arrested months earlier for his participation in Greyback's attempt at kidnapping Remus, the class had been taken over by Professors Flitwick and McGonagall for the fifth and seventh years only—in order to prepare for their O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s—while the rest of the students were dismissed from their end of year exams in Defence.

All fifth years flooded into the Great Hall to take their exam, and Mia laughed when Professor Flitwick purposely separated the Marauders by several seats.

Sirius was seated several chairs behind James, with Remus two seats to the right of him. Peter got stuck in the back of the room between the Carrow twins, who kept whispering to him. Mia sat between Lily and Mary with Alice and Frank behind them, and from the looks of the test that was put before them, establishing the A.D. had been an *incredibly* good idea.

Mia finished her exam in record time, smirking as she glanced around the room to see that every other member of the A.D.—save for Peter, who was chewing his fingernails and staring down at his paper, anxiously scuffing the ground with his toes—had also finished quickly. In the corner of the room, she saw Snape's hand flying across his parchment, his black curtain of greasy hair shrouding his face.

"Five more minutes!" Professor Flitwick announced.

Mia rolled her eyes at her brother, who was dangerously leaning back in his chair. He yawned loudly, and began ruffling his hair, making it look worse than ever. He turned around in his seat to make eye contact with Sirius, who was leaning his chair back on two legs as well, grinning and giving James a thumbs up.

Mia chuckled quietly, imagining how the boys would react if she could tip their chairs over from across the room. She frowned at the sight of a nervous Remus, who—though *clearly* done with his exam—was looking over his answers. She made a quick "Pst!" sound and caught his attention. She raised a brow at him, and he smirked at her, shrugging his shoulders and lowering his quill in surrender.

*As though Remus Lupin wouldn't pass his Defense O.W.L. with flying colours.*

"Quills down, please!" Professor Flitwick squeaked. "That means you too, Stebbins! Please remain seated while I collect your parchments! *Accio!*" Rolls of parchment zoomed

through the air and into Professor Flitwick's outstretched arms, knocking him backward off his feet. Several people laughed.

Mia and Lily sighed and stood up, rushing to Professor Flitwick's side, and helped him to stand.

"Thank you," Professor Flitwick panted. "Very well, everybody, you're free to go!"

"How do you think you did?" Mary asked Mia and Lily as they joined up with Alice, heading toward the lake. All four girls linked arms, which caused Mia to laugh and roll her eyes.

"If I don't get an Outstanding, I'll scream," she admitted, remembering the feeling of only receiving an Exceeds Expectations the first time she took the test.

"Me too. I wonder if we were adequately prepared," Lily said, nervously worrying the buttons on her robes between ink-stained fingers. "With Professor Higgs being arrested . . ."

"You'll have done brilliantly, Lils." Mia looked ahead, watching her brother play with his stupid Snitch, while Sirius and Remus laughed, and Peter had his nose buried in his exam questions. "I'm going to go sit with the boys," she said and made to leave to follow her pack—and Peter—to the beech tree by the edge of the lake.

"Oh, no you don't," Mary insisted, locking her arm tightly with Mia's. "We've been nice because you're a bit of a nutter when it comes to revising, and we didn't want you to curse our faces, but I have been waiting months and *months*, and our exams are *finally* over; so now you're going to tell us what happened with you, Sirius, and Remus the night of Remus's party."

Mia immediately flushed, looking longingly at her boys, who all smirked at her while she was literally pulled away from the comfort of their gossip-less conversations. "I don't know what you're talking about, Mary. Remus and I dated for a year, you knew that."

"Did you snog Sirius while you were with Remus?" Alice asked innocently. "Was that why he was so angry?"

"Remus was angry? How did you know?" Mia asked.

"When Frank and I woke up in the Room of Requirement, everyone had left," Alice said as she pulled her scarf from around her neck and transfigured it into a blanket to sit on. "We went back to the common room, and Remus was there pacing in front of the

fireplace. He looked furious, and when we walked in, he asked if either of us had seen you or Sirius."

Mia groaned. "Ugh, it's nothing, I assure you."

"Didn't sound like it to me," Lily muttered under her breath.

"Got something to say, Evans?" Mia asked with a raised brow and a slight smirk.

"Well, when you came back to the dorms, I remembered I had left my Charms essay down in the common room," Lily said, her cheeks turning slightly pink. She bit her lower lip and nervously tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "I overheard Sirius and Remus talking."

Mia narrowed her eyes. "What did they say?"

"I just heard bits and pieces. Sirius told Remus that he was okay with everything, then he apologised." Lily rolled her eyes. "Which was odd in itself because I didn't think Sirius Black capable of such a feat."

All the girls chuckled softly.

Mia shook her head and smiled. "Sirius can surprise you sometimes. If he's given a proper chance, he can be a really good—"

*"Impedimenta!"*

All four girls turned and looked as a group of students began gathering in a crowd. Mia's lips parted, and her eyes widened as she saw James glance behind him, a grin on his face as his eyes met Lily's.

"Oh no," Mia mumbled and stood up quickly. "Jamie."

"What's going on?" Lily asked.

"Lily, stay here. I'll deal with this," Mia said, eager to prevent her friend from witnessing what she knew would be a devastating event.

*Nothing you do will change what is meant to be.* Future Remus's words echoed in her head, but she pushed forward, growling as the group of students grew larger and larger, cutting off access to the scene at hand: James with his wand pointed at Snape.

*"Scourgify!"* James said coldly.

"Leave him alone!" Lily screamed, pushing her way past Mia.

Snape was on the ground, choking on soap bubbles. Sirius and James both spun, each pretending like they were perfectly innocent of all crimes. Mia closed her eyes, not wanting to watch.

"All right, Evans?" James asked, the tone of his voice suddenly pleasant, deeper, and more mature.

"Leave him alone," Lily repeated, looking at James with every sign of great dislike. "What's he done to you?"

Sirius scoffed loudly and turned around, staring at Snape with absolute disgust.

"Well," James began, pretending to deliberate the point before glancing at Sirius for confirmation. Sirius just shook his head sternly, as if silently telling James to keep his mouth shut as to the real reason for their assault. "It's more the fact that he exists if you know what I mean."

Mia stared down at Remus, who was still on the ground, nose stuck in a book that he was clearly not reading. She narrowed her eyes and knelt in front of him. "Hello!" She snapped her fingers in front of his face. "Prefect!"

Remus buried his face further with an exhausted sigh, and Mia shook her head in frustration. Ever since he had nearly killed Snape months earlier, Remus had done everything he could to avoid the Slytherin, which left Sirius and James without anyone keeping them in check.

"I'm staying out of it, Mia," Remus muttered, shifting uncomfortably.

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing," Mia quoted with a frown.

Looking incredibly guilty, Remus confessed, "Mia, Snape's been after the two of them for weeks. I tried the first few times, but I can't control James or Sirius, let alone a Slytherin that keeps making snide remarks about my condition or talking about how you—" He stopped mid-sentence and cringed, dropping his gaze and refusing to meet her eyes again.

"How I *what?* Snape said something about me?"

"No, but the Carrows did. Alecto called you a . . . whore," Remus admitted with a low growl. "Snape laughed. James heard him. That's why James and Sirius were in detention all last week. They were caught hexing the Carrows outside the pitch. This is them getting back at Snape."

"You four are *toddlers*. I'll take care of this myself." She moved to stand up, and there was a sudden commotion. She heard Sirius yell and saw two flashes of bright light. People

began shouting, and Remus was suddenly up and at her side, pushing through the crowd to see what happened.

Mia watched as her brother held Snape mid-air, using the boy's own curse against him. She winced at the thought that it was *her* wand that had taught James and Sirius that spell, to begin with. She momentarily felt guilty over the treatment of her future Potions Professor until she saw a cut across James's face, blood leaking down his cheek and staining his robes.

"That *snivelling* son of a . . ." She stormed forward, rage fuelling her.

She hated that James and Sirius were bullies, hated that part of herself that had treated Snape similarly, but Snape gave as good as he got, and more often than not, he was the one starting the scuffles over any perceived insult. It did not help that knowing James's ultimate fate caused her to be overly protective of her brother. Plus, he was a mirror image of Harry, and protecting Harry had become second nature to her over the years.

Mia reached for her wand and glared ahead as she moved, but she suddenly felt two large arms around her, pulling her back into the crowd.

"Let him down!" Lily screamed.

"Certainly," James said, and he jerked his wand upward.

Snape fell into a crumpled heap on the ground. Disentangling himself from his robes, he got quickly to his feet, wand up, but Sirius shouted, "*Petrificus Totalus!*" and Snape keeled over again, rigid as a board.

"LEAVE HIM ALONE!" Lily shouted. She had her own wand out now, and James and Sirius eyed it warily.

"Ah, Evans, don't make me hex you," James said earnestly, though everyone knew he would never raise his wand against Lily; he had a multitude of hex scars from her to prove it.

"Let me go, Remus!" Mia snarled as she struggled against his long arms.

"I am not letting you run into this with James and Lily pointing wands at each other," Remus argued firmly.

"Take the curse off him, then!" Lily shouted.

James sighed deeply, turned to Snape, and muttered the counter-curse. "There you go," he said, as Snape struggled to his feet. "You're lucky Evans was here, Snivellus—"

"I don't need help from filthy little Mudbloods like her!"

The crowd fell into utter silence.

Mia's face paled. "Lily," she whispered, watching closely as her friend stared into Snape's cold face.

Mia—no, *Hermione*—had been called Mudblood more times than she could count, but as she watched Lily and Snape stare at one another, she wondered how much it would have hurt if it had been Harry or Ron who called her that horrid name instead of Draco. If Remus or Sirius used it against her, Mia knew it would shatter her heart in ways that could not possibly be put back together; an ultimate betrayal said in a flash of regrettable anger.

"Apologise to Evans!" James roared at Snape, wand pointed threateningly at him, eyes blazing.

"I don't want you to make him apologise," Lily shouted, rounding on James. "You're as bad as he is."

"What?" James yelped. "I'd *never* call you a you-know-what!"

"Mary, grab Lily, and get her out of here!" Mia demanded.

Mary nodded, a scathing look on her face as her eyes narrowed at Snape.

It was one thing to hex each other in the hallways. It was one thing to call names, make fun of Houses, and cause problems on the Quidditch pitch, but there was one line that no one ever crossed: no one *ever* called Lily Evans a Mudblood in front of the other Gryffindors.

"Messing up your hair because you think it looks cool to look like you've just got off your broomstick, showing off with that stupid Snitch." Lily stormed closer to James. For a moment, he actually looked a little terrified. "Walking down corridors and hexing anyone who annoys you just because you can—I'm surprised your broomstick can get off the ground with that fat head on it. You make me SICK!"

"Come on, Lils." Mary took Lily's hand, leading her away from the crowd.

Mia watched closely as her friends walked away and could tell Lily was holding back tears. She turned on the boys, her glare directed at all of them—Snape included.

"What is it with her?" James asked, trying and failing to look as though this was a throwaway question of no real importance to him, but Mia could see he was hurt and felt guilty. Though, if she guessed, he was not sure *what* he felt guilty about.

"Reading between the lines, I'd say she thinks you're a bit conceited, mate," Sirius said. There was another flash of light, and Snape was once again hanging upside-down in the air.

*"Liberacorpus!"*

Snape fell back to the ground.

James and Sirius spun on their heels and looked immediately past Mia at Remus who shrugged his shoulders in defeat.

"How *could* you?" Mia demanded of James, shaking her head in disappointment.

"Did you hear what he called Evans?" James snapped at her.

"You are a Gryffindor!" She smacked him on the back of the head. "Act like it!"

"No one asked you—" Snape began, glaring daggers at Mia.

She turned on him immediately, actually feeling it when her eyes flashed amber with anger as she pointed her wand at him. "You! You threatened my friends, called Lily a Mudblood, and you made my brother bleed. Go back to the castle, Snape, before I decide to pay you back in kind."

"I look forward to the day when you *try*, Potter" he sneered at her as he stood, turning and making his way toward a group of Slytherins who had stood by to watch the whole ordeal with amused expressions on their faces. Mia could just imagine how pleased they were to see Snape lose his Muggle-born friend so publicly.

"I am officially done." Mia put her wand back in her robes, shaking her head in disappointment. "I would have thought what happened back in March would have given the four of you some perspective, but clearly, I was wrong."

"Oh, c'mon, Mia, just because I don't want the greasy git dead doesn't mean that I'm going to jump at the chance to be his best mate," James said. "I took it easy on him. After what he said about Remus? You would have hexed him too! Never mind that he was laughing after—"

"The Carrows called me a whore?" Mia guessed.

Both James and Sirius turned and glared at Remus, knowing immediately that he was the one who told her what had happened.

"No one talks about my sister that way," James snapped.

"I am not *yours* to protect!" Mia yelled.

Then all at once James, Sirius, and Remus began arguing vehemently with her; clearly, she had said the wrong thing and struck a nerve.

"Grow up, Jamie!" Mia cried. "You're holding onto a grudge you've had since you were eleven because some stupid boy pushed your sister down. You're my brother, and I love you, but Lily's right. You're so full of yourself sometimes."

"Mia . . ." Remus reached for her, but she pulled away from him.

"*You* are supposed to be the voice of reason. You're supposed to understand why *they* shouldn't bully others!" She pointed at James and Sirius. "*You* are supposed to be the smart one!"

"Hey!" Sirius said, offended.

At the sound of his voice, Mia turned on him. "Who started this today, Sirius?" She asked him point-blank. James and Remus looked away, but Sirius held her stare. "You're supposed to be a better man than this!"

"I *am* a better man! Better than *him*!" Sirius yelled, pointing after Snape.

"If you want to know what a man's like, take a good look at how he treats his inferiors, not his equals," Mia said sadly and turned away from James and Sirius both, tears in her eyes.

Remus followed after her immediately. "Who said that?"

"A good man I once knew," Mia whispered, the image of an older Sirius burnt into her mind as she walked away from them all.

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## June 16th, 1976

Frank Longbottom *should* have counted himself a lucky man.

After the now-infamous story of what happened by the Black Lake spread like Fiendfyre through the school, Frank was the only boy in Gryffindor Tower to whom *any* of the girls would speak. Unfortunately, that meant when the Marauders failed to get either Mia's or Lily's attention to beg forgiveness for their immature idiocy, Frank was sent as a messenger to parley between the genders. Naturally, it did not work, and when Frank tried

for the *fourth* time to relay a message from Sirius, it took Alice begging Mia not to hex her boyfriend for him to walk away unscathed. Don't kill the messenger and all that rot.

The moment she left the boys down by the lake, Mia had returned to the castle and made her way to the Room of Requirement, requesting it to turn into a familiar room for her. She spoke to Hogwarts in great detail as the room conformed around her, walls changing colour and texture, the floor shifting from hardwood to marble, and expensive furniture popping up out of nowhere. Hanging from the ceiling was a large chandelier, the final touch on what looked nearly identical to Malfoy Manor.

She created the place she hated more than any other place in the world.

Because she desperately needed something to destroy.

For the better part of three hours, Mia hexed, smashed, destroyed, and set fire to everything within reach. She blamed the Death Eaters and Voldemort more than she blamed the Marauders for what had happened. While James and Sirius were acting like arrogant children, she knew that Snape had been dabbling in the Dark Arts; and even if he had never caused a problem before, *that* was the line that James drew with everything and *everyone*. Mia knew James would grow to be a good man, to join the Order of the Phoenix, and fight against the Dark Arts. In a way, she imagined he thought he was doing that now.

In an incredibly stupid and immature way—that she did not approve of—she supposed he was.

She wanted to be furious at Sirius, though, who should have known better, but try as she might, she just could not fuel her rage toward *him*. She had known Sirius for years. She had seen him older, sitting around a table at Grimmauld Place, throwing bitter insults back and forth with Professor Snape, who was always provoking him. It was a constant and deeply rooted grudge.

She could not change anything.

When she even *tried*, it did nothing but stoke the fires of an already resilient rivalry.

Every decision she made either triggered a chain of events she was trying to prevent or added fuel to the open flame of the future that she could see unfolding right before her eyes. *Her* very existence in Diagon Alley five years ago triggered the bad blood between Severus Snape and James Potter. The same event that brought Sirius Black into their lives. *Her* love for Remus and her mistaken sympathy for a bullied Peter Pettigrew had formed the Marauders. *Her* need to defend her friends had her at war with the young

Severus Snape, and *her* use of his curse in front of him had put a bulls-eye on her back. *She* was the reason the Marauders fought him now. The reason that Severus lost control and cut ties with Lily, the only thing potentially keeping him from fully being recruited by Death Eaters. Now he *would* be. Snape would join Voldemort, overhear a prophecy, and unknowingly bring about the deaths of James and Lily.

And Mia had been the catalyst for it all.

When she had returned to the common room covered in sweat, tears, and blood, the boys jumped to attention.

"Mia, what happened?" James bellowed. "Are you okay? Who did this?"

"I did," she muttered. "I'm going to my room."

"No! Mia, what happened?" Sirius stared wide-eyed at the cuts on her hands from when she had decided to destroy the chandelier.

"Learn Occlumency," she replied. "All of you."

She said nothing more to them as she made her way up the staircase to the girls' dorms where she found Lily crying. Her heart broke for her friend who had tried to be so strong in the face of others, but she knew Lily had her own vulnerabilities. Mia used a few non-verbal charms to clean herself up—which she admitted she should have done before even coming back to the tower—then sat on Lily's bed and pulled her friend into a tight hug.

The girls stayed like that for an hour, Lily crying for the loss of her childhood friend, and Mia quietly regretting the beginning of a war she could not prevent.

"Lily?" Mary called from the door. "I'm sorry, Lils, but. . . Snape's outside the portrait. The Fat Lady's throwing a fit because he won't leave until he talks to you. Says he's going to sleep outside the entrance if you don't come out."

"Tell him to sod off!" Mia growled.

Lily sighed. "No. It's fine. I'll get rid of him."

"Lily, I'm sorry. I'm sorry about everything."

"Nothing you could have done about it, Mia." Lily offered a shrug and a sad smile as she and Mary walked out, closing the door behind them.

Mia nodded quietly to herself. "I know."

**June 26th, 1976**

Mia spent the rest of the month with her girlfriends, which was completely out of character for her—in *both* timelines—but the boys did not give her much of a choice. Sixteen. They were all sixteen now, and she wondered if over the summer Severus Snape would become a Death Eater.

She sat with Lily, Alice, and Mary on the train the whole way home. When she stepped foot onto platform nine and three-quarters, a sudden feeling of dread filled her at the sight of Orion and Walburga Black staring coldly up at the Hogwarts Express. In all the years she had known Sirius in this time, his parents *never* waited for him. He would always go straight to Potter Manor and Floo back to Grimmauld Place when needed. They only came for Regulus a handful of times, usually sending a house-elf in their stead.

"Sirius?" she said, speaking to him for the first time in weeks. "Sirius, your parents are here."

"What?" He raised a brow, then swallowed hard at the sight.

"Sirius, don't go," Mia pleaded. "Come home with us."

He leant forward and kissed her cheek. "It'll be okay, kitten. I'll see you and Prongs in a few days," he promised with a tender smile, and his grey eyes twinkled in the reflecting light as the sun blazed through the open windows of the station.

She nodded to him, letting out a shaky breath as she watched him approach his scowling family.

"*Speaking* to us now?" James asked as he and Remus followed Sirius and Mia off the train.

Mia turned around to hug her brother tightly. "You know you're better than a bully," she whispered in his ear. She looked over James's shoulder and saw that Remus had heard her, and his soft green eyes lowered to the ground in shame. She sighed and released James, who looked to be trying to hide the fact that he was internally struggling with what she said to him.

"Come to the manor soon," Mia said to Remus before kissing his cheek and wrapping her arms around his waist. Remus nodded silently and hugged her back.

She felt it lingering in the air. She thought they could feel it too.

Change.

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### July 3rd, 1976

It had been over a week, and Sirius had made no contact.

James tried owling and fire-calling, while Mia even tried using the charmed Galleon to get his attention, but so far, nothing had worked to get word back from their friend. Charlus and Dorea must have picked up on their children's anxiety because they offered to reach out to a few contacts to see if they could find out anything. Charlus had been reserved about it at first, but the moment Mia mentioned that Walburga had gone to pick her son up at King's Cross, Dorea looked as if she knew something was amiss. After contacting several old friends at the Ministry and in social circles, she reported back that no one had seen *any* member of the Black family that week.

"Try and get some sleep, my loves," Dorea said as she kissed each of her children. "We shouldn't be gone very long." She gave one last look in a mirror to check her reflection.

It was a rare occasion for the Potters to leave their home when James and Mia were back from school, but they had made plans with several friends for a late dinner party. The vague story reeked of Order business, and Mia was certain that if she were able to get back to Hogwarts, she would notice that both Dumbledore and McGonagall would be absent from the castle.

"Be careful," James said, frowning. It had only been the night before that an apothecary of a popular Muggle-born had been attacked. Three well-known "blood-traitors" had been killed or wounded in the onslaught, and no one had been arrested thus far. James was predictably nervous about his parents leaving the protection of the manor's wards.

"Don't leave the manor," Charlus instructed his son before he and Dorea stepped into the Floo, vanishing in a whirl of green flames.

Several hours later, Mia slowly stood from her chair in the circular drawing room, book in hand. She had tried to stay awake, waiting for her parents, to see if she could somehow weasel a little information out of them about their "dinner party." When she

began falling asleep in the big armchair, she gave up and decided to head to bed as James had done an hour earlier.

She put her book away on a nearby shelf and paced toward the stairs. She was not three steps up before the walls around her reflected a flash of bright blue light.

Mia turned quickly, drawing her wand on instinct as she slowly made her way back into the drawing room, a Stunning Spell at the ready. The room was still dark, as she had extinguished the lamp before going to bed, so she prepared herself for an attack before whispering, "*Lumos!*"

No one attacked. Her focus was drawn to an unmoving shadow on the floor, and her Animagus senses kicked in when she smelled blood.

A lot of blood.

Her heart stilled for a moment when she realised what the blue light had been.

An emergency Portkey.

*The* emergency Portkey keyed to Potter Manor that she had given to . . .

"Sirius!"

## Chapter Fifty-One

### *Persian Rugs*

---

*Do you remember me? Lost for so long  
Will you be on the other side  
Or will you forget me?  
I'm dying, praying, bleeding, and screaming  
Am I too lost to be saved? Am I too lost?  
(Tourniquet - Evanescence)*

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**July 3rd, 1976**

Mia's screams echoed off the walls of the manor.

"JAMIE!"

Falling to her knees in front of Sirius's body, her skin ran cold as she saw the blood-soaked robes wrapped around him. His left arm was cradled tightly against his chest, tucked beneath the fabric, while his right hand gripped the silver chain around his neck so tightly he had lost all colour in his fingers. He did not move of his own accord, but as she leant down and put her hands on his face, he flinched and his muscles seized at the touch.

She sobbed as she realised what had happened: he had been tortured with the Cruciatus Curse. She made her touches a bit firmer, knowing from personal experience that soft caresses actually hurt more. The seizing that came in the aftermath sometimes hurt nearly as badly as the curse itself, but if the muscles were held tightly in place, it took the edge off.

Mia choked back more tears as she tilted his head toward her, angling his face so that he could look her straight in the eye. "Sirius, look at me, love. Open your eyes, please? Sirius, please look at me."

"Hello, beautiful," he rasped, his grey eyes slowly opening to look up at her.

"JAMIE!" she screamed again. "TILLY!"

The house-elf appeared, large eyes widening. "Young Master Black? Young Miss, he is needing a Healer right now. Yes, right now."

James came running into the room, wand drawn, his gaze falling immediately on Sirius. "Padfoot!" he yelled frantically and fell to the floor. "What happened to him?"

"He is getting to St Mungo's," Tilly insisted. "Tilly will Apparate him."

"I'm not leaving him," Mia said, shaking her head and ignoring the way that the movement caused the tears in the corners of her eyes to blur her vision. "We'll take the Floo. Jamie, grab the powder. Tilly, go find Mum and Dad, and tell them what happened."

James rushed to the fireplace to grab a fistful of Floo powder just as Tilly vanished from sight. "Mia? What *did* happen?"

Sirius groaned when Mia adjusted him in her arms. "All right there, Prongs?"

Mia wiped her eyes as James returned to Sirius's side. His eyes were filled with unshed tears, looking as though pure panic was the only thing keeping him from breaking down. "What happened, Pads?" he asked with quiet urgency.

Sirius did not answer, his head lolling to the side, and the colour draining from his face.

"All right, we'll hear about it all later. Let's get him to a Healer." James nodded to Mia, kneeling down to help her adjust Sirius's weight before lifting him.

"Mia . . ." Sirius whispered.

She looked down at his face as she followed her brother to the fireplace, her lip quivering at the sight of the blood dripping onto the hearth. Forcing herself to focus, she cupped Sirius's face in her hands, wanting to kiss away every ounce of pain. If she could take it herself, she would have. "Yes, love?"

"Am I a better man yet?" he whispered desperately.

At his words, she sobbed into his sweat-soaked hair, holding onto him tightly as James yelled, "St Mungo's!" and took all three of them away at the same time in a blaze of green.

---

"WHERE IS HE?"

On high alert with her adrenaline pumping and paranoia at the forefront of her thoughts, Mia let her Animagus instincts take over. Even through the magical wards she had created and the hustle and bustle of the busy hospital, she could hear her mother's piercing voice echoed through the doors of the ground floor. The words echoed as though they were magically amplified through the corridors and up the lift; they probably reached

the roof where a flock of pigeons took flight, terrified of the sound that reverberated off the walls and penetrated through the foundation.

The windows around Sirius's room were large, and Mia watched from the corner where she could see the double doors blown open, and Dorea burst through, using wandless magic and likely rage to move any obstacles out of her way.

One such obstacle appeared to be a frightened girl, trailing behind next to Charlus. "You can't just come up here. You need to be properly checked in.

Charlus winced at the girl's words just as Dorea turned on the girl. "I can and *will* come up here, and if you think that a pesky little chit like you is going to stop me, then I dare you—little girl—to try my patience!"

The girl nearly burst into tears.

Mia growled when she watched a familiar Healer move past the window toward her parents.

"What's happening?" James whispered from the corner.

"Quiet," she muttered and tilted her head to the side so that she could focus on eavesdropping.

"What's all this commotion out here? Do I need to call the Aurors?" the Healer asked, reaching for his wand.

"I apologise for the disruption," Charlus said, approaching the man. "We're here to see—"

"Our son! Our house-elf told us he was brought in after . . ." Dorea said, swallowing hard. "She said he was tortured."

"You're Sirius Black's parents?"

"Yes," Dorea replied immediately. "Where are my children?"

The Healer held his hands out in supplication. When Dorea looked like she was no longer on the verge of attacking, he sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I'm Gerald Wainscott; I run this floor. Come with me," he instructed and turned, leading Mia's parents into the next room and out of her sight.

She moved to the other side of the room, pressing her hand against the wall and muttering a spell that pushed her ward out into the room next door. She focused her energy on her hearing.

"I know you're not the boy's parents, but . . . you say the other two teenagers are yours?"

"Yes," Charlus said, "but Sirius is—"

"I'm sorry sir, I can't give you any information on Mr Black. That being said, we do require your assistance." The Healer cleared his throat. "Your son and daughter brought Mr Black in a half hour ago. The Healers rushed him to a room to clean his wounds, but when your children were asked to leave—they refused, and things got . . . unpleasant."

Mia huffed. That man had tried to separate her from Sirius's side. If he tried again, he would see just how unpleasant she could get.

"Take us to them," Charlus demanded.

Mia heard footsteps and a door opening, and she moved back toward the window, feeling defensive magic glide over her skin like armour. She watched from the corner window as her parents likely saw the crew outside the door. Last she counted, there were five Healers, two Aurors, and another wizard in long brown robes that Mia was certain was a Curse-Breaker.

Wainscott turned to Charlus and Dorea. "When my staff tried to physically remove your children from Mr Black's room, they were attacked."

Charlus's eyes narrowed. "Our children were attacked?"

Audibly seething, Wainscott shook his head. "No, sir. Your children attacked my staff."

Charlus looked aghast. Dorea looked proud.

"Then your daughter warded the room against everyone, saying that they would not be separated. We had to call in a Curse-Breaker to try and get in." He gestured to the wizard in the long brown robes who looked utterly frustrated. He made the mistake of making eye contact with Mia through the window, and she bared her teeth at him.

Dorea moved swiftly to the window, pulling Mia's gaze away from the Curse-Breaker.

Somehow, her defensive magic receded, and Mia turned around, moving back to Sirius's bed where James sat. Ignoring the talking outside of the room, she went back to tending to Sirius's wounds. She did not want to see her mother's face. She knew what they all looked like, clothes and skin stained with Sirius's blood.

Sirius himself was lying in the bed, his exposed chest clean but layered with dark purple bruises and deep cuts to which Mia meticulously reapplied Dittany to from a small bottle. Sirius seized up in pain, his muscles stiffening.

James reached for his hand, burying his forehead into the side of the bed, unable to watch while Mia used her arm to wipe tears from her eyes before continuing to heal more cuts on Sirius's neck.

"We *need* to get in that room," Wainscott said to the Potters.

"My children won't leave," Dorea insisted.

"Only family can—"

"We *are* family," Charlus asserted, his temper sounding like it was getting the better of him. "That boy in there is our son. We'll get your Healers in the bloody room, but in the meantime, send someone to a Floo and contact Alphard Black." Before Wainscott replied, Charlus added, "Oh, and nothing happens to our children. They meant no harm; they're only frightened."

Mia could only assume that the Aurors and Healers nodded. She did not look up from Sirius to confirm, not until her father quietly called out to her.

"Mia, love, take down the wards."

Mia and James both looked up at the noise.

James looked relieved at the sight of their parents, but Mia was still on edge as though she were awaiting an attack. A part of her could not separate the smell of Sirius's blood and the memory of her own back at Malfoy Manor under Bellatrix's blade. She gripped her wand tightly in her hand as she carefully tried to read the expressions on her parents' faces. Her father looked calm but stern, which was not helping ease the tension in her shoulders.

Her mother placed a hand on the glass and made eye contact, offering Mia a kind smile that broke her. She acquiesced and lowered the wards with a wave of her wand, the door unlocking and cracking open.

When the Healers rushed in before her parents, James's stance changed completely, and she could feel his Animagus spirit practically being pushed from his body like an astral projection. She could feel her eyes turn amber as she glared at the group. Both lifted their wands, and Mia put her body in front of Sirius.

"Mia," Charlus said, pushing his way through the Healers. "They're only here to help. You've done wonderfully." He slowly reached for her, lowering her wand hand before pulling her into a tight hug.

Dorea did the same to James on the other side.

Charlus kissed the top of her head as she broke into tears. "You did wonderfully, my girl."

"What happened?" Dorea finally asked, watching as the Healers moved around Sirius's bed, a few muttering admiringly about Mia's healing, but one looking carefully at Sirius's left arm while another waved his wand over his body.

Looking up at her mother through her tears, Mia whispered, "They . . . tried to force the Dark Mark on him."

---

*They had been at it for hours, but Sirius would not break.*

*He had known, when his parents met him at King's Cross Station, that something was not right. His friends had known something was wrong as well, and he clung to the images of their faces as his weakened body hit the floor—again and again. He looked down and watched as droplets of blood—from the recent wound to the side of his head—fell on the hardwood floors of his family home. Consciously, he pivoted his body so that his head hung over the twelve-hundred-year-old Persian rug, grinning as he bled onto one of his mother's favoured possessions, staining it with his blood.*

*Pure blood. He snorted at the thought. Pure blood spilt in his own home.*

*"You informed me that he would be ready, Orion," a chilling utterance came from the corner of the room.*

*Sirius had not seen the man speaking, nor had he seen the faces of anyone, save for his own family members.*

*He had arrived home a week earlier and was immediately thrown into and subsequently locked inside his room. It did not bother him, of course, not until it became clear that food was being withheld from him. He called for the elves, though Kreacher was the only one to come to him, instructed to only give Sirius water. By the end of the week, cut off from food and the world, Sirius was starved and barely able to stand.*

*They wanted him weak and broken.*

*But Sirius would not break.*

*Walburga came to his room, instructing him to bathe and dress in his finest robes. Unable to fight her when she insisted that she would have the elves do it for him if he would not, Sirius begrudgingly obeyed.*

*When he was led down the stairs to the drawing room, a circle of masked figures met him. His eyes widened, and he scowled at the sight of them: Death Eaters. Long, pale blond hair peeked out of the mask of one Death Eater, and Sirius knew it was Malfoy. He had lunged forward, but his cousin Bellatrix was there, all too eager to fling Sirius to the ground where she set a curse on his flesh, slicing and cutting his skin, bleeding him out onto his robes to further weaken him—a sacrifice to her master.*

*"He is ready my Lord," Orion insisted, his head bowed. "He is sixteen, just as you requested."*

*"I requested nothing. I required him to be at least sixteen, but he also needed to come willingly and offer sacrifice. I do not intend to Imperius every last follower into understanding and obedience."*

*"Perhaps a little persuasion is useful, my Lord?" Bellatrix cooed lovingly in the direction of the hooded figure. Sirius wanted to vomit, but there was nothing in his stomach to throw up. He turned his head to the side and watched as the hooded figure gave a short, quick nod and Bellatrix turned, her eyes alight with ecstasy and madness.*

*Then the Cruciatus Curse began.*

*Pain unlike any he had ever known filled his body, flames licking at his nerve endings while knives simultaneously stabbed into his muscles, pinning him to the ground yet forcing him to thrash at the same time. He screamed as the pain racked through him.*

*Still, Sirius would not break.*

*Behind the screams that his body made involuntarily, Sirius clenched his eyes tightly and focused as hard as he could. James, Remus, Peter, Mia. Flying above the pitch with the wind in his hair. Winning the Quidditch Cup. Ducking into secret passages to avoid Filch and his silly cat. Pranking Slytherins. Sneaking into Hogsmeade. Firewhisky and pumpkin pasties and Chocolate Frogs. Christmas at Potter Manor. Nights in the Shrieking Shack with his pack. Prongs, Moony, Wormtail . . . Mia.*

*Mia.*

*"Never!" Sirius screamed as the Cruciatus Curse ended, and he struggled to stand. In frustration, Bellatrix hit him hard on the side of his head, knocking him back to the floor where he found himself now, bleeding on his mother's favourite Persian rug.*

*"Does the boy love anything?" the stranger asked. "His family perhaps? Would he join our cause should their lives be threatened?"*

*Sirius panted heavily, licking blood from his lip before spitting it onto the rug. "Not . . . even . . . if you let me kill them . . . myself."*

*"Kill the brother."*

*"No!" Walburga screamed and fell to her knees before the hooded figure. "My Lord, I beg you, kill this whelp instead." She gestured to Sirius's shaking, bleeding, sweating body adding, "My Regulus is as noble and pure as you could ever require. Even at his young age, he would willingly seek your approval and bear your mark."*

*"Is that so?"*

*Walburga bowed her head. "I will fetch him for you, my Lord."*

*"No need." The man shook his head. "Bring him to me when he turns sixteen; in the meantime, what will we do with this stubborn heir?"*

*"Break him."*

*At the sound of Lucius Malfoy's words, Sirius growled; he felt his body go stiff before he could do anything else. It was not a Full Body-Bind Curse, as he was still able to struggle, but Malfoy had his wand trained on him, forcibly extending Sirius's left arm.*

*"Willingly or not, he will be marked; he can prove himself worthy of it later," Lucius hissed, walking forward and stepping on Sirius's hand to hold him in place. "My Lord, if I may do the honours?"*

*The hooded figure seemed to ponder the request for a moment before nodding.*

*Lucius turned and stared down, silver eyes so wide Sirius could almost see the grin behind them. Malfoy leant down and pressed the tip of his wand into the flesh of Sirius's arm.*

*Sirius let out a howl as the skin began to burn. Knowing he had to do it to stop the Dark Magic from touching him, he turned violently, snapping the bones in his arm and breaking the contact with Lucius's wand in the process. The pain was cold and sharp, but it was bearable compared to the Cruciatius.*

*"Stubborn, stupid Gryffindor!" Lucius hissed.*

*"I tire of this travesty," the stranger said, and he stood to leave the room. "Do not call me again, Orion, Walburga, until you have a worthy child." He Apparated with a booming CRACK!*

*"You rotten blood-traitor!" Bellatrix screamed, throwing another Cruciatius that made the cold pain in Sirius's broken arm feel like fire.*

*"Bella, enough!" Walburga shouted. "Leave him. We have to make plans. I'll deal with this stain on my House later."*

*In response, Sirius defiantly spat more blood onto her ugly, expensive rug.*

*The drawing room emptied slowly, as the occupants left one by one.*

*Sirius remained, bleeding on the Persian rug, watching as it slowly stained red. He could not help but smirk at the sight as he fell in and out of consciousness. Gryffindor red, he thought with a chuckle.*

*"Salazar," came a whisper from a dark corner. Sirius looked up to see Regulus cautiously approach. "Are you even still alive?"*

*Sirius coughed in reply, the metallic taste of blood burning the back of his throat. It was getting harder and harder to breathe.*

*Regulus's eyes widened. "Why didn't you just do it?"*

*Sirius tried to smile, but his muscles seized, and he grimaced through the pain. "You know me, Reg. I've always been a trendsetter—not one to follow blindly." He fought for a breath but it took several tries to fill his lungs. "Besides, you saw their robes. Fucking hideous. I wouldn't be caught dead wearing those ugly things."*

*"You're out of your mind."*

*"Nope." Sirius swallowed hard as relief came over him at the feel of cold silver against his chest. He had not had a moment to think about it until now, but when he remembered Mia's gift, he almost cried. "I'm out of here. Reg, come with me. Come with me, get out of this place . . . 'cause you're next."*

*Regulus shook his head. "I'm not like you, Sirius. I'll go willingly. They won't hurt me."*

*"They will. One day," Sirius said regretfully, pulling his broken and burnt left arm to his chest, hissing at the sharp, stinging pain. He looked up at his brother one more time and sighed, gripping the silver chain around his neck. "Portus!"*

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The Healers had been able to put a stop to Sirius's seizing, but when one caused him to involuntarily flinch while applying a burn paste to his arm, Mia and James both stood defensively, drawing their wands. It was the last straw for the Healers who—after a sizable donation by the gracious Potter family—allowed Mia to tend to Sirius on her own.

James eventually fell asleep in the corner of the room, and she took the time to send a message through the charmed Galleon to Remus to let him know what had happened and to insist that he not come. She and James were having a hard enough time keeping their own tempers in check, the last thing they needed was an overprotective werewolf roaming the halls of the hospital.

Alphard Black stood out in the hallway with her parents, Mia listening to every word.

"As Head of your House, Alphard, you have the ability to do it," Dorea whispered.

"Of course, Dorea, if it's not too much trouble."

"Sirius is no trouble to us," Dorea insisted, and Charlus chuckled softly. "Well, he's nothing *but* trouble, but he's been *our* trouble since he was a young boy." After a moment she added, "You're certain Walburga and Orion won't come for him?"

Alphard sighed. "Absolutely. When I got to Grimmauld Place to find out what happened, he'd already been blasted off the tapestry. Walburga has lost her mind. Here's Sirius's wand. I found it on the floor next to a rug that was . . . I feel that if I took him in, it would only cause more problems. Cygnus, Orion, and Walburga have been fighting with me since father put me in charge. Merlin knows why the man did it."

"He's a smart man," Dorea insisted.

Alphard gave a sad laugh that carried weight and burden despite his youthful age. "Sirius will be safe with you when he's not at Hogwarts."

"Be realistic, Alphard," Dorea responded irritably. "Death Eaters tried to mark a sixteen-year-old boy against his will tonight. In his own home, at the behest of his own parents. No one is safe. We're officially at war."

"That may be true. Forgive me, Dorea, it has been a long night for all of us. I will set the guardianship papers in order tonight and send them to the Ministry immediately Monday morning. I still think it would be safer were you to officially adopt him, but you're right; he is still the heir to our House, despite the fact that I've already received several urgent owls from Walburga insisting that I give Regulus the title."

Mia could only imagine the dark look on Dorea's face that would have been interpreted as a threat if he was stupid enough to go against her.

"Tell Sirius I will be in touch. Please, thank your children for taking good care of him. Your daughter seems to be especially protective."

"Maybe she'll become a Healer," Dorea said. "Mia, dear? Would you be a love and get your mother a cup of tea?"

Sighing irritably at being caught eavesdropping, Mia nodded, knowing her mother was just tricking her into leaving the room. *If I get her tea, she'll figure I'll get some for myself.* Well, she decided despite her dislike of being manipulated, *I could use some tea.*

As she moved through an open corridor on her way to fetch the drinks, Mia caught a familiar smell and turned toward the direction of the scent. Suspicious, she moved forward and growled when she caught sight of Lucius Malfoy stepping out of a room, his

trademark sneer on his face and long pale hair flowing behind him as he stormed away from an open door. She moved to follow him but stopped to peek inside the room he had vacated.

A stricken Narcissa Malfoy sat in a hospital bed, hands over her eyes, weeping into her palms.

Mia raised a brow, her feet leading her into the room on their own. "Narcissa?"

The blonde's head shot up, eyes wide. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Are you okay?" Mia asked, genuinely concerned for the witch.

"Obviously not. I'm in hospital!" Narcissa snarled.

"I saw your husband just leave," Mia said, ignoring Narcissa's sour attitude. She did not have the energy for it, and knowing that Sirius had always taken kindly to his cousin—for some reason—she felt it would be in bad taste to be rude to the woman. "Did he hurt you?"

"Not today, dear," Narcissa said with a light tone and a roll of her eyes. "Are you following him or something?"

"No. I'm here because Sirius was almost killed tonight," Mia replied, her tone hard and cold.

Narcissa gaped, eyes briefly softening. "He . . . They . . ." She inhaled sharply. "Is he . . . I mean to say, he lived?"

"Barely."

Mia glanced around the room, catching sight of the phials left on the table beside the bed: Pain Relief Potion, Blood Replenishing Potion, and Calming Draught. "If you mix rose thorns with red clover it creates a fairly helpful fertility potion. Though, you should wait to be fully healed before you use it. It works best if brewed in the autumn and drunk under a full moon."

Narcissa narrowed her eyes. "How did you . . . ?"

Mia indicated the phials. "Your potions. Plus, you look fairly pale, more so than usual. Also, Lucius Malfoy seems like the type of arsehole who would leave his wife alone at a time like this."

Narcissa's bottom lip quivered, betraying her cold façade. "He's just upset because he wants a child, and I am incapable of holding onto one."

"He wants an *heir*," Mia corrected her. "You'll give him one: a son. I promise. He'll be spoilt rotten." She rolled her eyes as the image of a young Draco popped into her head. "For the love of Merlin, Narcissa . . . do not let Lucius control your son the way he controls you."

"And how exactly is that?" Lucius Malfoy asked, reappearing in the door and glaring down at Mia.

She inhaled sharply, and her eyes widened as she recognised a scent: blood.

*Sirius's* blood.

White hot rage flooded her. Before she had a chance to think about what she was doing, she reached out and swiped at Lucius's face as though she were in her Animagus form, claws extended. She smacked him good and hard—so much harder than she had ever hit Draco or Snape. One of her fingernails cut into his flesh and actually drew blood. She grinned as she remembered an older Lucius Malfoy carrying around a small scar. It thrilled her to know that she had done permanent—though very mild—damage.

Lucius growled, cupping his face. "You filthy little—"

"Careful there, Malfoy," Mia snarled. "I might be tempted to speak to some Aurors downstairs. See, they're *very* interested in finding out what happened to Sirius tonight."

She shook with fury, and it only made it worse when he smirked at her.

"Oh? Something happen to the little blood-traitor? Maybe I should go downstairs and speak with the Aurors myself, as I was just assaulted."

She feigned innocence, blinking wide eyes at him. "I doubt they'll arrest me. See, I was under the Imperius Curse at the time. I have no memory of what happened."

"As though they would believe *you*?"

"You're right. Perhaps the Aurors should investigate. Are you familiar with the Imperius Curse, Malfoy?" she asked knowingly, not blind to the way that Narcissa visibly stiffened.

---

**July 30th, 1976**

Sirius was brought back to Potter Manor after a week at St Mungo's where Healers had closely monitored his progress. Eventually, Mia relented and left his side, but only under the condition that a Potter be with him at all times; the family had taken rotating shifts. When he was finally allowed to come home with them, Dorea had already converted his original guest room into a full bedroom, complete with Gryffindor banners, a closet full of new robes, and pictures of his friends on the walls.

Still recovering, Sirius was forced to stay in bed most of the time by an irate little house-elf, who now politely called him "Young Master Sirius" and tucked him into bed each night.

Mia fought tooth and nail with Tilly over helping nurse him back to full health. The house-elf finally relented, allowing Mia to bring him his meals and to visit, so long as Tilly was still allowed to clean his room and cook.

Remus and Peter eventually came over to see him, and Mia had to force herself to leave the room to allow the boys time together. Sirius and the boys talked about Quidditch, played Exploding Snap, and planned pranks for the upcoming year, but never once did Sirius open up about what had happened to him.

However, he *did* have nightmares.

"I'll take care of it," Mia said one evening when she and James both woke up to the sound of Sirius moaning in his sleep. It was the fourth time that week, and she knew Sirius had been refusing to take the Dreamless Sleep Draught that St Mungo's sent home with them.

James sighed irritably. "Force it down his throat if you have to," he said and then turned around, walking back to his room while muttering, "Stubborn mutt," under his breath.

She stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. Not wanting to wake her parents or rouse Tilly, she put up a strong Silencing Charm around the room before she made her way to Sirius's bed, frowning as he tossed and turned, covered in sweat with an angry look on his face. She approached slowly, moving his wand out of his reach to forestall any accidental hexing if she woke him too quickly. He would hate to hurt her.

"Sirius?" she whispered as she sat down on the edge of his bed, reaching out and gently stroking the side of his face. "Sirius, wake up."

His breathing quickened at her touch, and he bolted upright, grey eyes wide and dangerous. She was reminded of the man she met in the Shrieking Shack: he looked broken and wild and threatening. She inhaled sharply at the sight of his crazed stare, cursing herself for how she felt her face flush at the sight.

"Sirius?"

He growled, low and quiet, and she thought for a moment that he might still be lost in the nightmare and try to strike out at her.

She gasped when he reached out and grabbed her arms, pulling her forward. She barely had a chance to half-mutter his name before he crashed his lips against hers in a raging, bruising kiss.

## Chapter Fifty-Two

### *No Expectations*

---

*Lovers forever face to face  
My city or mountains, stay with me, stay  
I need you to love me, I need you today  
Give to me your leather, Take from me my lace  
(Leather and Lace - Stevie Nicks)*

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**July 30th, 1976**

He was not gentle with her like he had been during their first kiss—either time—in the secret passage. Nor was he passionate and smug like he had been when he cornered her after Remus's birthday party, taking her pleasure and claiming it for his own.

This was anger. This was untamed. This was Sirius taking what he wanted for himself.

He gripped her jaw tightly, and Mia let out a squeak but allowed it as he pried her lips open with his tongue. Despite the pain she felt through the ferocity with which he kissed her—bruising, scraping, biting at her lips—she was breathless and lost in him. She was desperate to moan his name, but he refused to relinquish control enough to part from her mouth even for a second. She wrapped her arms around his neck and ran her fingers through his hair, needy for him, and he mimicked her actions. When she pulled away slightly, his fingers gripped her hair and held her firmly against him. She felt him growl against her and could not help but echo the sound, tugging at his raven locks in a struggle for dominance.

As on nights of the full moon, the little fox and the black dog would battle. They would struggle against one another, chasing and tumbling in a constant blur of black and red, one rolling over the other. The fox would bite the dog, nipping at his paws and legs.

Mia bit Sirius, her teeth scraping against his bottom lip.

The dog would use his size and strength against the fox, pinning her down beneath him.

Sirius gripped Mia's hips tightly, flipping her over and pinning her firmly beneath him, against the mattress of his bed.

Their monthly animalistic game of dominance was an amusing way to pass the time, but they were not a fox and dog right now. They were a witch and a wizard, and the wizard was asserting his dominance over the witch writhing beneath him. As though he had not the ability to control anything else in his life, he *would* control this moment.

When Sirius finally broke their kiss, Mia gasped loudly, but he did not pay attention as he moved his mouth elsewhere, latching his lips and teeth to the side of her neck where he bit down hard, causing her to whimper in both pain and pleasure, finding bliss in the razor sharp line between the two. Though she rarely thought about one when she was with the other—in any sense—Mia wondered if adjusting to Remus's sexual aggression had not prepared her in some way to deal with Sirius's.

He sucked hard on the skin of her neck, likely marking her. When his rough hands—callused from years of playing Quidditch—reached for her thighs, she moaned at his touch and adjusted her body so she could reach for her wand that she had dropped on the bedspread a foot away. Waving the vinewood at the door, she reinforced her Silencing Spell and added an incredibly strong Locking Charm—just in time, as Sirius's hand slipped between her legs, and she let out a loud cry of shock at the way he was taking command in the moment.

His hair hung like a beautiful curtain in front of his eyes. He refused to look at her as he dipped his fingers beneath the band of her knickers, slipping two inside of her wet heat, and groaning at the feel.

The noise made her shiver, and she bucked her hips against his hand; the desperate need for friction was stronger than her need to breathe.

Instead of touching her like he had done in the hallway of Hogwarts, Sirius removed his hand and put it on her hip, pulling her down the length of the mattress until he was kneeling between her thighs, pressing his hardness against her; nothing separated them but a few layers of fabric.

She trembled with pleasure as he rutted himself against her, bucking hard and panting, showing her what he could do to her without the boundaries of clothing. His fingers dug into the skin of her hips and thighs as he moved above her, grinding their bodies together, and growling low and deep.

Something inside of her coiled tightly, building a familiar pressure. She reached up, running her fingers along his scalp and threading them through the black silk of his hair.

Suddenly, the noises he made stopped, save for the sound of heavy panting. The movements he made stopped, save for the way his shoulders shook.

"Sirius?" she whispered, worried when she felt wetness against the skin of her stomach. She brushed back the hair from his face and adjusted her body to sit up at an angle where she could tilt his chin toward her.

When his eyes finally looked up into hers, their silvery grey depths were wet, and she saw something she had never seen before: the exposed soul of Sirius Black.

The moment was fragile and fleeting, and she knew it, so before he had a chance to build the walls back up around him, she leant forward and kissed him soundly. Lacking the lust-fuelled intensity from moments earlier, Mia put every bit of sincerity and need into the way she kissed him now. He did not move at first, and she opened her eyes to gaze up at him, watching as he looked to be struggling with the decision to let her in or not.

She realised he was afraid.

"Am I safe with you?" she asked, knowing that he needed to feel like he was in control. As if he—not she—was the protector.

Her words seemed to snap him out of his dark thoughts. As if he were seeing her for the first time that night, he sighed and touched his forehead against hers before giving her a slow, chaste kiss on the lips.

Pulling away, he cupped her cheek and sighed, his gaze wary but honest. "I don't know."

She ran one hand through his hair while the other tenderly dragged over the skin at the back of his neck. "Tell me."

"I was almost a . . . a Death Eater." Sirius swallowed after he let the words tumble out, looking pained just by saying them. He shook his head, the tears beginning to return. "They tried to mark me, Mia. Why would they even try if I wasn't already somehow—?"

"No," Mia interrupted, tears prickling at the corners of her own eyes. "You are *good*, Sirius Black. You are good, and kind, and brave, and . . . Merlin, *so* brave. They didn't try to take you because they thought you *belonged*; they tried to take you because you *didn't*. The first Black to ever be a Gryffindor. You are all red and gold. You are rare and, therefore, priceless."

A thought occurred to her, and she smiled, reaching one hand over to the other, she unclasped the bracelet around her wrist—having long ago figured out how to undo the

Locking Charm that the older Sirius had put on it. Slowly, she removed the goblin-made heirloom from her skin, smiled, and reached for Sirius's hand. She placed the bracelet around his wrist. "Courage and craft. You have *new* House words, Sirius."

"You're too good for me." Sirius frowned as he looked into her eyes, not even glancing at the gift she had just given him as he ran gentle fingers against her cheeks, jaw, and the line of her neck.

She smirked up at him. "I said you were *precious*, not *perfect*."

Though he did not return her expression, she saw a brief glimpse of amusement in his eyes. As the moment faded, however, she began to see it again: fear. The walls were going back up. He had exposed too much, showed too much weakness to her, and that left him vulnerable and open to hurt.

"I need you," she whispered before he had a chance to lock her out completely.

Caught off-guard by the statement, Sirius's wet eyes widened. "Mia, nothing's changed. I'm still—"

"*Mine*. You're the end, Sirius," Mia cut him off. "However, I'm nothing if not logical and practical. I don't expect epic love stories where I'm some pure princess locked in a tower, and you're the charming prince come to save me." She pushed a fallen lock of hair from his face so his eyes remained unobstructed from her view. "We're both Gryffindors who fought a little too hard to stay out of Slytherin, which means we are not perfect. I am *anything* but pure, and while you *are* charming," she began, chuckling when his expression briefly turned smug, "I don't expect you to come riding in on a white horse."

"*Black* horse?" he suggested with a softened smirk.

"Maybe one day. When we're older and smarter and this war is over. For now, we live in a shitty world filled with Dark Magic and Death Eaters, and I'm struggling to find any good reason to not have my fill of you now because we'll only be this age together for such a short time."

She fought back the burning anxiety in her chest. It already felt like time was running out for them. She gently scratched her nails against the front of his worn t-shirt. "I've already lived a life full of regrets based on overthinking things. I want to live in the moment, this moment. I have no expectations, Sirius, not tonight, but haven't we waited long enough?"

"I *need* you," he finally blurted out, echoing her pleading from earlier.

The sincerity in his tone was almost painful to hear. It stirred something inside of her that brought relief at the same time that it rekindled the fire in her belly.

Suddenly, he was kissing her again—jump-starting some needy, burning fire of desire and desperation. She dug her fingers into the taut muscles of his back, terrified that he would vanish into thin air if she dared to ease up on her grip. He began sliding his mouth over her jaw and back to the skin of her neck, and Mia gasped as she began to think that spontaneous human combustion was a very real possibility.

When his fingers touched over the buttons of her nightdress, Mia squeezed her eyes tight, trying to find a steady way to breathe rather than gasping for air. One by one, he pulled at each button, delicately, teasingly, and she wondered if he was doing it on purpose to torture her—all of her dreams of this moment had him tearing at her clothes. In reality, he took his time, pulling away the fabric and leaving an open-mouthed kiss on every inch of skin he revealed as he went down. She felt like she was drowning in the sensations, caught in a riptide of pleasurable anticipation that was dragging her under.

"Sirius, just . . . Just rip it off."

His chest rumbled in response to her plea, a throaty chuckle escaping his lips as he ignored her, reaching the fifth button of her night dress that sat at the very bottom of her sternum. He kissed his way down the valley between her breasts but refused to pull the fabric away from either side. She expected him to be greedy in devouring her the way she wanted to devour him, but instead, he was savouring every last excruciating nip of flesh.

When he reached her navel, his movements stopped, and he looked up at her with a hunger that dissolved her completely. Swiftly, he moved upward, crushing his lips against hers in a devastating kiss, seeking her tongue with his own, and groaning against her when he found it.

Frantically, Mia gripped at his back, reaching for the hem of his shirt and tugged it upward.

Sirius laughed softly at her frustrated need to undress him before granting her silent request by breaking their kiss and parting with the shirt. He dove in to capture her mouth once more, but she held him back with the palms of her hands flat against his chest. He let out a soft whining noise, but Mia shook her head.

"No," she said on a heavy breath. "I need . . . I need to look at you." She traced her fingers over the lines along his body, savouring each and every dip and crease. A

whimpering moan escaped her throat as she looked down at the way his pyjama pants hung low on his hips; the line of muscle that disappeared beneath the fabric looked like it was begging to be licked.

Sirius grinned down at her. "See something you like?"

To answer his question, she tugged her hands around his neck, pulling him back down in a kiss, crying out when she felt his hands finally press past the open fabric of her nightdress.

His fingers gently feathered over the soft skin of her breasts until he had one palmed perfectly in his hand, the pad of his thumb brushing slowly, but repeatedly, over the rosy peak. When his hands left her skin, she whined at the lack of touch but was well compensated when he tore his lips from hers to crawl down her body, pulling a nipple into his mouth. He tongued the pebbled flesh, grinning against her when she made noises, feverish and unbridled, her hips bucking against him as her hands twisted in the red sheets that covered his bed.

"Sirius . . . please. . ."

He released her nipple from his mouth with a wet pop. "Patience, kitten. I need to memorise every exquisite moment of this."

Mia growled. "Sirius, I need you inside of me, right now!"

He closed his eyes, looking like he was fighting to focus, but she felt his cock twitch at her words and at the way she continued to roll her hips against him. He opened his eyes and looked down at her.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked him with a grin.

"For the love of Merlin," he said on a ragged breath, firmly gripping her hips and stilling her movements. "You need to stop." He was not proud of many aspects of his less than proper reputation, but one thing he *did* pride himself on was the fact that he had always been able to satisfy a witch before he ever lost control of himself. Mia was testing his resolve in the worst—and best—ways possible.

He took in slow, deep breaths to calm himself, but was unable to concentrate as he felt Mia's knees bending around him. Her toes tucked into the waist of his bottoms, and she was tugging them down. He glanced at her and almost glared at the smug, victorious look on her face. She was pushing him, trying to dominate the situation, and he would have none of it.

Sirius continued to let her tug at his clothing, exposing him to the warm air of the bedroom, but before he allowed her to see him in all his glory, he leant forward, pushing her nightdress up around her waist to reveal black knickers. The sight of the colour caused the Animagus in him to growl with pleasure as though she had his very name tattooed on her skin.

Pressing his face against the skin of her hip, he grasped the black lace between his teeth and inhaled deeply, letting the scent of her arousal wash over him, drugging him, and bringing him into a heady reverie. He pulled the small scrap of fabric down her soft thighs, his eyes focused on their apex. The sight of her bare before him made his mouth water. Yanking the knickers completely off and throwing them to the side, Sirius hiked her leg over his shoulder, placing a trail of kisses up her thigh and grinning when she whimpered at the soft sensation.

"Fuck, you're soaking." The pad of his thumb stroked against her wet centre, and he watched closely as she shivered at his touch. He lightly nipped at the tender skin of her thigh to distract her. When she gave a soft yelp in response, he pressed forward and ran his tongue against her cunt, groaning at the taste and feel of her, and relishing the sweet mewling sounds she was making as her thighs tensed around him. He placed a firm hand on her stomach to hold her in place as her body fought to move against him, using the other arm to grip around a thigh for leverage as he lapped at her eagerly.

*Honey*, he thought with a grin.

"Purr for me, kitten," he whispered against her, circling his tongue around the centre of her nerves before he took it between his wet lips and sucked gently. At the same time, he pushed two fingers inside of her, curled them, and stroked.

Mia let out a loud cry of passion as he pushed her over the edge into a blissful nirvana that had her quivering, her body fluttering around his fingers and pulsating against his tongue.

"S-Siri . . . Sirius . . ."

Before she had a chance to catch her breath, he was taking it away from her, kissing her urgently as he removed his fingers from inside of her. He gripped his hard length in hand and rubbed the tip of it against her wetness. He broke away from her mouth to look down into her dilated eyes.

Mia whimpered. "Want you."

"Need you," Sirius said on the end of an exhale before burying himself inside of her in one long thrust, hissing at the feel of her tightness around him. She squeezed him as he drove hard and deep, wanting to delve inside her and mould her body specifically to *his* cock. He groaned loudly, pressing his face into the crevice of her neck as she dug her fingernails into his shoulders.

Every stroke wound him tighter and tighter, a familiar building pressure that burned hot and felt icy cold at the same time. With every movement of his hips, Sirius eased out and left her wanting, then thrust in again to fill her until she cried out for him in bliss. He kissed along her throat before lifting up and pressing against her forehead, letting her eyes focus on his face. He rode a dangerous line between pain and pleasure, but he still held back, not wanting to hurt her.

Somehow, Mia must have known, because she moaned, "Harder," and dug her heels into his arse and tilted her hips upward, allowing him to bury deeper.

He growled at the change, fighting the thoughts inside of his head that told him she was delicate, and he was not worthy.

She put her hands on either side of his face until he opened his eyes and looked down at her. When she finally had his full attention, Mia demanded, "Fuck me harder!"

And Sirius lost every semblance of control.

Rough hands took firm hold of her hips, pulling on them hard as he slammed into her. Mia watched with parted lips as drops of sweat fell down his chest. Her gaze raked over his sculpted frame until her eyes focused on their connected bodies. Sirius, too, brought his attention to the place where they joined, panting as he watched himself piston in and out of her.

As the coil inside of him wound tighter and tighter, he could also feel something pull at his chest. A piece of his magic tugged hard, almost violently until he was physically pulled down. His eyes widened, and he stared into hers, realising by the way her back arched at the same time that she must have felt it too. The thread of magic twisted tight, and if he closed his eyes he could almost see it, feeling it twist into something stronger.

"Sirius . . ."

"Look at me," he pleaded with her. "I need to see you come. Please let me see you come."

Her eyes widened at his words. She panted hard and let out a breathy cry.

Sirius rode out the waves of her climax with her, and the fluttering velvet walls pulled him down, firmly gripping him like a pulsating vice. Once she let out a tell-tale sigh of contentment, he growled and drove into her again and again, savouring the moan she let escape her swollen lips. He stole four more thrusts before burying his length to the hilt and spilling himself inside her warmth, stars bursting behind his eyelids as he collapsed against her.

They stayed like that for several minutes, coming down from the high. Sirius's forehead rested against hers; they were both breathing hard and heavy, breath mingling. He leant forward, kissing her softly, not having the proper words to tell her how he felt, considering the blood had yet to return to his brain.

He pulled himself off of her, settling next to her on the mattress, which now felt cool against his burning skin. He draped an arm over her waist, tugging her until her sweat-soaked back was flush against his chest. He buried his face in her tangled mane of brown curls and breathed her in before placing gentle kisses on her bare shoulders, laughing lightly when he realised her half-opened nightdress was still bunched around her hips.

"Lift up," Sirius whispered, sitting up and nudging at her hips. Mia complied silently, allowing him to completely disrobe her; it all felt a bit silly, after the fact.

He pulled the fabric away from her pelvis and down her thighs, tossing it to the floor in the direction he assumed her knickers had been thrown in the heat of passion. As he moved his way back up the bed, he placed tender kisses along her body. Her ankle, her calf, a spot just behind her knee where he lingered a little longer, her thigh and the beautiful curve of her hip, where he paused to leave a tingling bite. He placed his hand against her stomach as he pulled himself up the side of her body, grinning and kissing every inch of her with reverence. Despite taking as much time as he possibly could before succumbing, in the blurry vision of lust, Sirius felt he had not had proper opportunity to worship her.

His lips kissed along the dip of her waist but stopped when the smooth flesh changed in texture. Sirius opened his eyes and looked down. Narrowing his focus, he ran the pad of his thumb upward along a thin, but very deep, scar that ran the length of her ribs—a scar he had never seen before.

"Give me your wand."

"I already cast a Contraceptive Charm," Mia muttered sleepily.

"Mia, give me your wand," he demanded again.

"What for?" She sat up, handing him the wand.

Before he had a chance to answer her question, he illuminated the room. Holding the wand over her body, he felt his stomach roll at the sight he was met with. "Mia, what the fuck is this?"

*Shit*, she thought as she looked down at the deep purple scar she had all but forgotten about.

In the insanity surrounding Sirius's attack, Mia had not even realised the month and year. Madam Pomfrey had warned her, years earlier after taking the De-Ageing Potion, that when she reached the age she previously acquired them, her scars would resurface. The long purple line dissecting her ribs was just the first of many. Dolohov's curse that she had taken in the Department of Mysteries at the end of her fifth year had left behind the nasty mark. Unfortunately, it could not be glamoured due to its dark nature, which left her in an awful situation as Sirius stared down at it with his wide eyes.

"Mia! What is this?"

"A scar."

"No shit. This isn't just any scar. This is Dark Magic. When the hell were you cursed? Who touched you?" He looked wrathful, though Mia knew it was not aimed at her.

"I can't tell you," she muttered, and her heart broke when she saw his walls go back up. She winced in frustration. "Sirius, wait! You need . . . You need to learn Occlumency."

"You need to tell me the truth. Someone hurt you!"

"I'm fine. I promise you, Sirius, I am fine. I know what you're thinking. *You* didn't fail to protect me."

*It was me who failed to protect you*, she thought as memories from that particular battle resurfaced. Fighting alongside Harry, being separated from the others as Death Eaters chased them from room to room in the Department of Mysteries. She had been knocked unconscious by the curse only to wake up days later with Future Remus sitting by her bedside, eyes rimmed in red as he held her hand and told her that Sirius was dead.

His hands still held on to her body as if he were afraid to let her go. "Why are you keeping this secret?"

"Because I have to." She felt tears pricking her eyes once again. "One day, I'll tell you everything, I promise you. I'm not hiding anything to hurt you, I swear on my magic. I'm doing it to keep you—"

"Don't say safe," Sirius snapped and finally let go of her as he sat back on the bed. "It is not your job to keep me safe! It's *my* job to keep *you* safe!"

"Why?"

"Because *I'm* the dangerous one! Tell me the truth, please. I need to know . . . Did this, whatever this is, happen because of a Death Eater?"

"Yes. But I am fine, and he is dead. One day soon, I can explain it all to you. To you, James, and Remus," she lied. James would never, *could* never, know the truth about any of this.

"Fuck. A Death Eater cursed you . . ." Sirius put his head in his hands for several long moments before turning and looking up at her. "Was it because of me?"

She hesitated one second too long, and his eyes widened.

"Fuck!" He stood up from the bed and began to dress himself.

"No!" she shouted, but it was far too late. "You don't understand. It's complicated!"

It *was* complicated. Though, not at all to blame, Sirius Black *was* the underlying reason she had been cursed. It had been the fake image of Sirius being tortured that had led Harry to the Department of Mysteries to face Death Eaters. Hermione had gone along for the ride, never able to let Harry run into trouble on his own. It was Harry's need to rescue his godfather that brought them to the Ministry.

"You asked me earlier if you're safe with me. You're not." Sirius frantically put his clothes back on. "Mia, I need you safe, and that can't be . . . It's not right . . . Not right now. Fuck."

Mia swallowed hard, trying to collect herself so she did not become overly emotional, not like she used to be when she would cry over every little thing. "I told you earlier, I had no expectations for tonight, but I was telling the truth when I said you are the end for me. You're mine." She stood up and walked to him, unashamed of her naked form as she reached for her clothes. "So this distance that you're putting between us right now . . . it's temporary."

Sirius nodded slowly. "Of *course* it is. I'm sorry, Mia."

"For tonight? You regret it?" she asked, her brows furrowed, the dam she had placed her emotions behind threatening to burst at any moment.

"Merlin, no." Sirius exhaled heavily, looking up at her with pleading eyes. "I'm sorry that I'm so . . . fucking broken. Do *you* regret it?"

"I have never regretted a single moment of my life when it comes to you, Sirius Black." She leant forward and placed a gentle kiss on his lips. "Past, present, or future."

## Chapter Fifty-Three

### *Silencing Charms*

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*Made a wrong turn once or twice  
Dug my way out, blood and fire  
Bad decisions, that's alright  
Welcome to my silly life  
(Fuckin' Perfect - Pink)*

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**July 30th, 1976**

Though Mia swore she did not regret sleeping with him, Sirius could not help but berate himself for hours over the fact that he crossed the line he swore he would never cross without being absolutely certain he could: no sex; that was his rule with Mia.

He had craved her for so long, and she was already there when he woke up from his nightmare, sitting on his mattress, smelling like a rainstorm, and looking like she had the ability to heal not only his external wounds but everything inside of him as well. She was perfection, and it made him angry that he could not be the same for her. Something dark inside of him wanted to take that perfection from her—the something inside of her that made her good, while he was worthless. So, he tried taking it the only way he could, by kissing her rough and hard and putting all of his anger and resentment toward the world into that kiss.

That kiss had triggered something else; the wall he kept around himself to hide his emotions, to keep him strong enough not to touch her, came crumbling down. Like an addict, he was in a frenzy to have as much of her as he possibly could.

It had not been until she touched his head that the reality of what he was doing flooded him. That simple touch had been his absolute undoing; it reminded him of the first time she ever touched him on the Hogwarts Express. They had been eleven, and she gave him affection in ways he had never known before. He had hidden behind his walls then, as well; because, for the first time in his entire life, Sirius Black felt properly cared for. All because of the simplest touch of a bushy-haired girl.

He craved her touch for years and years, and it killed him when she was angry and would not pet him—even more when it became inappropriate to do so because she had started dating Remus.

Sirius was not just addicted to her *body* and how it stirred him to life the way no other girl's ever could. He was not just addicted to her *smell* and the way that it felt like it could cleanse the sins right out of him. He was not just addicted to the *feel* of her, or the *sight* of her, or the absolutely heavenly *taste* of her. He was addicted to the way she *loved* him.

He tossed in his bed, forcing himself to ignore the fact that his sheets smelled like her. He focused on the softest lights peeking through the window, indicating that the sun would rise within the next half hour or so. A new day. He did not *want* a new day. He wanted the night all over again, wishing he could forget that he had seen that scar on her ribs. What the hell was she hiding? Who hurt her? How could he figure it out so that he could hurt them back?

Tilly appeared with a soft *pop*. "Young Master Sirius?"

Sirius yelped in surprise and tumbled off the side of his bed, landing on the ground with a loud thunk. His right leg tangled in the sheet, preventing him from getting up without looking like a clumsy prat. He sighed and raised his focus, glancing at the little elf who had the audacity to look amused over his plight. He was not in the mood for any company, let alone the bossy house-elf.

"Tilly, it's a bit early to want to clean my room, isn't it?"

Tilly took in the bed before her, and she grimaced. "After what was done in it a few hours ago, Tilly would like to pull out the *good* Cleaning Spells. The burning ones."

He stared, gobsmacked. *Shit*.

"Tilly is coming to tell that Mistress is waiting for Young Master Sirius in the library," she said sweetly, though there was mischief playing across her face.

He felt like the house-elf was hiding something. He was technically considered her Young Master now, and Sirius was tempted to order her to tell him everything, but the Potters treated their elf kindly, and he knew by watching closely that Tilly responded to direct orders differently than Kreacher or any of the other house-elves he had seen before. For all he knew, if he gave the elf an order, she would smack him in the mouth for giving her attitude.

"What does she want me for?"

Dread filled him. If the house-elf knew that Mia had been in his room that night, who was to say the rest of the manor didn't? He knew that Silencing Charms had been put up, but what if they had not held?

"Not time to be explaining." Tilly reached down and untangled Sirius's leg from the sheets. She pushed him to stand, shoving him toward the door. He was tempted to dig his heels into the floor to delay the inevitable. "Young Master should be up and going. Go, go, go. Tilly will take you."

"All right, you pushy elf!" he grumbled and finally took steps of his own free will when she began shoving her tiny hands against his backside to get him to move faster.

He reached behind, shooing her away from him—which only earned him a hard swat on the arse. He growled in his throat defiantly but ended up just walking faster toward the library in an attempt to evade Tilly.

Unfortunately, he had forgotten that, in his desire to escape the house-elf, he was speeding along toward Dorea Potter—a Black, a Slytherin, and the mother of the girl he'd just shagged.

"Ah, there you are, dear. Good morning." Dorea smiled brightly as he entered the room, which immediately unnerved him.

Growing up, he learnt early that it was a flip of the Galleon when it came to the personalities of the House of Black. One side was volatile, hot-tempered, and easy to provoke: Bellatrix, his mother, and—unfortunately—even himself. It was the other side of the coin that was worrisome. Narcissa, Andromeda, and Dorea had perfected the stone wall that hid away their true thoughts—a smile to hide the serpent's fangs.

"Tilly, thank you so much for waking him." Dorea beamed at the little elf and then gestured for Sirius to take a seat, smiling even more brightly when he obeyed without question.

"Young Master Sirius was *already* awake." Tilly smirked, scrutinising him. "Tilly is surprised."

"As am I, Tilly, as am I," Dorea said to the elf as though Sirius were not in the room. "Especially considering the hour my daughter left his room this morning,"

Sirius bowed his head into his hands, peeking at the witch through the cracks in his fingers as he groaned. *Fuck.*

"Tilly, will you go and make sure Mia is sleeping well? If James wakes up, let her have a lie in. She's probably *very* exhausted." Dorea smiled knowingly as her grey eyes finally fell on him.

The house-elf nodded before whispering, "Tilly sees the bond. Stronger."

"Yes, Tilly, it would be, wouldn't it?" Dorea chuckled as the house-elf vanished.

Sirius sat up, needing to speak first so that he felt like he had some sort of control of the situation, which was as far from true as possible. "I'd ask if you wanted me to go pack my bags, but seeing that everything I now own was bought by you—"

"Oh, are you leaving, dear?" Dorea asked as she sipped her tea. She gestured to the extra cup on the tray in front of her, where the pot sat next to a bowl of biscuits.

"I assumed as much," Sirius said nervously, eyeing the tea and treats between them as though there was a very real chance they might have been poisoned.

"Do you have a new place to live?"

"No." Sirius frowned. How could he have been so stupid? Why could he not control himself? He had done so well in the past. Then again, Mia lived with three other girls for the majority of the year, and he roomed with her brother and ex-boyfriend. *Now* she was literally a few feet from his bedroom door.

"And you expect me to send you out onto the streets? My own blood?" Dorea suddenly dropped her smile, looking offended.

He swallowed, unable to tell if her expressions were real or not.

"Sirius, love." She smiled when she said the term of endearment usually reserved for James or Mia, and Sirius looked away, unable to take it. "I understand that you've had a skewed view of our family with the way your parents raised you, but the House of Black is indeed Most Noble and Ancient. I will not have its true heir—and, in my belief, the one person who might be able to cleanse it—living as a street urchin."

With wide eyes, Sirius looked up at the woman. He had always heard Dorea speak poorly of Walburga and the rest of their family, save for Andromeda whom he knew had visited once or twice with Dorea since she was blasted from the family tapestry. He had assumed the Potter matriarch *hated* her House, but apparently, she was just as prideful as any other Black, with the exception that she disliked the *members* and not the House and history themselves.

She thought that *he* could fix that?

"But, what about what you said . . . about you know," he began, pausing to clear his throat, "Mia and me?"

"That I was aware of your amorous activities with my daughter? Oh, you sweet boy, you really embrace being a Gryffindor, don't you?"

Sirius felt like he was being insulted.

"Nothing happens in this manor without my knowledge, dear. The moment Mia stepped foot into your bedroom I was made aware."

"And you're not going to . . . ? I don't know . . ."

"Threaten your life for daring to put your filthy hands on my precious baby girl? Hardly." She laughed, uncrossing and re-crossing her ankles.

The movement startled him a bit, and he hoped that she was unaware of the way he flinched in response. He doubted it.

"It was Mia in your room, not the other way around, was it not? I doubt very much that my daughter entered your bedroom without knowing that you bedding her was a possibility. There were Silencing Charms thrown up, after all. Hers?" Dorea set her now empty teacup on the tray in front of them before leaning back slightly to relax into the chair, delicate fingers laced together on her lap as she observed him closely.

Sirius nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good girl. Very considerate of her."

He just gaped at the woman. How was she so casual about this? He had expected to be hexed within an inch of his life. Instead, Dorea Potter was smirking at him after outright admitting she knew Mia and Sirius had sex, and that she had known the very moment her daughter had stepped foot into his bedroom. Not only that, she allowed it to happen and was grateful that Mia was thoughtful enough to put up the bloody Silencing Charms?!

Sirius shook his head in disbelief. "You're not upset? Mrs Potter, how are you not upset?"

Dorea frowned, an expression of distaste crossing her features. "Am I back to 'Mrs Potter' again? Oh, dear. So formal. As I've told you since you were a boy, you may call me 'Dorea' or even 'Mum' if it pleases you." She laughed softly, a sly sparkle in her eyes. "It's always pleased me, considering how amusing Walburga's face would look should she ever hear *that*."

Sirius snorted a little at the thought himself, though a month ago, he would have outright laughed. Now, however, thoughts of Walburga only made him angry, bitter, and even sad—though he would never admit it.

"As for my discontent, or lack thereof, you worry for nothing." Dorea waved her hand, shooing away his concerns as if they were pointless. "Though, I can't deny how fun it is to watch a Gryffindor squirm a little under my gaze. You should work on that. I am not the last Slytherin who will attempt to intimidate you."

"I'm not intimidated," Sirius lied defiantly.

"Really? You should be." The mirth was suddenly gone from her eyes, the casual lightness gone from her words. "Not *one month* living under my roof, and you're having sex with my daughter? In the traditions of pureblood society, you should have written a formal letter of intent before even *thinking* about beginning a courtship, let alone taking her to your bed."

*This* was what he had expected.

"Okay, so I'm a little intimidated," he painfully admitted, watching as Dorea's expression changed once again. He was certain the Sorting Hat put him in the right House. There was no way he would have ever kept up with the way Slytherins behaved. "Are you going to ask me what my intentions are with Mia? Isn't that how the speech goes?"

"That is how *Charlus's* speech will go."

Sirius paled. He had been so worried about facing Dorea that he had not thought about what Mia's *father* would do. Knowing James, Charlus was certain to have a foul temper that was not easily calmed, especially when it came to his family.

"*When* he eventually finds out," Dorea added. "However, that won't be for a very long time, I imagine, unless you plan on telling him."

Sirius barely managed to spit out a choked, "No!"

"Good. I wouldn't confide in James, either. Gryffindors are terrible liars and abysmal at harbouring secrets."

"Mia's actually pretty good at it," Sirius said bitterly under his breath as he remembered the look on her face when he asked her about her scar. She had not expected him to find it, which meant that it had been there for a while, and she had no intention of telling him, or maybe anyone, about it. Sirius wondered if Remus had seen it and knew of its origin.

"Yes, but there is a difference between one who has been *born* into the House of Godric Gryffindor and one who has chosen it, wouldn't you say?" Dorea inquired politely. "Charlus and James, bless them, such sweet little lions. All bravery and nerve, but very reckless and illogical. Do you honestly think my Mia an illogical creature?"

"No." Sirius shook his head.

Reckless, sure. It had been Mia who had threatened Bellatrix to her face. It had been Mia who had stormed into the Forbidden Forest with a plan to take down the craziest and most vicious werewolf known. Illogical? No. If anything, Mia thought absolutely everything through to the last detail, which made him nervous considering what had happened last night.

"She said the Sorting Hat almost put her in Slytherin."

"Or perhaps Ravenclaw, in another life. Mia is a smart girl who understands that within each of us reside the qualities from all four Houses. You, for instance, hold the intelligence of a Ravenclaw, the kindness of a Hufflepuff, the resourcefulness of a Slytherin, but it is your courage and daring that define you as a Gryffindor, Sirius."

While he liked to boast about himself often, he had a difficult time accepting praise when it came in the form of genuine appreciation or observation. "And Mia?"

"Wiser than Rowena Ravenclaw herself, as far as I'm concerned, though I may be just a boastful mother," Dorea said proudly, and Sirius frowned. All Walburga had ever told him was how much of a worthless screw-up he was. "Mia is fair and hardworking as Hufflepuffs are known to be, but she is also cunning and clever, and somehow she has found a beautiful balance between the bravery of a Gryffindor and the self-preservation of a Slytherin. That means she keeps secrets. That means she lies."

"Do you know what she's hiding?" Sirius asked bluntly.

"Of course. I can be very resourceful when I need to be. Can you trust me to tell you that the secrets she keeps are not because of any malice or ill intent she holds for you?"

"I don't care if she has ill intent for me," he said with a growl. "I'm worried about her."

He fidgeted, trying to come up with the right words to explain his concern. Unfortunately, he was never quite good at formulating the right words or timing them appropriately.

"She's got a scar on her ribs from a Dark Curse," he blurted out. "She didn't say it exactly, but I asked, and she didn't deny it. It has something to do with me." He frowned as he remembered the look of pity in her eyes. He had somehow caused her to get hurt, and she felt bad that he knew it.

"Even if that were the case, would that change your feelings for her?"

Sirius stopped to think. Would it change anything? Had it changed anything? "No. It doesn't. Not how I . . ." he tried to clarify, but the words would not come out. "I just want her to be safe."

"Because you feel guilty for putting her in danger."

Sirius nodded sadly. "Yes."

He had seen first-hand how Mia's relationship—whether friends or more—with Remus had essentially put her in danger with not only Fenrir Greyback but Professor Higgs. She had jumped to Remus's defence during that first class, basically putting a target on her back as a werewolf sympathiser. Then, her love for their friend had taken her into that forest. Sure, Sirius and James had been right there beside her, but it only proved that Mia would always come to the rescue. What would happen if one day Death Eaters broke into Hogwarts to come for Sirius? He knew for a fact that Mia would rush to help, throwing herself into danger.

He cleared his throat. "I mean, I don't want her in danger."

"That's because you love her. Knowing that you could be the cause of her pain and suffering causes *you* pain."

There it was: love. Sirius wanted to flinch at the word, throwing up his walls as Dorea spoke of love so easily—as if it came naturally to her. He could not understand how a member of his own family had first-hand knowledge of the feeling and was able to talk about it so openly.

"Oh, there's more Slytherin in you than you realise, dear. Tell me, Sirius, when you were with my daughter . . . intimately . . ." Sirius finally let his stony exterior break a little under the weight of discomfort that her words caused. "Did you feel something different than when you're intimate with other witches?"

"This conversation should be awkward." Sirius raised a confused brow as he folded his arms across his chest. He would have expected the witch to give him "the talk" any minute now had she not known he was already quite knowledgeable in that area.

Dorea laughed quietly. "We're Blacks, dear; therefore, things that are often considered unacceptable, distressing, or uncomfortable come naturally to us. I personally blame the inbreeding. Now, answer the question."

"No." Sirius exhaled. "Mia was different."

"As though perhaps some invisible cord connected you together?"

Sirius was awestruck at the words. He had felt it, but thought he was just caught up in the moment. Something inside of his chest, like a string had tugged at him, pulling him forward at the same time that Mia had risen up from the bed to meet him. Something strong and pulsating with magic held them tightly together just before they came apart.

"How did you . . . ?" Sirius gaped.

Dorea smiled knowingly. "What do you know of Soul Bonds, Sirius?"

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### **September 1st, 1976**

"I had sex with Sirius," Mia blabbed the moment she stepped into the compartment on the Hogwarts Express that usually sat Lily, Alice, Mary, and Frank.

She had been in the back of the train, sitting with the boys for the first half of the ride to Hogwarts. Though she and Sirius had gone on the rest of the summer as though nothing happened, Mia felt like everything was different, and not just because of the sex. Sirius continued to make jokes and laugh around everyone, but there would be quiet moments when the two would make eye contact across the dinner table, and he would turn away from her. She could see him warring internally with himself.

It had not been until they met up with their friends at King's Cross Station that Sirius showed any genuine expression other than one of conflict.

Mia had seen Remus at a distance and ran into her best friend's open arms, eager and hungry for the hugs that infused her with a sense of calm.

Remus, however, had grinned deviously. Instead of greeting her with a friendly hug, he lifted her up into his arms and hoisted her body over his shoulder, laughing.

She had pretended to fume with embarrassment, but it was always pleasant to see his jovial side; it made it obvious how much of a Marauder he genuinely was.

When Remus had turned to carry her onto the train despite her struggling, her gaze fell upon Sirius, who was smiling softly at his two friends with an expression on his face that looked like relief.

"WHAT?!" Lily screamed, dropping the Advanced Potions book she had been reading to prepare for their sixth-year class. The train took a turn at that exact moment, and the book slid beneath the seats, out of reach. "Oh, fuck."

Mia's eyes widened, and she laughed when Lily gasped and covered her mouth. "You said fuck."

"I did not!" Lily squeaked.

"You did so, you right foul liar."

"You had sex with Sirius!?"

Mia slammed the compartment door behind her, sealing it with a Silencing Charm in the process, glad that Mary, Alice, and Frank had all left to go visit others. "Merlin, do you want everyone to come barging in here? The way you screamed, Jamie probably thinks you're being tortur—" She shook her head as the image of Sirius twitching on her drawing room floor came into her mind, and she winced. "I . . . Sorry, that was in very bad taste."

Lily raised a brow in concern at the sudden change of demeanour, and Mia knew she was putting the puzzle together. Remus had admitted to running into Lily earlier that summer; when she questioned why he was not with his friends, he had accidentally let it slip that Sirius was in St Mungo's. Lily, despite her general dislike of Sirius, had apparently shown concern for his well-being and asked if she could send something to him in hopes of him getting well again. Remus confessed that Sirius was living at Potter Manor and would be for the foreseeable future. Though no one outside the Marauders and Potter family knew the truth of everything that happened that horrible night, it was not too difficult to piece together.

"Forget bad taste," Lily insisted, pulling Mia away from her dark thoughts. "Or maybe *speaking of* bad taste, how on earth did you find yourself having sex with Sirius Black?!"

"Found it quite pleasant actually," Mia blurted out and then covered her mouth the same way Lily had after swearing.

"Mia!" Lily blushed.

There were moments that Lily reminded Mia of Ginny Weasley, but the innocence of Lily Evans was what set the two gingers apart. Ginny was the very definition of depraved and shameless, and Mia remembered politely asking Ginny and Harry to throw up Silencing Charms the first night after the final battle. She had not wanted to begrudge Harry whatever prize Ginny had been willing to offer for defeating the darkest wizard of all time, but the whole castle had not needed to listen to it!

On the other hand, Lily was as sweet and pure as freshly fallen snow. It was no wonder that she would end up with James, who had not so much as glanced at another girl since Lily had first slapped him all those years ago.

"I can't tell you everything—it's not my place to say—but Sirius moved in with us, and he and I . . . well." She frowned, wondering if she already said too much, but Lily did not react in the slightest which told Mia that her friend already knew something. "He's been having nightmares."

"Like yours?" Lily asked.

Mia paled at the words. "How do you know about those?"

"What? That you put up Silencing Spells, starting our first year?" Lily rolled her eyes in offence as though her very intelligence had been called into question. "Mary and Alice may be oblivious, but my bed is right next to yours. While I'm glad not to be kept awake by snoring, it's a little weird when I can't even hear my roommate breathing. I check on you from time to time. It's always quiet of course, but I can tell something's wrong. You calm down pretty quickly when someone just holds your hand."

Mia felt a warm affection for her friend. "I didn't know . . . I—"

"Don't worry about it. Back to Sirius."

Mia nodded, grateful that Lily had not let her linger on the topic of her own nightmares. "Well, I went in to check on him, and he woke up, quite startled actually." She frowned as she remembered the look of fear and anger on his face. "We talked a bit about us, and how we're pretty much constantly drawn to one another."

"Constantly?" Lily grinned, and Mia raised a brow. Maybe Lily was more like Ginny than she originally thought. "So, this has happened before?"

"What? No." She briefly thought of the fifth-floor corridor after Remus's birthday party. "I mean, not exactly."

"You slept with him before?" Lily stared, astounded.

"No! Just a little . . . snogging and . . . stuff." It was impossible not to see Harry looking back at her through Lily's eyes, and she suddenly felt awkward talking about having sex.

"So, was it your . . . first time?"

Mia could tell by the lowered, shy tone that her friend was interested for more than one reason. "No. I dated Remus for a year."

Lily gasped. "You've shagged Remus *and* Sirius? Merlin, do they know? Are they going to fight over you?" Her smile faded into a look of absolute panic. "Oh God, what if they start duelling over you in the common room? Remus is a prefect! How am I supposed to handle that?"

Mia chuckled in amusement, remembering when she was just as tightly wound about prefect duties. "How did my love life suddenly become the subject of your prefect record?"

"Love life?" Lily turned and looked back at her with a knowing grin.

Mia scowled. "Shut up, Lils."

"Which one do you love?"

"Both," Mia admitted truthfully.

It was a constant thorn in her side, having feelings for both of the wizards. Knowing the outcome only made it more difficult. She wondered: if she had not known what the future held in store for them all, would she have reacted differently to each of them? Would she have stayed with Remus despite the fact that she was not his mate? She had been the one to bring the subject up, and she wondered if he would have ever told her or if he would have gone on dating her, ignoring the fact that they were not meant to be. She wondered if she would have fought harder for Sirius after that first kiss following Narcissa's wedding. Would they have ended up together without the knowledge that they were already involved in a provoked Soul Bond?

The fact was, she *did* know the future and could not ignore it.

"I love them differently. I can't be with Sirius. Not right now. It's not time."

"There's a time frame?"

"Yes." Mia sighed. "It's complicated."

"What about you isn't?" Lily laughed. "No offence. So what was it like?"

"What? Shagging?" Mia scoffed. "With which one?"

"Either," Lily admitted with a blush. "Both? Is it awful that I want to know?" Her cheeks turned bright red, and she hid her face in her hands. "Oh, never mind. You don't have to tell me. No, wait, tell me everything."

"Amazing," Mia answered her with a grin. "Each time. Both. Remus is earthy and passionate and . . ." She groaned at the memories that were not nearly as recent as she would have liked them to have been. Remus's run-in with Snape the year before still kept him at a distance from her. "He's sometimes just downright feral. Sirius was . . . painfully delicious. Slow and controlled and—"

"Would you like some ice water?" Lily asked with a smirk. "Perhaps a dip in the Black Lake when we get to Hogwarts to cool your aching loins?"

Mia blanched. "Aching loins? Are you reading Muggle romance novels again?"

"Maybe." Lily blushed and looked away from her as she knelt on the floor to fetch her textbook from beneath the seats. "Not all of us can have two devastatingly handsome wizards chasing after us."

"Nope," Mia answered with a sly grin. "You still only have the one."

"I'm ignoring that," Lily muttered as she stretched her arm beneath the seats.

Mia laughed, glad to know that after everything that had happened last year, she could still joke with her friend about James's undying love for her.

"So, which one is better in bed?" Lily asked, more than likely just trying to change the subject again.

Mia flushed. "Well . . ."

## Chapter Fifty-Four

### *By the End of It*

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*I wonder what you're thinking now  
Or if you even see  
You wish that you could change the past  
Have you taken all you need  
(My Friend - Saga)*

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**September 2nd, 1976**

"Morning, Lils," Mia said with a bright smile as she reached the Gryffindor table for breakfast.

The start-of-term feast for her *second* sixth year had been the same as it had every year that preceded it, save for a short speech on safety from Dumbledore who mentioned that there had been Death Eater attacks throughout the summer in Britain. After everything that happened the previous year with Professor Higgs and Fenrir Greyback, the wards surrounding Hogwarts had been strengthened greatly. Work was also being done to communicate with the centaur herd in the Forbidden Forest in order to keep students, wizards, and creatures of all kinds safe in the face of the growing threat of Voldemort, or as the *Daily Prophet* had taken to calling him: You-Know-Who.

Yes, Mia knew who very well.

"Has McGonagall brought over the timetables yet?"

She began filling a plate with various items, pouring pumpkin juice into a tall glass, and then automatically pushing the meal across the table to the seat opposite her, all without breaking eye contact with Lily.

"Not yet," Lily said with an excited smile. "How did you do on your O.W.L.s? I got Outstandings on all nine. I was so worried. The Arithmancy exam was a lot harder than I'd expected. I still want to know how you convinced Professor Vector to let you sit for the exam when you didn't even take the class."

"I convinced Professor McGonagall to put in a good word for me. Actually, I ended up taking an O.W.L. for every available class. Wanted to see if I could do it," Mia said, trying to hold back the smug grin that had spread across her face.

"I thought you were messing about when you said you were going to try that!" Lily gaped at her in amusement. "So, did you get your results?"

"I did very well," Mia answered, refusing to give away any more information.

"She's being modest. It's not a good look for her." Remus chuckled as he sat down opposite Mia, grinning at the plate of food already waiting for him. He gave a nod of hello to Lily—completely missing the way her face flushed bright red at the sight of him—before he began fixing a cup of tea for Mia. "She got Outstandings on everything—even Muggle Studies and Divination."

"You've always said that Divination is rubbish!" Lily scolded her friend.

"It *is*, and I've basically just proved it." Mia shrugged, smiling gratefully as Remus handed her the cup of tea. "I didn't even take the ridiculous class, faked my way through the exam, and still ended up with an Outstanding."

"How'd you do, Lily?" Remus asked. He raised his brow looking concerned when Lily refused to make eye contact with him. "Everything all right?"

"Calm down," Mia mumbled as she elbowed her friend, having realised that Lily was reliving the conversation they'd had on the train where Mia had confessed details of her sexual exploits with Sirius and Remus.

"I'm fine," Lily lied quickly, forcing herself to look Remus in the face, but immediately, she let out a nervous laugh and averted her gaze once more.

Remus turned his attention to Mia, who shrugged and shook her head, mouthing "girl stuff" before reaching for the bowl of porridge he had served her.

"I umm . . . I got nine Outstandings," Lily said, looking a bit like the wind had been taken out of her sails. "My parents were really excited. It would have been a record if *someone*," she muttered, eyeing Mia, "hadn't decided to be a show-off."

Mia laughed in reply.

"Actually, it would have *tied* for a record," Remus said. "Sirius got nine Outstandings too."

Lily paled, her mouth falling open as she stammered, searching for words. Then, when the colour returned to her face, she screeched, "What? How is that even possible? He never revises! Does Sirius Black even *know* where the library is?"

"Sure I do," Sirius said in a sultry voice from behind Lily as he moved over, taking a seat directly on Mia's other side. "It's that place where you can shag up against bookshelves, right?"

Mia stared accusingly at him while Lily turned beet red at the words, making a small squeaking noise.

"All right there, Evans?" Sirius asked with a raised brow and a self-satisfied smirk on his face.

"Leave her alone. She's annoyed that you both received the same number of O.W.L.s." Mia tried to excuse Lily's red face as fury instead of embarrassment. "Speaking of which, what N.E.W.T.-level classes are all of you taking?"

"All available to me," Lily admitted before giving her undivided attention to her breakfast, likely refusing to look at anyone until her flushed cheeks turned back to a normal colour.

"I got all Outstandings in everything," Remus said. He growled a little under his breath, bitterly amending, "Except Potions. So I won't be taking *that* as a N.E.W.T. course. Going to drop Herbology and Astrology too and put most of my efforts on Defence and Ancient Runes."

"I'm surprised you don't excel at Potions," Lily spoke up again, though she still would not make eye contact with either of the boys. She whispered, "Doesn't your . . . sense of smell help when brewing?"

"Opposite." Remus sighed a bit, looking down at his breakfast defeatedly. "If I were constantly on my own it might be easier, but in a classroom with ten to twenty cauldrons going at the same time—often with different potions and draughts being brewed—it's overwhelming and hard to focus."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "You were never meant to be a Potions Master anyway, Moony. If you were, then you and Mia would have turned the A.D. into a brewing club instead of Defence." He grinned when Remus smiled up at him in thanks. "I, on the other hand, will be joining you lovely ladies in Advanced Potions."

Lily gaped at him. "*You're* taking Advanced Potions?"

"Need it if I'm going to be an Auror."

"You were an—" Caught so completely off guard by Sirius's declaration, Mia blurted out her first slip-up in years. She cleared her throat. "I mean—You want to be an Auror? You've never said anything about that before."

"Decided recently," Sirius replied with a careless attitude that Mia recognised as one of the many walls he used to hide his vulnerabilities. "Also, besides it being a requirement for Auror training, I'm determined to figure out how to brew Veritaserum before I graduate."

She narrowed her eyes a little as she remembered Remus's birthday the year before. "You and Veritaserum have a bad history."

"I've a bad history with Death Eaters, but I'm still taking Defence."

Mia and Remus both winced at the casual reference to his attack only months earlier.

"Oh, come on." Sirius rolled his eyes again, this time with an added bit of melodrama that came in the form of his arms slumping down at his sides as though he had a lead weight in each hand. "I want things to go back to normal. A normal year, a normal morning where Evans tells me I'm an annoying child, Moony and Mia exchange breakfasts like the nutters they are, and I pull a morning prank on Prongs."

"What did you do?" Lily, Remus, and Mia all asked accusingly at the same time.

Sirius barked a laugh in response and straightened his posture in amusement. "Wow, I haven't gotten all three of you to sync like that since third year when I replaced all the Slytherin Quidditch brooms with Muggle ones." He grinned excitedly. "'You're going to get detention, Sirius,'" he mimicked his friends in a mocking tone. "I'll have you all know, I did *very* little. Honestly, it was the easiest hex I've ever used."

Just then, a bleary-eyed James walked into the Great Hall, adjusting his glasses as he made his way over to the Gryffindor table to join his friends. Yawning, he reached for a scone and took a large bite of it before turning to look at the shocked and silent faces of his entire House and half of the Great Hall.

"Whaappened?" he mumbled around a mouthful.

Remus and Mia gaped at Lily, who looked like she was struggling not to laugh, but Sirius was beside himself with glee.

To avoid James entirely—especially considering she was trying not to condone Sirius's behaviour—Lily stood and left the table.

"What's wrong with you?" Mia hissed, smacking Sirius's arm. "How did you get him to partially shift?"

James blinked, raising one eyebrow in confusion as he swallowed his bite. "Shift?"

"It's not a shift. I will admit, that's what gave me the idea. Just a hex. I, personally, think his hair looks much better like this," Sirius said with a beaming grin.

At the mention of his hair, James dropped his scone and tried to investigate by touch, only to find two large antlers sticking out of the top of his head. "Padfoot!" He launched forward, knocking Sirius from his seat and onto the floor. The two boys began wrestling, Sirius laughing as James threw random punches.

Mia sighed, watching with disapproval as they grappled on the floor. "Jamie, how did you not even notice those?"

"Because his head is so big that he's used to the extra weight?" Remus offered in amusement.

"Mr Black!"

Everyone turned to see an annoyed-looking Professor McGonagall standing over the boys, who finally stopped rolling around on the floor, with James pinned beneath Sirius.

Her voice was sharp when she went on, "You should have transfigured Mr Potter into a mop, since the pair of you seem so intent on using him to clean the floors."

Sirius winked at her. "Well, if I wanted to do that, I wouldn't have to transfigure anything. You've seen his hair."

Her only reaction was to narrow her eyes further. "Considering your O.W.L. scores in Transfiguration, Mr Black, I would have expected more from you than a simple Anteoculatia Hex." She sighed with disappointment and waved her wand at James's head, silently casting the counter-spell and shrinking away the large antlers. Tucking her wand away, she pulled timetables from her robes and began handing them out. "I hope you'll put more effort into my class this year than you've shown this morning."

"Minnie," Sirius called after the professor as she walked away from the table, "I think you're flirting with me! You know how I love it when a pretty witch gets mad and scolds me." He tucked his timetable into his pockets while ignoring the fact that James was still struggling to get out from under him. "Love that old bird. If she were forty years younger—"

"Padfoot, if you get hard for McGonagall—or anyone—while sitting on me, I will show you just how sharp my real antlers are the next moon," James snarled.

Sirius chuckled, looking down at his friend. "*Now* who's flirting?"

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With James recovered from the mild hex, and Sirius covered in a few bruises of retaliation, the group made their way to the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom. There they speculated on their new professor, who had not been announced the night before. All of the Gryffindors were hoping that Professor Prewett would make a return, but the rumoured curse on the position prevented any one professor from teaching for more than a single year. They had barely taken their seats when a tall man with a slight limp made his way down the centre of the classroom, his head of shaggy, tawny hair flowing behind him.

Mia groaned at the sight and laid her forehead on the desk in front of her, silently cursing fate as she wondered just how small the Wizarding world really was.

Sirius and James were audibly intrigued by the new professor after spotting the glint of an Auror badge the man had pompously attached to his professor robes.

Remus patted Mia's shoulder and whispered, "Are you all right?" to which she quietly groaned again, shaking her head as the new professor wrote his name on the blackboard with a flick of his wand: *Professor Scrimgeour*.

"I've been informed that, while your class has been properly taught in the *theory* of Defence Against the Dark Arts, you've had poor education in the ways of practical application. The notes left behind by Professor Higgs say that at least half of you are lazy when it comes to duelling."

"I bet I know which half," Sirius mumbled under his breath.

Scrimgeour narrowed his yellowish eyes at the whole classroom. "Since the man was arrested in connection with the Dark Arts, I won't be taking his opinions into account. You all begin this year with blank slates. That means that until you prove otherwise, you're nothing but children who are incapable of protecting themselves in any situation, thus putting the lives of others at risk.

"As this is your sixth year, we will begin instructing you on how to use non-verbal spells. It is a poor wizard who needs to speak a charm in order for it to work properly. Pair up."

In the earlier years of Defence, the pairs had been friendly. As the Slytherins and Gryffindors grew older, though, the animosity intensified, and soon the classroom was split down the middle with red and gold on one side, silver and green on the other.

While Professor Higgs had always paired James and Sirius together, Professor Scrimgeour did not know better. James stood across the room from Severus Snape, a grin on his face, while Sirius was all too eager to take a crack at Amycus Carrow. Mia stood to the right of Sirius, glaring across the way at Elora Zabini, and beside her, Remus was staring at Alecto Carrow.

"Now, Gryffindors will attempt to jinx their partner while the Slytherins will attempt to protect themselves. Not a word is to be spoken," Scrimgeour said fiercely. "On the count of three. One, two, three!"

All at once, Amycus, Elora, and Alecto flew backward into the wall behind them, stunned to the ground. Sirius, Mia, and Remus shared a proud grin over their non-verbal spells.

James stared intensely across the room as he and Snape faced off in a non-verbal duel. Snape had erected a shield in time, of course, but instead of a simple stunning spell, James was trying to silently penetrate the Slytherin's shield, forcing it back on him. Everyone stopped to watch closely as hazel eyes met black and the two boys glared at one another viciously.

"Stop!" Professor Scrimgeour yelled minutes later, and both Snape and James released, nearly collapsing to the ground after forcing their magics to press so hard against one another. "While showing impressive *strength*, Mr Potter should have used additional attacks, layering spells instead of forcing one that was not working. Mr Snape, you should learn to hold a shield and fire hexes simultaneously. It could mean your very life when faced off against a Dark wizard."

Sirius clenched his fists and scathingly muttered, "Except that he *is* a Dark wizard."

"He's intense," James declared, grinning as they left the classroom an hour later. "I *still* can't believe that Rufus Scrimgeour is teaching Defence this year. He trained under *Alastor Moody*, you know." He said the name with a reverence that made Mia laugh until he turned and narrowed his eyes at her.

"I think it's ridiculous. You know *why* he's here, don't you?" she asked the four boys, who all looked confused. "Do *any* of you read the *Prophet* for anything other than Quidditch scores?"

"Of course!" James retorted with indignation. "I was just telling you how awesome Auror Scrimgeour is. He's been all over the *Prophet* this summer. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement's been catching Death Eaters."

"No," Mia argued, "they've been *chasing* Death Eaters; so far, no one they've caught has actually had the Mark of Vo—The Mark of You-Know-Who. They've been arresting Imperiused bystanders. We're at war, and our new professor isn't just here to teach us; he's here to recruit."

"Then sign me up," Sirius said proudly.

Mia growled, rolling her eyes at his brashness. "You don't know what you're saying. Besides, he's not here recruiting *you*. He's here for Dumbledore." When none of them spoke, looking at her in silent confusion, she sighed. "Isn't it obvious? The Ministry can't get ahead of the Death Eater attacks. It's not just Muggle-borns anymore. A whole family of goblins was slaughtered last week, and there are rumours that You-Know-Who is seeking out giants. Who better to have at the beck and call of the Ministry in a war than Albus Dumbledore?"

"Well, then he should join," Sirius insisted. "Put a quick end to it."

"There will *not* be a quick end to this war," Mia lamented, turning her gaze down and huffing. "Besides, Dumbledore won't join them. He does things in his own way, and in his own time, which I *suppose* is fine."

"Why wouldn't Dumbledore join the Ministry? Don't they have the same goal?" Peter asked.

Mia forced herself not to snap at him as it was only the first day of classes and the other boys had started to get a bit defensive of Peter when it came to her attitude toward him. Normally, she could blame the stress of revising for exams.

"The Ministry can't be trusted. *No one* can be trusted." She looked at Remus, Sirius, and James. "As a matter of fact, right now, there are currently only four people in the world that I trust with my life, and that's you three and Lily."

Peter frowned. "Not *me*?"

Mia took in a deep breath, watching as Sirius patted Peter on the shoulder, looking at him as though he were embarrassed for his friend. While she was not exactly openly hostile to Peter, unlike the way that Mary was, everyone knew that Mia did not get on well with him.

"It's nothing personal, Peter," she lied. "Jamie's my brother, Remus is my best friend, and Sirius is... family now. They're . . ." She looked at the other three Marauders, trying to find a word to explain it. When she glanced over at Remus, she found it. "They're Pack."

"It's 'cause I didn't go into the Forbidden Forest, isn't it?" Peter turned his eyes down bitterly. "Evans wasn't there; she's not a part of your whole weird pack thing."

"Not *yet*," Mia muttered, scoffing when James glanced up at her with bright eyes. "Calm down. Don't you have class?"

"No, I've got a free period. Need to get the Quidditch try-outs scheduled. Want to come help?" James asked with a crooked grin, knowing that while she did not enjoy flying or listening to Quidditch, she had a knack for organising; James was not too proud to abuse his family connection to the bright witch.

"No, I have to . . ." She thought for a moment. "I have to talk to Dumbledore about something." When three of the four boys reacted with looks of concern, Mia sighed. "I'm just going to talk to him about my Divination exam. Honestly, I *faked* my way to an Outstanding. The class shouldn't be an option at Hogwarts, and he needs to know it. Even if he takes away that extra O.W.L. Go and deal with your team."

She smiled at James and then leant forward, granting each boy—save for Peter—a quick kiss on the cheek before walking off toward Dumbledore's office.

"Chocolate Frogs," Mia said to the gargoyle guarding Dumbledore's office. When the stone did not budge, she exhaled irritably and began rattling off various candies. "Acid Pops, Candy Floss, Ice Mice—Ah." She smiled as the gargoyle moved, granting her access.

"Miss Potter, what a pleasant surprise. Is your sixth year at Hogwarts living up to the original?" Dumbledore asked, blue eyes twinkling from behind his desk. He chuckled

softly, an action that, for some reason, unnerved her. He proffered a small bowl filled to the brim with little sweets.

Mia shook her head politely. "Rufus Scrimgeour. He's here because of the war, isn't he? Because of the Death Eater raids and Voldemort?"

"While I have, from time to time, sought your opinion on certain matters, mostly relating to your small circle of friends, I believe we have discussed in the past, Miss Potter, that the subject of Voldemort is off the table when it comes to you and me," Dumbledore said in a firm tone, though the smile never left his face.

"But I *know* how to kill him!" Mia cried in frustration. "I *know* what he's doing, and *who* he's after, and I know that there are students in this very school who are being recruited, and—"

"We won the war in your timeline?" Dumbledore asked, interrupting her.

"Yes." It had been a conversation that happened repeatedly throughout the years, though the longer she had been in the 1970's, the more emotional she had become about her need to try and fix the future. "Yes, we won. He's destroyed completely where I'm from."

"Then I will not risk losing that final future battle."

*You won't even make it to the final battle,* Mia thought.

She ground her teeth together hard, trying to force a little physical pain in order to prevent herself from crying. "We could save so many lives. I've seen the *Daily Prophet*. They're killing so many, and my knowledge could stop that from happening."

Dumbledore sighed sadly. "Or it could make things worse. Voldemort could discover your knowledge and use it against you. Or, as we've spoken about before, nothing would change except you would personally be harmed and innocents would die regardless. I must insist that you keep to my rules and not tell anyone anything about the future. I've already risked too much in the past by asking questions. You have told me that in the future we have a certain victory, and I am not willing to risk that certainty for anything, Miss Potter, even if it means my own life."

*It will.*

"In the end, it's all for the Greater—"

"Don't finish that sentence, sir." Mia raised a finger to stop him from continuing. Hermione Granger would have been horrified to know that in some world she would have

the nerve to hush Albus Dumbledore, especially while still a student at Hogwarts, but *Mia Potter* could not find it in her to care. "Do you still have my Time-Turner?"

"No, I do not," Dumbledore said softly. "As promised, it's being looked over by an expert in Time Magic. I have been assured that I will be notified should anything new be discovered in regards to the device."

"Thank you, sir."

Mia headed back down the spiral staircase, cursing under her breath with each and every step. She knew she could not do anything. She had seen first-hand what happened when she tried to make changes—she ended up being the cause of those events—but it still felt wrong to sit idly by and watch as the world descended into chaos around her.

*Every action we take is the causation of destiny, time travel won't change anything.*

*Live your life. Enjoy your life.*

The words from her letter—her guide—repeated in her head like a quiet mantra, and she could feel the bitterness bubble under her skin. "Shut up, Future Remus."

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Sirius stormed through the door of the dorm he shared with his three best friends, an angry expression on his face as he flipped open his trunk and began digging through his things, muttering, "Fucking Filch," over and over again.

"Problem, Pads?"

Sirius looked up to see James sitting on his bed, looking over the Quidditch Try-out sign-up sheet. He edited a few words with a quill in hand, adding *Only Bitches Don't Play Quidditch* before cringing, eyes wide, and erasing it from the parchment.

"Filch accused me of setting off dungbombs on the third floor. I *actually* didn't do it this time, but he made me turn out my pockets and took my pack of cigarettes. Now, I'm so pissed off that I need one," Sirius muttered as he returned to his trunk and reached into the small pouch where he kept his extra packs. Flipping the pouch open, he growled when he noticed that it was unexpectedly half empty. "Prongs, did you steal my cigarettes?"

"No," James said quietly, a facade of innocence transforming his features. "What makes you think that?"

Sirius glared suspiciously at his friend and took a careful step forward, sniffing the air. "I can smell it on you."

James's mask of innocence was replaced by one of guilt and growing fear. They'd had a few rows over the years; when it was about something genuinely important, James Potter was a force to be reckoned with, but Merlin help the wizard who stole Sirius Black's cigarettes.

When Sirius advanced, James leapt from his bed and pointed across the room. "Moony took one first!"

Remus looked at James, mouth agape. "You suck, Prongs. I just wanted to try it," he explained to Sirius. "*James* has been stealing your fags since the middle of last year. Don't let him pass the blame on me 'cause he's too cheap to buy his own vices."

"*I'm* cheap?" James's brows rose into his hairline. "This coming from the guy who hoards sweets like a niffler?"

"I wouldn't *board* them, if you'd all stop nicking them from me," Remus growled, his gaze turning to Sirius in mild accusation.

Sirius rolled his eyes and folded his arms across his chest. "I took *one* bar *one* time."

"You took *two* bars last night," Peter chimed in. "You also took his extra pumpkin pasties yesterday on the train. You gave me half of one to keep me from telling Remus."

"And *now* you owe me those pumpkin pasties back, you little rat!" Sirius snarled.

"No, *you* owe *me* the pumpkin pasties back and, apparently, two chocolate bars!" Remus snapped.

"No, *you* owe *me* cigarettes!" Sirius growled at Remus, stalking forward.

"*I'm* not the one stealing your fags. *Prongs* is!"

"Hey!" James yelled at Remus, and the other three boys turned, waiting for him to defend himself. After nearly half a minute of tense silence, James clearly had nothing, so he did the next best thing . . . offered distraction. "Yeah, well, Remus is the one who dumped that nasty cologne in your trunk!"

Sirius's eyes widened, and he turned, enraged as he recalled how badly his robes smelled for weeks following the event. The cologne had been a gift from his father, and he hated it, which was exactly why he had been so angry that the bottle had been broken and soaked through everything he owned. Not even the best Cleaning Charms had been able to get the overpowering stench out.

"That was an accident!" Remus defended, standing up and putting both hands in front of himself as if pleading with Sirius for mercy.

He looked a bit ridiculous. Sirius knew that Remus could best him in a fight if he had to; hell, he still stood inches above the rest of them—but Remus likely wished to avoid the carnage that usually followed these arguments when they inevitably occurred about once a year.

Asking four growing boys to room together for seven years without at least one or two fights was like asking a group of teenagers to all live in a private tower and not *eventually* have sex with each other. Sirius and Remus were clearly proof that both scenarios were just unavoidable.

"I was looking for the map!" Remus asserted when everyone focused on him instead of one another. "If *you* just kept it where it's supposed to be—"

"I *would* keep it in Prongs's trunk, but it looks like rats live in it," Sirius explained, still miffed about the spilt cologne.

"Hey!" Peter shouted.

The other three boys all turned on him and yelled, "Shut up, Wormtail!"

"Well, don't bring *me* into this," Peter pouted, gesturing to them with a flick of his hand. "I didn't bloody well do anything."

"*You* didn't do anything?" Remus scoffed incredulously, crossing his arms. "I saw you sneaking drinks out of Padfoot's private firewhisky stash all last year."

"You did *what*?!" Sirius's temper reached its peak. It was one thing to steal his cigarettes, but to drink his firewhisky? His precious, beautiful firewhisky that took every effort to acquire, considering the trunks were often checked randomly by Filch. He was not of age yet to even *purchase* it; he had always been able to steal from his parents' vast collection, but since moving in with the Potters, his stash had been running out quickly.

Sirius glanced at Peter, and both Remus and James looked mildly smug that they had officially put an end to the argument, especially since it had started because they had been outed stealing his cigarettes.

"You rotten little . . ." Sirius growled as he stalked toward Peter.

"SIRIUS AND REMUS HAD SEX WITH MIA!" Peter blurted out, covering his face defensively as Sirius came closer.

The room fell immediately silent; the only sound was Peter's laboured breathing. Sirius glared down at the boy, his expression making a promise of absolute pain to be delivered once he had somehow fixed this amazing cock-up.

His heart was in his throat as he slowly turned, watching as Remus did the same to look at James, who was no longer sitting on his bed. The Quidditch sign-up parchment was clenched tightly into his fist, and his face was quickly turning red as he stared at them.

"WHAT?!"

Sirius took a leap. "Peter took your wand to scratch his arse with it once."

Remus sighed and cursed under his breath. "Nice try, Pads, but this argument reached its peak about ten seconds ago. Look, Prongs," he said, using his calm and collected tone of voice, glancing briefly at Sirius, who was desperately hoping he did not do anything to make matters worse. "Let's be adults about this, yeah?"

"Or we could have denied it," Sirius said with a groan.

Before either had a chance to properly explain the unbelievably complicated and interlaced relationships they each had with his twin sister, James shifted on the spot. A very real and angry Prongs stood in his place, huffing hot air through his nostrils, black eyes narrowed and head bowed forward.

Sirius's eyes widened in genuine fear. "Fuck."

From the corner of his eye, he saw Peter shift into his rat form and scurry through a small hole in the stone wall.

"James . . ." Remus said, taking a slow step back.

Prongs pawed at the floor with his hooves in an aggressive threat.

"Well, shit." Sirius quickly shifted into Padfoot, knowing that at least he would have size as an advantage in the oncoming and inevitable onslaught.

"Not fair! Not fair!" Remus yelled. "*I can't shift at will!*"

They both stared into the face of the angry stag just as it charged forward.

## Chapter Fifty-Five

### *Maidenhead*

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*Hey little sister, what have you done  
Hey little sister, who's the only one  
Hey little sister, who's your superman  
Hey little sister, who's the one you want  
(White Wedding - Billy Idol)*

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**September 2nd, 1976**

It did not matter what Dumbledore said. She knew she could not outright tell people what the future had in store because it would endanger herself and everyone around her, but who was to say that she could not find out *new* information? She did not, for instance, know for a fact that the current Slytherin students were *already* marked Death Eaters. If she could find out, then it would only be her proper duty as a student to report such things—perhaps to McGonagall, instead of Dumbledore, directly.

Mia spent her day attending the rest of her classes, grinning brightly as Lily helped her catch up with Arithmancy. Her afternoon was spent studying outside by the beech tree near the lake, enjoying what few moments of peace were afforded to her. After completing her homework, she began planning out ways to find out if Snape, the Carrows, and any seventh year Slytherins had taken the Dark Mark. After a few minutes of proper plotting, she felt guilty for giving Harry such a hard time back in her original sixth year when he had been so intent on discovering if Draco Malfoy was an initiated Death Eater. She had thought Harry was paranoid, having Dobby and Kreacher follow Draco around Hogwarts, slipping out of the tower to spy on him from beneath the . . . *The cloak!*

She rushed back up to Gryffindor Tower with a plan formulating. She could borrow James's cloak and slip inside the Slytherin common room to observe the future Death Eaters. The moment she caught a glimpse of a branded forearm, she could tell . . . No wait, she couldn't tell anyone, because then she would have to explain where she was when she saw it. *Hmm*, maybe she could verify that they had the Dark Mark and then charm their robes to slip up their sleeves in front of a professor? Either way, she still needed her brother's help.

"Jamie, I need to borrow the cloak for . . ." Mia began as she entered the boys' room, but the rest of her sentence became stuck in her mouth as she scanned the scene in front of her, shocked.

The dorm room looked like someone had attacked it with several Blasting Hexes. There were large punctures in the stone wall, resulting in crumbled rocks and dust piled on the floor. The curtains around at least two beds were torn completely from the posters. One of the mattresses had been upended, and it had a long gash down the middle with feathers and fluff billowing out of it. A strangely unfamiliar chill blew across the room as a breeze slipped in through the broken window in the corner. Long claw and scuff marks scratched the floor at her feet where she could also see drops of blood.

"What in the name of Merlin happened in here?"

"These two . . . two *fuckers* had sex with m'sister," James slurred from the corner of the room. "That's what bloody well happened."

She turned and looked at her brother, who was sitting on the floor with his wand held upright. In the other hand was a half-empty bottle of firewhisky, from which he struggled to take a drink. James looked angry and ruffled, but otherwise healthy and intact. Mia followed his glare across the room where Sirius and Remus sat, their backs against the stone wall.

They looked distinctively worse.

She attempted to rush to their sides, pulling out her wand to check them over, but Remus held up a hand, silently pleading with her to stay exactly where she was. The way James levelled his wand up a little higher told her exactly why it would not be prudent to get closer to the other two boys.

Remus looked exhausted and guilty, holding one hand over his ribs through his ripped, blood-soaked jumper. He was also sporting a very lovely shade of red alongside his right eye that—without the werewolf healing factor—could turn purple by tomorrow morning.

Sirius was much worse off. His lip had been split clean open, and the right sleeve of his white shirt was soaked in blood. Mia frowned at the sight of it, instinctively stepping forward to help once more, only to have Sirius be the one to try and keep her back.

"Kitten, it might be best if you stay away for the moment. He's not exactly in the right state of mind . . ." Sirius gestured to James. "At least the firewhisky has made it harder

for him to stand up and punch us. Doesn't help that his wand hand is still steady, though. You'd be surprised the amount of things Prongs can do while properly intoxicated."

She looked at her brother, mouth agape in shock, as he managed to take a long swig from the bottle while glaring at his friends, wand arm exactly as Sirius said: completely steady.

"Jamie, you've kept them at wand point? This is ridiculous."

James pulled the firewhisky bottle from his mouth, some of the liquid spilling out onto his shirt as he shook his head. "They can't be trusted. Gotta keep 'em here."

"They are your *best friends*, and they *can* be trusted!" she snapped as she moved forward to steal away the bottle.

James dove to the side to protect it, tucking the bottle and his wand to his chest. It spoke volumes that Remus and Sirius did not take the opportunity to make a run for it. When Mia stepped to the side to try and get a better angle, James sat back up, the bottle tucked under his armpit and his wand held back up. "They're thieves!" he yelled as he pointed his wand at Remus and Sirius, letting out a sad little sob. "Stole my sweet Mia's maidenhead."

Mia blanched. "Ew. Don't say maidenhead."

"It's actually the most suitable word for it," Remus muttered soberly, looking exasperated. "We've been through several others, and this is the least horrible, believe me."

She had known that James would react this way when he eventually found out about either Remus or Sirius. Of course, she had hoped that he would not find out about the *both* of them. She thought she had been cautious when it came to her boys, but clearly, something had happened tonight that she was not expecting. Now all she could try to accomplish was damage control.

"Jamie," Mia said as she knelt down in front of him. "I appreciate the big brother protective act here, but you can't punch your friends. You're drunk and not thinking clearly."

"Not drunk," James muttered, looking far too smug—especially since one of his eyelids was drooping.

"He didn't start drinking until *after* he beat the hell out of us," Sirius snarled, wincing as he licked at his split lip.

"Can't exactly hold a bottle with a hoof, now, can you?" Remus added.

"You attacked them in *Animagus* form?" Mia's eyes widened as she examined the room once more. Suddenly, all the damage made a lot more sense. The room was large, as it needed to house four boys and all their furniture, but Prongs was a massive, fully-grown stag. She was certain the span of his antlers would not even allow him to fit his head between the posters on the beds.

"Cause they're animals! Both of 'em," James accused. "They took your *maidenhead*."

"Stop saying maidenhead!" Mia shrieked. "No one *took* anything from me, and there was certainly not a 'they' in the first moment, thank you." A strange flutter of images came into her mind, and she forced herself not to blush as she glanced over at Sirius and Remus, who must have been thinking the same thing—both were purposely avoiding eye contact with one another *and* her.

"You're so smart . . . such a smart Mia." James smiled as he sat up, putting the bottle of firewhisky down to pat Mia on the head affectionately as though she were a cat. "I'm so glad you're my Mia sister."

She sighed irritably but allowed the affection because it seemed to be calming him down. "I'm glad you're my Jamie brother. I'd prefer a *sober* brother, but you'll do."

James laughed, hugged her, and picked up the bottle once again when she tried to grab it from his reach.

"Now, you tell me which one did it. Just point, and I'll curse him," he said calmly, waving his wand lackadaisically which caused the other two Marauders in the room to flinch.

"You can't curse them, Jamie," Mia shouted, trying to snatch James's wand from him. She would prefer not to disarm him with a spell, though she certainly was not above doing so.

"Fine." James huffed with a pout. "Then you point out which one did it, and I'll make sure he marries you."

Remus and Sirius both paled instantly.

Mia shook her head in aggravation. "Jamie, you're drunk. Give me the bottle." She lunged forward, grabbing the bottle of Ogden's Finest out of his hands, ignoring the pathetic little whimper that escaped him. She sniffed at the open top and sighed, taking a long drink from it herself and rolling her eyes when she heard Sirius whine as the last of his good whisky slid down her throat.

"It was Sirius, wasn't it?" James glared across the room. "He's been crawlin' in your bed since firs' year."

"We were eleven, mate," Sirius snapped. "*You* were in the bed too. So was Remus."

"Aha! You admit it then! You've been plannin' this for *that* long?" James yelled and attempted to stand up only to fall forward onto his hands.

"Jamie, calm down." Mia leant forward, reaching for his wand again, but he pulled it away just in time.

"I didn't take her bloody maidenhead, you drunken prat!" Sirius growled, ducking slightly to the side as sparks flew haphazardly out of the end of James's wand.

James pulled away from Mia, tipping to the side and colliding with his trunk. Mia winced on his behalf, but he did not seem to notice the injury. Instead, his focus turned on Remus. "You! I fucking *knew* it!"

"You did *not*, Prongs; you just finished saying you were certain it was Padfoot!" Remus shouted back, recoiling at the sight of the mahogany wand aimed at his face.

"You're both equally to blame!" James hollered.

"How do you figure that?" Sirius asked incredulously. "Moony's been shagging her for *years*. I only had her the once."

Mia's mouth fell open as she spun on Sirius, half tempted to let her brother hex the hell out of him. "*Had* me? I'm sorry. You *HAD* me?"

"Not that I'm saying our one time was less than perfection," Sirius went on as though Mia was not currently staring daggers into his head. He gestured to Remus. "Certainly better than the total of *your* handful of little moments."

"Little?" Remus asked, his eyes narrowing. "Would you like me to get a Pensieve and show you? You'll have to go down to the apothecary, though; I only have a couple *dozen* phials for memories, and I'll need at least *twice* that to let you have an accurate portrayal."

"Fine!" Sirius stood and glowered at Remus. "When you're picking up your *tiny* phials," he said, wiggling his pinky finger at him, "pick up an *extra-large* one for me, and I'll show you *my* memory and how she likes it when I—"

"Oh, believe me," Remus darkly interrupted, "*I* know better than *anyone* exactly what she likes!"

"One thing she *doesn't* like for sure is her sexual preferences being shared in front of her drunken brother!" Mia shouted, brandishing her wand and aiming it at the two. Sirius and Remus had the grace to look properly scolded for their actions, and threw an apologetic glance at her before glaring at one another and then turning their backs.

"Gryffindors are red and gold . . . not . . . not scarlet," James muttered under his breath like a petulant child.

Mia rounded on her brother with wide eyes. "Did you just inadvertently call me a scarlet woman, James Charlus Potter?"

"What?" James looked up at her, genuinely confused. "No . . . I called *Remus* a scarlet woman. Man. Moon. Moony. Scarlet Moony."

Sirius stifled a laugh.

Remus groaned. "Why am *I* still being singled out?"

"Need I remind you that he stabbed *both* of us?" Sirius gestured to his bleeding arm. "Plus, I don't heal as fast as you. We're even. We're sharing this stupid punishment."

"You two already share too much if you ask me," James complained.

Sirius, clearly fed up, threw two fingers up at James and said, "Well worth it."

James started forward, and Sirius ducked behind Remus with a yelp, but Mia jumped in between her brother and the other two, halting his movement by pushing on his shoulders lightly. The jolt to his motion caused his balance to recalibrate, sending him to the floor.

Mia frowned, pinching the bridge of her nose as a headache loomed over her. "Remus, go and ask Mary for a Sober-Up Potion please. The last time Jamie got drunk, he woke up in the broom shed naked." She most certainly did not want to see that again. He had ended up with a sullied reputation and splinters in terrible places, and she had spent the day trying to convince everyone that her brother did not have strange broom fetishes.

"No!" James stood back up and glared at Remus. "No one leaves. I have to keep my eyes on them at all times."

"Because if I send Remus out of the room he'll sneak off and have sex with me?" Mia asked, rolling her eyes.

"You're right!" James nodded, clearly not catching her sarcasm. "I'll follow him."

"Okay good. While you and Remus are gone, I'll stay in here and shag Sirius."

James turned around so fast that he lost his footing again and fell back to the floor, though he still had his wand in hand and suddenly aimed it at Sirius.

"What the fuck are you trying to do, Mia?" Sirius gestured to his bloody arm. "*This* is not a Quidditch injury! *This* is where a fucking *antler* stabbed me. Right here!" He pointed at it repeatedly. "Stabbed me right here!"

"Jamie, it is not your business who I'm intimate with," she insisted, ignoring Sirius's wailing in the background.

"Intimate?" James scoffed, making the same face that he used when Tilly tried to feed him cabbage. "Is *that* what Moony called it? When he corrupted you?"

At his words, both Sirius and Mia burst into laughter.

James frowned. "Wusfunny?"

"You think that *Moony* corrupted *Mia*?" Sirius barked with laughter, cringing when the hysterics caused him pain.

Remus scowled, crossing his arms over his chest. "Should I be taking offence at this?"

"Oh, Jamie." Mia smiled at her brother and then reached down while he was distracted, finally stealing his wand away from him. "It's adorable—if not incredibly insulting—that you think I'm naive enough to let myself be corrupted at all. Let alone by *Remus*, who dated me for almost a year before even kissing me."

"Which was very romantic, if I do remember," Remus muttered, as he continued to pout over the attack on his masculinity.

Mia smiled sweetly up at him. "Love, I am not criticising *anything* about you," she said with a wink.

James grimaced and swatted lightly at her. "Don't you . . . Don't *wink* at him. No winking. Don't you wink at him in front of me after what . . . what you . . . and he . . . and . . . and Padfoot too?" One of his eyes closed on itself, and James yawned, trailing off in thought.

"Remus, the Sober-Up Potion please?" Mia pleaded with her friend.

"He stays!" James yelled, suddenly awake again. "They can't just use my sister and get away with it! I have to do something! Snotright! It's not right!"

"I did not *use* her!" Remus yelled, suddenly angrier than he had been since Mia arrived. She frowned at the sight, realising that in his drunken stupor, James had crossed a

very firm line. "I *loved* her with everything I . . . I . . ." he stammered and locked eyes with Mia before turning away from them all and storming across the room.

"Gonna marry her then, Moony?" James muttered as Mia affectionately brushed hair from his face.

"Planning her betrothal for her?" Sirius wondered amusedly.

"Not going to let m'sister get a reputation like the other girls you go around shaggin', *Sirius*." James glared up at his best friend. "She's better than that!"

Sirius recoiled from the words and looked down, guilt plastered across his face.

"Jamie!" Mia chided. "No one else knows about Sirius. These are your best friends, and you know they would never do anything to hurt me. Please, stop overreacting. Especially since there are more important things to worry about."

"Like what?"

"Like for instance, how *did* you find out that I've had sex with them?" she finally asked, glad that no more threats were being issued between the three boys. "I don't imagine either of them is stupid enough to tell you." She glared up at Sirius with a raised brow, and he shook his head. "So either you walked in on them talking about it, or . . . ?"

"Peter told me," James confessed.

"Of *course* he did," she hissed. "And how did *Peter* find out? Did *you* tell him?" She looked up at Sirius and Remus, who had re-joined the conversation now that he'd had a chance to collect himself.

"No!" Sirius answered.

"I never told anyone about us except Sirius," Remus replied.

Sirius nodded. "Same here. Who all have *you* told about us?"

"Only Lily," Mia whispered.

James looked up with bright eyes. "Evans was here? Did she say anything 'bout me?"

Mia rolled her eyes at her brother. "Not now, Jamie."

"How do we know that *she* didn't go blabbing?" Sirius asked.

"Because Lily can keep a secret just as well as the four of us can—better even. She's known that Remus is a werewolf for years. Despite being one of her best friends since childhood, it still took *you*," she said, glaring a bit at Sirius, "being a reckless prat for Snape to find out."

"How *did* Peter know?" Remus asked. "I mean, I know he was the one who blabbed, but . . . I guess I was too worried about Prongs to think about it at the time."

"Which means that he's been spying on our conversations. It's been months since I've slept with *either* of you." Mia looked up at the two wizards, ignoring when James made a face. "That means he's had this information for a while and has just been sitting on it until it became useful for some reason."

James chimed in, looking a bit more sober. "I don't think Pete would purposely—"

"Stop trusting Wormtail!" Mia yelled, angrily cutting him off.

"Mia, you're being a little—" Sirius began.

"No!" She stood up, furious. She could feel the way her eyes flashed amber and her hair sparked; all three boys stared at her cautiously. "Either one of two things happened. He overheard you two talking about having sex with me, or he actually *witnessed* it for himself by shifting around the dorms in his Animagus form."

When they did not give her the reaction she wanted, she added, "Which means that he's *seen* us having sex. He's seen *me* naked."

She almost smiled when she finally saw the flares of anger light within their eyes.

"That little . . ." Sirius began, clenching and unclenching his fists.

"You three deal with him, because if I have to be the one to do it, I'll feed him to Filch's cat!" Mia roared and turned on her heels, storming out the boys' dormitory and slamming the door behind her.

Silence filled the room for a brief moment before an echoing thud signalled that James had finally blacked out on the floor. Sirius let out a loud sigh of relief and walked over to the corner where James had stowed the two stolen wands. Sirius handed over the cypress wand to Remus, who took it gratefully and levitated James up into his bed.

Meanwhile, Sirius hissed in pain as he attempted a quick Healing Charm on his arm, wishing he could go to Madam Pomfrey to have it treated, but knowing he could not. How was he to explain having been stabbed by a bloody antler while in his own room?

Silently, they began to set the room back in order. There was not much they could do about the marks on the walls, but it was easy enough to repair the windows and curtains and clean the blood from the floors.

"We need to talk, Moony."

"Can it wait?" Remus sighed, collapsing into his bed once he adjusted his mattress.

Sirius ignored him. "Are you angry that I shagged Mia?"

"No," Remus replied after a long moment of silence. "I told you before when you told me what happened, I just . . . I'm not angry. I'm not."

Sirius made a disbelieving sound. "Remus."

"A little angry," Remus conceded in frustration, "but I've no right to be. I'm not upset with you or her, just—"

"The whole werewolf mate thing?"

Remus nodded. "It should have been her. She's perfect in every way except . . . except that."

"Yeah." Sirius nodded and sat down on the foot of Remus's bed, running a hand through his hair in discontentment. "It must suck to feel like you have no choice in who you end up with." He said the words to Remus, knowing that he was *really* talking to himself. Dorea telling him about the Soul Bond had put him in a state of confusion and stress.

"If I end up with a mate at all," Remus complained. "It's rare. Beyond rare. I haven't met many wolves in my life, but my dad has. None of them has ever found their mates."

"What if you had a choice?" Sirius asked.

"I don't."

"Fuck that." Sirius stood, glowering. "You say you don't think you'll ever find your mate, so you're content to just let yourself be alone for the rest of your life?"

"I'm not alone," Remus retorted. "Clearly, I can't even get a moment to myself with *you* around. Really, I'm fine. I have friends. I have you, Wormtail, Prongs, and Mia."

"And when she doesn't want to fuck you anymore?" Sirius challenged, his tone dark and bitter.

Remus reacted immediately by sitting up and growling, his eyes sharp and flashing gold. "That's not a problem. We haven't . . . Not in a long time. You shouldn't worry about me. Worry about you and Mia . . . And probably Prongs, considering what happened tonight."

Sirius fumed. "I *am* worrying about Mia. Remus, she loves you."

Remus shook his head. "Not like that."

"Yes like *that*. You love *her*, right?" he asked, staring ahead while Remus looked away, his now green eyes drawn to a spot on the floor. Sirius would have thought that

Remus was petrified had he not been able to see the way his shoulders moved as he took in slow, deep breaths. "Answer me, Moony!"

"Of *course* I love her!" Remus stood and stared icily down into Sirius's face. "I've been in love with her for years, but it doesn't matter!"

"It fucking *should*! You didn't have a choice to become a werewolf; you *should* have a choice in who you bloody seal your life to! You're able to defend your past relationship with her against her brother." He gestured to the unconscious James on the bed, who was already snoring. "Why aren't you willing to fight for her?"

"Because it's pointless," Remus admitted angrily. "It doesn't matter how I feel or what I want because being a werewolf took that choice away from me."

"Then take it back!" Sirius kicked the trunk at the foot of Remus's bed in anger.

Remus raised a brow. "Why are you forcing this? Don't *you* want her? Or was she just some piece of—"

Sirius clenched his fists. "Finish that sentence, Moony, and I'll break your fucking jaw."

"Then explain."

Sirius took in a deep breath and moved across the room, plopping down on his bed and pressing his palms into his eyes in frustration. "I want her happy and safe. She's not safe with me, and it's my . . ." He paused and then corrected himself. "It's *our* job to make sure she's safe and happy."

Remus sighed. "Sirius—"

"So I'm forcing the issue because I want to make her happy, and she was happy with *you*. If she and I end up together in the end . . ." He frowned, wondering if that was even a possibility. Soul Bond or not, they were in the middle of a war, and he had a target on his back. "I will *always* wonder if it's because she wanted you but didn't think she had a choice, and she'll wonder that too."

"She wouldn't get back together with me." Remus shook his head. "She made her decision."

"You didn't give her a choice," Sirius said, narrowing his eyes. "You told her you had a mate out there somewhere, and she did the honourable thing by stepping out of the way."

"Actually . . ." Remus cleared his throat, flushing pink. "We were still . . . I mean, we weren't dating or anything, but we were still together. For months afterward. We both just figured we might as well be together—physically—until *I* found my mate or until *you* pulled your head out of your arse."

"Well, you're still lacking a mate, and my head feels pretty stuck. So why aren't you together? What's with the bullshit about sleeping together if you're not going to date her? You only do that if you're shagging other people, and I know the two of you were exclusive up until . . . until that shit with Snivellus."

Remus shrugged. "Seemed less messy."

"For you or her?"

"Both."

"Fix this, Remus," Sirius said, feeling a little sick inside even as a weight from his shoulders lifted. "You deserve each other. You at least deserve a chance to find out for yourselves instead of taking the easy way out by saying that you're already bloody bonded to someone else. Plus," he added with a heavy sigh, looking across the room, "it'll probably keep Prongs off both of our backs if you at least attempt to make an honest woman out of her."

Remus chuckled. "Believe it or not, I'm a little more afraid of Mia than I am Prongs right now."

Sirius smirked. "That's because *you're* the smart one."

## Chapter Fifty-Six

### *Amortentia*

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*It's not a walk in the park  
To love each other  
But when our fingers interlock,  
Can't deny, can't deny you're worth it  
'Cause after all this time I'm still into you  
(Still Into You - Paramore)*

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**September 8th, 1976**

Mia's week had not been the best.

After learning about her secret sex life with Remus and Sirius, James could scarcely look her in the eye. The three Marauders involved were back on speaking terms at last, especially after joining forces to literally beat the truth out of Peter. He admitted to having once walked in on Remus and Mia in the dorm room, and then overhearing Sirius talking to Remus about their one-night affair over the summer. Peter walked away with a black eye and a three-month ban on the Shrieking Shack. In addition, Sirius threatened him into supplying the common room with as much butterbeer as they could sneak in through the Honeydukes passage.

James was quiet around Mia—mostly due to embarrassment over his own behaviour—but Sirius and Remus were behaving differently as well, and *that* she had not expected. Both knew of her relationship with the other, but something must have happened the night James found out, and each was acting strangely in her presence because of it.

Sirius was oddly quiet and constantly looking between Mia and Remus as though he were searching for something important. Remus, on the other hand, was wildly distracted by whatever occupied his thoughts. For the first time in five years, he forgot how Mia took her tea, and accidentally put raspberries instead of blueberries on her porridge—something that the entire table noticed with wide eyes and loud gasps as though someone had just shouted a Killing Curse.

It took Mia cornering Remus outside of Defence Against the Dark Arts for him to finally break down and admit that, a week earlier, Sirius had trapped him into an uncomfortable conversation and brought up some confused feelings regarding her.

She pulled as much truth out of him as she thought possible but still felt like he was holding something back. She blamed the approaching full moon and then promised to meet him outside the Whomping Willow later that night. She still had afternoon Advanced Potions with Lily and also needed to visit Sirius in the hospital wing where he had been taken after a group of seventh year Slytherins attacked him outside of the Quidditch locker rooms.

"What are you trying to accomplish, Sirius Black?" Mia demanded as she stormed into the infirmary, eyes narrowed at him lounging on the hospital bed as though he did not have a care in the world. A few books were stacked on the table to his left, though he was using a fairly large one as a makeshift desk to write on.

"Transfiguration essay." Sirius gestured to the parchment. "I know, I know. *I* think it's stupid too. I don't even know why I'm still taking it. I'm a bloody Animagus. How much better can a person *get* at Transfiguration? I could probably *teach* the fucking class if I wanted to."

"Sirius!"

He looked up at her innocently. "Yes, love? What has your knickers in a tw—" His lips pursed and then closed, likely due to the look on her face. Instead, he distracted her by pointing to the bruises just below his throat that were slowly developing. "Is this about the broken clavicle? Because I promise you, the other guys look worse. At least they did before I blacked out."

Mia frowned as she looked him over, sighing when she felt a twinge of guilt. "That's not why I came to yell at you, actually."

Was she really here to scream at Sirius when he had just been attacked by potential Death Eaters?

Yes.

Yes, she was.

Glaring at him, she put her hands on her hips and ploughed ahead. "Though, I'm angry that you're not properly reporting this. How are they going to punish the students

attacking you if you won't tell Dumbledore what's going on? The headmaster can't possibly believe that rubbish story about you falling off your broom. You're one of the best flyers."

"I'm not telling because I'm not a coward who's willing to put my problems on someone else's shoulders," Sirius admitted, not meeting her eyes as he put his attention back on his essay. "Besides, Prongs and Wormtail are working out a few details for me."

Mia suddenly became worried. "Working out a few details" always meant "planning something horrible" in Marauder-speak. No one ever wanted to find themselves on involved in whatever details were being worked out.

"Don't even tell me what they're going to do unless it's particularly painful." Shrugging, she fought not to roll her eyes when she added, "In which case, I can help . . . *a little*. They *did* break your clavicle, after all."

She should have felt guilty for wishing physical harm on anyone, but Mia Potter was a very different person from Hermione Granger. However, even Hermione had gotten a fantastic rush of adrenaline when she punched Draco Malfoy in the face third year. Mia wondered if *that* had been the crack in the dam that let open the floodgates of her—as Dorea would call it—latent Slytherin traits. Thus far in her new timeline, she had already physically assaulted more Slytherins than she'd ever done in the 1990's.

"So, did you come just to yell at me over getting injured? Because that's a little cold, even for you." Sirius kept at his essay with a determined expression, but she could see the hint of a smirk on his face.

"No," she said, growling as she remembered why she *had* come to the infirmary in the first place. "Remus is my best friend and tells me everything. I *know* you tried to convince him to get back together with me, and I want to know why."

Sirius scoffed, using his quill to end a sentence with particular gusto. "Remus doesn't tell you *everything*."

"What? Of *course* he does."

Sirius put his quill down as though he were preparing for this to be a long argument. She really hoped it would not be. "So, you're aware that he's still in love with you?" he asked with a knowing look on his face.

Mia's lips parted in surprise, not having expected that. Her cheeks warmed over at the implication that Remus's feelings were stronger than she had been led to believe;

perhaps back when they had dated, but certainly not after he discovered that she was not his mate.

"Don't be ridiculous. He loves me the same as I love him, nothing more."

"Well, *that* I do believe."

She narrowed a glare at him. "Just what is *that* supposed to mean?"

Sirius crossed his arms over his chest—obviously holding back the wince of pain the motion caused, all for the sake of looking self-righteous and smug when he said, "You and Remus are in love with each other, and the only reason you broke up was because of some ridiculous thought that fate is fucking with your love lives."

Her jaw tightened in response to his words. "There is sufficient evidence on the subject of werewolf mates and—"

"I'm not talking about Remus, Mia. I'm talking about *you*. About *you* and *me*." She paled at his words and inhaled sharply. At her startled reaction, he continued, "Oh? Nothing to say on *that* subject?"

*Bugger.*

She swallowed with great difficulty, her growing anxiety clinging to the inside of her throat. His stare was hard and cold and reminiscent of the look he had given her the moment he saw the scar on her ribs. The look that said he knew she had hidden something—knew that she was lying to him.

"Your *mum* had plenty to tell me."

*Shit.*

"Like how we somehow provoked a bloody Soul Bond."

*Fuck!*

"And you've been keeping *it*, and I'm guessing a thousand other fucking things, a secret from me."

The normally soft and humorous Sirius was gone, and in his place was the cold wall that reminded her far too much of Draco. It only further proved that, as much of a Gryffindor as Sirius was, he was still a Black.

Though, technically, wasn't *she* as well? In the few interactions with people who had known Dorea Potter née Black, whether as a student at Hogwarts or in her adult years, not one had failed to mention how much Mia reminded them of her mother.

"She shouldn't have told you that," she whispered when Sirius continued to glare at her, waiting for a response—which she assumed he thought should have been an apology. How would that conversation even begin? *Sorry I lied to you, Sirius, but to be honest, I'm lying about everything, including my own name, how we really met, what the future has in store for you, and the very real possibility that if I ever make it back to my own timeline, you'll hate me because I let you get arrested after being framed by one of your best friends, who let your other best friends get murdered.*

"Why?" Sirius asked.

"Because I didn't want you to feel forced into anything with me," she blurted out, feeling her old insecurities creeping in. She remembered her first kiss with an older Sirius Black. There had been passion and love that she had felt behind his actions, and the fact that she had been unable to concentrate enough on them because she was so worried all his feelings were due—at least in part—to the mysterious bond she created between them. A bond that somehow extended over time and still existed here in 1976.

"I can't want the same thing for you?" Sirius shook his head and expelled a breath of utter disbelief. "Fuck, Mia, you think Divination is rubbish, but you're willing to buy into this Soul Bond thing so easily?"

She glared at him, ready to inform him that Divination *was* rubbish, but the Soul Bond was clearly very real. She felt it. When they made love, she had *felt* it, had almost seen it with her own eyes, and apparently, he *hadn't* felt the same thing.

"Don't look at me like that, I'm not saying it to hurt you. You know how I—" He hesitated and squirmed a bit in his bed, clearing his throat. "You know how important you are to me. I could never hurt you, and it's not just because of some bloody bond."

She looked away from him—forcing thoughts of the future and an older Sirius Black from her mind—and whispered, "It's more complicated than that."

"Explain it to me then," he demanded.

"Learn Occlumency," she countered impatiently.

"No," Sirius replied, frustration narrowing his eyes. "Stop it with the bloody Occlumency bullshit. For the record, I've been trying, but it's hard to do without a proper Legilimens to test your barriers. That's not the point. You've bought into this Soul Bond thing with blind faith, and you say it's more complicated but won't tell me why. You've taken away my choice *and* yours in the matter."

"I haven't taken *anything* away from you." A part of her wanted to tell him she saved his life and the bond was the result. Shove it in his stupid, smug, pretty face.

"You deserve *Remus*." Sirius heaved a deep sigh. "You love *Remus*."

"I'm not arguing that, but, what if . . . what if, I love you too?"

Silence fell between them. Instead of a stubborn, angry standoff, each was trying to read the other. Mia wondered if he believed her—that she *did* love him. She knew he struggled with emotions like that, especially when it came to her.

Sirius finally broke the silence in frustration, muttering, "Then you should figure that out before you just accept a Soul Bond. It's not fair to either of us or to Remus. The two of you were happy and in love. Then the whole werewolf mate thing happened, and you both gave up. Am I wrong in assuming that our bond had a hand in it too?"

"No."

"Then go back. Fix it, and be with Remus."

She groaned, pushing her fingers through her hair in frustration. Why couldn't any of them just learn Occlumency? She knew she could not tell them about the war or the deaths or Azkaban, but she would be able to tell them about Tonks at the very least—even if it was not by name—and the whole werewolf mate issue would be over with.

"I can't do that. Sirius, I've accepted that you and I—"

"I haven't! I've had my whole life decided for me, and the fucking Sorting Hat was the first time I've ever been given a choice in anything!" His grey eyes turned the dark colour of slate, speckled with silver. "I barely escaped my own family trying to force me into servitude to a Dark wizard, and I'm pretty sure they're not just going to let that go. I'm not going to put you in danger now, and I refuse to accept another thing in my life without having a choice, Mia. I will *never* allow our bond to be sealed without you knowing for certain that it's me and not Remus. Him thinking he has a mate out there somewhere isn't good enough proof for me."

Mia glared at him. "So what? You expect me to date someone just to placate you?"

He had a point, of course, and she felt guilty. Just a month after being attacked by his own family, who tried to force his hand in something so life altering, Dorea had let him in on the Soul Bond secret and made him believe something else was pushing him without his permission. She understood. Still, it was difficult to tell Sirius Black he was right, especially when he used that pissy tone of voice with her.

"No. I expect you to date Remus because he's good for you. Because you're good for him, and because you love each other. I expect you to be smart and not just accept things at face value. You would never say a spell, cast a charm, or drink a potion without first knowing what it was. I expect you to treat your heart—and mine and Remus's by extension—with the same intent." He spoke very clearly, so she knew this was not about him trying to protect her, or sacrifice his own happiness for someone else. Sirius was often good about taking care of his friends when he put thought into it and didn't act recklessly.

"I don't want to hurt you. I don't want you to see me and Remus, and—"

"Mia, considering how I've treated you in the past, it wouldn't be anything I didn't have coming," Sirius interrupted. The image of Marlene McKinnon entered her mind, and she felt a twinge of unpleasant anger dig its way into her belly. "It wouldn't hurt me. Your safety and happiness come above my own. Take that as the highest compliment, because there are literally less than a handful of people who can claim first-hand knowledge of my selfless moments."

"I'll . . ." She hesitated. "I'll think about it."

"Good." He gently scooted over and patted the side of his bed before picking his quill back up. "Now come, sit down, and help me with my essay."

The anger in the room vanished almost immediately, and she rolled her eyes at how quickly he was able to change the conversation. Had it not been in Sirius's nature to be able to naturally break tension, she would have assumed someone was trying to put the Imperius curse on her.

"I thought you said you were so brilliant that you could *teach* Transfiguration?"

He grinned deviously, which made her just a bit nervous. "I could absolutely teach that class, but I'm pants at altering charms, and I need your help. How can I create a delayed Permanent Sticking Charm? I want this to stick to McGonagall's desk the moment she grades it. That way she'll have a constant reminder of how brilliant I am."

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An hour later, Mia found herself in Advanced Potions sitting next to a focused Lily, who was putting all of her attention into her cauldron as she avoided the stare from a pair of black eyes across the room.

Mia glanced up and narrowed her eyes at Snape. "Want me to hex him for you?" she asked eagerly, remembering all too well how easily the word "Mudblood" had fallen from his lips. While she had eventually forgiven her *own* childhood bully—Draco Malfoy—that was *long* after he stopped being a vicious blood purist. Mia could not blame Lily for holding a grudge against Snape now.

"Just ignore him," Lily insisted, huffing when she added, "It'll piss him off more if we pretend he doesn't exist." Her lips then curled into a soft grin, and she chuckled. "Plus, if he doesn't stop by the end of class, I'm going to slip this Amortentia in his pumpkin juice."

"Wouldn't that just make him fall in love with you?"

"Then I'll dump *Belby's* Amortentia in his pumpkin juice," Lily primly corrected, and both girls struggled to fight back the bubbling laughter that arose within them.

"It's so funny that you try and make everyone think that you're so sweet and gentle." Mia rolled her eyes affectionately at her friend before turning her focus back on the simmering cauldron in front of her. "You, Lily Evans, are devious."

"You're just a bad influence. I was perfectly obedient before I ever met you and Mary. Now I read filthy romance novels, hex boys by the lake, and plot against Slytherins in Potions class. Speaking of Slytherins, how's Black?" Lily looked up from her cauldron, a frown of concern on her face. "I heard he got hexed pretty badly."

Mia's shoulders tensed at the mention of Sirius. "Yeah, I saw him before I came to class. It's getting out of control. First, everything that happened to him this summer, and now he has to deal with all of this?"

"Do you think You-Know-Who is behind it?" Lily whispered.

"Yes," Mia confirmed, taking only a beat before insisting, "*You* stay out of it." At her friend's indignant scowl, she shook her head, unshakable in her request. "I'm serious, Lily. Just be a good prefect and keep the fighting out of the corridors. You're a Muggle-born, and that automatically puts you at risk."

Lily eyed her with annoyance. "No more than a blood-traitor."

"Yes, more than a blood-traitor." Mia glowered and then glanced at Lily's cauldron, eager to change the subject. The potion had taken on a mother-of-pearl sheen and had steam spiralling up out of the pewter vessel. "Yours looks about done."

"Think it looks right?" Lily asked nervously.

"It's more about how it smells than looks. It'll smell differently to you than to anyone else. It should remind you of the things that attract you." Mia paused to look at her own potion, which was finally beginning to show the same pearly sheen across the top as Lily's.

Turning off the heat, she stopped stirring the liquid before her gaze drifted back to Lily, who was hovering over her cauldron, breathing in deeply and letting her eyes glaze over.

Lily exhaled, blinking slowly, pupils dilated. "I smell treacle tart," she grinned as she confessed. "And something outdoorsy, like orchard blossoms, and . . ." Her smile began to fade as she breathed in deeply again. "A . . . broomstick?" She paled, jumping away from her cauldron, bright green eyes wide.

Mia grinned at her friend. "I didn't know you liked treacle tart."

Lily blushed profusely. "I don't. I mean, I do, but it's not . . ."

Beaming, Mia breathed a sigh of relief as she realised that Lily Evans had somehow just figured out that, deep down, she had at least a mild attraction to one James Potter.

"What does *yours* smell like?" Lily inquired, obviously trying to change the subject.

"Parchment and grass," Mia said without smelling the potion. "I've smelled Amortentia before." She thought of her first encounter with it during her original sixth year when Harry had been using the Half-Blood Prince's book. Her eyes automatically drifted across the room to Snape, who was sitting at his station with his arms folded across his chest, looking bored while three phials of his finished potion sat next to a cleaned cauldron, the show off.

"Parchment and grass?" Lily asked. "That's all? Does that make sense to you?"

"Sometimes other smells get mixed in." Mia shrugged her shoulders thinking of firewhisky, leather, and tobacco. *Sirius*. "Smell it for me."

Lily raised a brow. "*You* don't want to?"

Mia shook her head. "I've been told recently that I should be making my own choices. I don't want a Love Potion to tell me what I'm attracted to."

"Sirius and Remus?" Lily probed knowingly.

"Sirius wants me to date Remus."

"That seems . . . *sensible* of him. Was he confunded?"

Mia laughed loudly, causing everyone in the room to turn and look at their table. She blushed and cleared her throat as she looked down, filling her phials with the completed Amortentia without bothering to smell it.

"No, he just thinks that, well, you know the whole werewolf mate thing?" she whispered discreetly, and Lily nodded. "Sirius thinks Remus and I used it as an excuse to break up."

"Did you?"

Mia shrugged. "Yes and no. It feels wrong of me to be with Remus when I know he'll eventually find his mate. Plus, I don't want to hurt Sirius."

"Is it wrong to *not* be with Remus over something he can't even control?" Lily challenged. "Or to lead Sirius on without him knowing for certain that you're not in love with his best friend?"

Mia glared at the redhead. "Have you been talking to Sirius?"

"No, but apparently it's obvious enough for even *Black* to pick up on. No one understood why you and Remus split. I don't think either of you were fair to one another over the breakup, and if Sirius is willing to let you go, then you shouldn't feel guilty about it. You're a good person, Mia, and I know you love them both."

Sighing, Mia corked the last phial and set it aside with the others so she could rest her arms on the table. "Isn't *that* the problem?"

"Yes, so fix it." Lily licked her thumb and adjusted the label on one of her phials, squinting as she repositioned it before gently tapping it once with her wand to keep it in place. "Pick one and put your all into it. Then, if it doesn't work out, you'll have no doubts. I'd suggest picking Remus since it was Sirius who brought the whole thing up to begin with."

Mia smirked knowingly at her friend. "I think you just want more details of my private life."

Lily straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. She waved her wand over her cauldron, vanishing the rest of the potion. "I will not acknowledge that accusation. Nor will I admit to borrowing one of Mary's non-Muggle romance novels where the main heart-throb happens to be a werewolf."

"Liar," Mia said with a chuckle and began cleaning up her own station.

"I *am* curious about something, though," Lily whispered after clearing her throat. "Do werewolves really bite . . . during . . . you know?" Her cheeks pinked, and she gestured to her shoulder.

"They do bite to mark, yes."

When Lily's eyes widened, Mia pulled her blouse to the side, revealing the unblemished skin of her shoulder. She laughed when her friend sighed, looking mildly disappointed.

Mia adjusted her blouse again, smiling. "Except, it's a myth that werewolves mark their mates on the *shoulder*. *Mates* get bitten on the hips or thighs." Lily's eyes automatically looked south, and Mia shook her head. "If you want me to undress, you're looking at the wrong Potter, Evans."

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Mia left the dungeons after Potions and made her way up the staircase toward the library after checking the Marauder's Map to locate Remus. She did not want to admit it, but Sirius and Lily were right. She and Remus had left things up in the air when they had broken up.

Mia had done it because she knew the future: knew that Remus would find Tonks and have Teddy, and that his life would be happy once he found his mate. She knew that she and Sirius had a Soul Bond, and in the future that meant something to him still. He had taken care of her while on the run, sleeping in her bed—even if it was as Padfoot—rescuing her from Bellatrix, saving her from drowning, and kissing her soundly in the caved-in passage in the heat of battle. She knew it all.

Still, Sirius and Remus did not know any of that now, and Sirius was right: it was not fair. Not only had fate somehow taken away their choices by giving Remus a mate and Sirius a Soul Bond, but Mia had taken away their choices by knowing the future and not telling them. They needed proof. She would give them proof by doing exactly what Sirius wanted and following Future Remus's letter.

*Enjoy your life.*

"Hey," she greeted Remus when she found him in the back of the library.

He was sitting at a table by himself, between the Arithmancy and Alchemy sections. She beamed a little when he smiled up at her, noticing the quill in his hands was a little shaky. The full moon was later that night, which meant she knew Remus was on edge. She sat down quickly at his side and reached out with her hand, covering his and lowering it to the table with a soft smile.

"Sorry." Remus frowned, pulling his hand away from hers to set his quill down and crack his knuckles. "Jittery. Haven't had a chance to go for a run since the weather's not that great. Now I'm all . . . bottled up. I thought we weren't going to meet up until almost moonrise?"

"I spoke to Sirius."

Remus averted his gaze. "What did he say?"

"You *know* what he had to say," Mia said, brandishing her wand and waving it several times in the air, casting a non-verbal Silencing Charm as well as her famous Slytherin common-room-worthy Notice-Me-Not Repelling Charm. While Remus was distracted by her spell work, she scooted closer to him and whispered, "You've been keeping things from me."

"I don't know what I'm supposed to say. We talked . . . talked about the whole mate thing, and then there's you and Sirius, and I—"

"Do *you* think you and I gave up?" she asked him point-blank. "That we took the easy way out because we felt like we didn't have a choice?"

Remus frowned and closed his eyes. "I *don't* have a choice."

"If you *did*?" Mia inquired and watched as Remus swallowed.

He breathed in deeply through his nose. "I'd choose you."

She watched him carefully as her vulpine senses took control of her; apparently, her human ones were missing what had been right in front of her face this whole time. She could see his heart beating against the pulse point on his neck, she could hear the way his breathing deepened as he inhaled, and she could smell the very moment her scent triggered something deep inside of him.

It caused an old, familiar arousal. His response made her grin, feeling empowered.

His eyes were still closed when Mia reached her hand beneath the table and rested her palm against his thigh. He flinched at the touch, eyes opening to look at her with a

question behind them, and Mia answered by inching her fingers until she felt a familiar hardened outline beneath his trousers.

"Oh, fuck." Remus sucked a breath in through clenched teeth. He shifted his hips in response, leaning forward and pressing his forehead into the *New Theory of Numerology* text he had been reading.

Mia grinned at his swearing, having always enjoyed the fact that she could so easily bring him to foul language when Remus generally reserved such things for angry outbursts.

She gave a throaty chuckle at how quickly she had brought Remus to his knees—or the table, as it were. It was another type of magic she relished perfecting, being the overachiever that she always was. She unbuckled his trousers, and Remus's eyes widened, his body stiffening at her movements, but not stopping her.

"Mia . . . Mia we should . . ." Remus moaned as her fingers dipped beneath the fabric, immediately grazing over skin. "We need . . ."

"To stop?" Mia suggested.

"No?" he whined, clearly trying to focus his way through a moral dilemma.

She pulled her hand away to give him clarity. "I think Sirius was right."

Remus brought his head up from the table and stared at her, his soft green eyes wide.

"We gave up too soon. I don't get to change anything. Bad things are going to happen—have been happening. I feel utterly helpless. I want to be able to at least control—or have a choice in—*this*." She gestured to the space between the two of them. "So, I think Sirius was right, but Merlin help you if you ever let him know I said that."

Remus smiled softly and reached for her hand, taking it gently within his own. "I thought we had a rule to not talk about Sirius when we were naked."

Mia smirked. "Planning on getting naked?"

"This counts." He grinned at her in a near predatory sort of way. His eyes flashed gold as he brought her hand back to the tent of his trousers, then closed his eyes as she eagerly sought him out again, encouraged by the way his mouth fell open.

Wrapping her hand around his length, Mia felt a surge of power flow through her. She watched his eyes clench shut when she squeezed and stroked him from base to tip, running the pad of her thumb against his already weeping head.

Remus breathed in quickly and thrust his hips upward against her palm, taking his lower lip between his teeth.

"Is this good?" Mia whispered.

"So good. I missed you."

"I missed you . . . and this," she admitted as she gave another short squeeze and watched with amusement as he bucked against her again.

"Never thought—*Oh*—that you'd be okay with—*Mmm*—doing this in the library." He panted in between strokes, licking his bottom lip.

The action distracted her, and Mia leant forward, still moving against him as she took his bottom lip into her mouth and shivered at the familiar, comforting taste of him.

Remus moaned against her lips, letting his tongue delve into her mouth, his hand reaching up and cupping the back of her head.

"Is this a fantasy of yours?" she asked with a grin as she broke the kiss.

Remus exhaled against her lips. "One of many."

"Tell me."

"Mmm-mmm," Remus replied, shaking his head as a flush covered his neck.

"No?" she whispered against the shell of his ear. "Maybe I should guess?" She grinned when she felt him silently nod his head. "Okay, I bet that you have a fantasy playing out in that beautiful head of yours right now where you grab and bend me over this table."

Remus groaned at the words and thrust against her again.

"No? What about the shelves. So many shelves, Remus. Do you imagine picking me up and pinning me to them?" she asked, her tone sultry. "Do you want to take me hard against the Advanced Transfiguration section and fuck me until your knees give out?"

Remus growled deep in his throat and leant forward, burying his face in the crook of her neck just as he came in her hand.

Reaching quickly for his wand, Remus cast a quick "*Scourgify!*" on the scene before looking up and taking her face in his hands. He grinned and kissed her hard and deep, pulling away to chuckle. "You have a filthy mouth. Sirius has been a bad influence on you."

"Want to go shout at him?" Mia asked, her cheeks red and her own arousal overwhelming as she stared deeply into his hungry eyes.

"Shout?" Remus laughed. "I'm going to send him a gift basket from Honeydukes! Just maybe *after* we visit the shelves of Advanced Transfiguration."



## Chapter Fifty-Seven

### *Intent*

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*She says I smell like safety and home  
I named both of her eyes "Forever" and "Please don't go"  
I could be a morning sunrise all the time, all the time yeah  
This could be good, this could be good  
(She Keeps Me Warm - Mary Lambert)*

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**September 9th, 1976**

Mia's eyes opened slowly as sunlight broke through the boarded up windows of the Shrieking Shack. Despite there being a bed in the other room, she found herself on the floor in what would have been a sitting room, had it been a real house and not the condemned building it was. She yawned and let her muscles stretch out, jumping only slightly at the feel of a warm, naked body behind her, pressed up hard against her own.

She smiled as she felt Remus's lips brush over her bare shoulders, then down her arm and over her ribs. He stopped when he reached her hip, letting his teeth graze against the skin.

A shiver ran through her at the implication of his movements. Mia knew werewolf mating habits because she had read up on them so much, plus Tonks had been just as bad as Ginny when it came to girl talk, and had once shown Hermione her mating scars during a post-war drinking celebration.

Remus might not have known what the simple action of his teeth against her skin meant, but Mia knew that *Moony* did, which was why she was not surprised in the slightest when instead of biting down on the flesh of her hip, Remus pulled his teeth away and left behind a sweet, open-mouthed kiss on her skin. It did not bother her much; Mia knew that Remus would never mark her as his mate—Moony would not let him even if he tried. Still, a part of her felt it would make everything easier. *No*. She could not think like that; she needed to forget about the future in order to think logically and focus on the here and now as she had decided.

*Live your life. Enjoy your life.*

*Sort out your life*, Mia added thoughtfully.

Remus continued to kiss along the skin of her hip, and she imagined he was doing so to apologise for the bruises he left behind from fucking her so roughly the night before, despite her insistence that she strangely enjoyed looking at them. There was something thrilling and almost comforting in the feeling of being possessed in such a way, yet not coming across as a possession. Remus had captivated every part of her, and the memories were lulling her into a blissful euphoria.

*They had not even made it the whole way through the underground passage to the Shrieking Shack before Mia pushed Remus to the ground to straddle his waist. The pair tore at one another's clothing in an absolute frenzy of need and want. They took in every look, every action, every noise from one another and basked in them all.*

*His fingers gripping tightly at her hips as she rolled them against him. Her breath hot on his cheek, whispering filthy words of his hunger for her and her arousal for him. His mouth sliding over her lips, across her jaw, and down her neck, taking in the taste of her skin. Her nails digging into the already overly sensitised skin of his chest, which caused him to buck his hips up against her and then tear away the bits of fabric that separated them.*

*Mia moved slowly down him, impaling herself on his length, and the two groaned together at the reunion of their bodies. Remus sat up and pulled her body flush against his own. As her legs wrapped around his waist, they stilled in the moment of their joining, kissing deeply and wordlessly expressing apologies to one another for waiting so long and being unbelievably ignorant in regard to their breakup.*

*It was not long before Mia was shaking with the need to move, her body craving friction, and her hips circling in his lap, plucking the most savoury and primitive sounds from deep within his chest that drove her crazy—pushing and pulling her in every direction. She dragged out each and every moment.*

*The moon in the distance was preparing its ascent into the sky, and, as much as they wanted to linger on the precipice of absolute rapture, they were both determined to have at least one more go before he transformed.*

*Planting his feet firmly on the ground beneath them, Remus used the leverage to thrust up into her hard and deep, eliciting a gasp from her mouth. He bucked into her with abandon, one hand on the ground to steady him while the other clenched the skin of her hip to hold her in place. Body shaking, lips quivering, and eyes clenched shut, she found her release through the increasing intensity, milking his from him with a shout.*

*An hour later, the werewolf watched with amusement as the little fox climbed the random pieces of furniture in the Shrieking Shack until she could sit on a high windowsill and stare out through the cracks*

*in the boarded up windows, gazing out at the moon as though it were suddenly something incredibly wonderful.*

"You're surprisingly awake considering it was a full moon last night." She whimpered a little when she felt his fingers lightly grazing against her knee, slowly ascending her thigh where he drew lazy circles against her leg. "Do you need me to heal anything?"

"All set," Remus said into the crevice where her hip met her thigh. "When I didn't show up in the infirmary this morning, Madam Pomfrey came to the Whomping Willow. She must not have been able to get through the wards you put up because she left all of my potions right outside."

Mia raised a brow at him questioningly as her eyes raked over his glorious body. "You walked all the way back to the Whomping Willow naked?"

Remus laughed. "No. I got dressed, then went down, grabbed my potions, and came right back."

"Where you got undressed again?"

"I'm incredibly optimistic after last night." He placed another kiss on her skin. "Besides, it's not like anyone else could get through your security wards."

"Can you blame me for wanting a little privacy?" Mia grinned, glad to see that his transformation had gone all right and that the potions had already taken effect. "After the temper tantrum Jamie threw last week, I wasn't about to let him in the shack last night. Especially, if he found out we came *well* before moonrise."

She let out a soft gasp when his breath ghosted over her navel, and she reached down to run her fingers through his sandy hair.

"Pretty sure Prongs would have figured it out, though, if he'd tried to enter." Remus winced at the thought but did not stop kissing his way across her stomach to the other side, reaching around her small body and turning her to grant him easier access as she hummed with approval.

Mia sighed. "I'll handle him."

Remus laughed softly. "I'm surprised the lads haven't hired a Curse-Breaker to tear down your wards."

"I'm sure by now Jamie is terrified of accidentally walking in on us." Mia snickered. "As for Sirius, if he was mended from that hex by the time the moon rose, I'm guessing he went back to the dorms to pout over not being able to play Animagus with us."

"And Peter?"

"If I find that little rat sneaking around to catch us having sex again, I will joyfully watch him strangle himself to death," she said through clenched teeth, still horrified by the fact that the nasty little snoop had not only spied on her and Remus having sex, but that he told her brother about it. "What we do in the privacy of our own dorms . . . or Room of Requirement . . . or shack . . . or—" She broke off with a laugh.

Remus grinned. "Or library."

"Or library," she agreed with a smile that softened when he rested his cheek against her breast, "is our own business and not for someone to watch."

Remus chuckled. "I wouldn't mind if people watched."

Mia noticed his eyes were still golden. She laughed and shook her head. "You're either incredibly smug with your performance, or have been hiding away some deep, dark fantasies that you've neglected to tell me."

"Maybe both." He shrugged, and she laughed loudly, leaning forward to kiss him.

When she released his mouth, he smiled at her, and suddenly, it was as though the whole world had fixed itself overnight. However, just as quickly as the smile came, it faded away and Remus sighed heavily. "Are you going to tell me?"

"Tell you what?" she asked with a frown.

In reply, Remus leant down and kissed the bottom edge of the purple scar that ran the length of her ribs.

Mia inhaled deeply out of worry, but the feel of his lips on her scar sent chills down her spine until heat began pooling again between her thighs. She closed her eyes, letting the feel of his body over hers warm her thoroughly and push the stress and worry out of her with force. "Do I have to?"

"No," Remus answered and crawled up her body, relaxing as he rested his head between her breasts. "We all have the right to our secrets. I wish you would tell me, though. That's a Dark scar, and it's only been a few months since I last saw you naked, which means it's recent."

Mia muttered, "I hate it."

*Hermione's head pounded, and her muscles ached more than ever before. The room was pitch black and smelled of potions, and she assumed that meant she was in the hospital wing back at Hogwarts. If she was here, though, something had gone terribly wrong. She tried to remember, but it was only coming back in blurred images. She remembered leading Umbridge—that ugly pink toad in the form of a witch—into the Forbidden Forest, then there were thestrals and a long trip where she kept her eyes shut the entire way.*

*The Ministry of Magic. She remembered they had gone to save Sirius. Harry had a vision that was not really a vision, but they had not known it at the time. She remembered a large, circular room with many doors. Another room full of brains in a large tank, and yet another with Time-Turners that had all been broken during the scuffle with Death Eaters. Death Eaters! They had been attacked by Death Eaters in the Room of Prophecy.*

*Hermione remembered being separated from the others, but she knew that Neville and Harry had been beside her. A Death Eater found them hiding in a room. She had not been fast enough, and when they attacked, she had not been prepared. She remembered silencing one to prevent him from giving away their position to the others, and Harry had subdued another with a Body-Binding Curse. Then she remembered the silenced Death Eater had stood and glared at her with a hate she had never seen before. She saw purple flames, felt a sharp pinch in her side, and then nothing.*

*Clearly, she had survived, but what about the others? She tried to let her eyes adjust to the darkness, but, still, couldn't see anything. She did, however, feel movement beside her bed, and only then did she notice that her hand was being held between two large palms.*

*"Harry?" Hermione mumbled quietly, her throat dry and hoarse. She felt the hands around her own hold her tighter.*

*"Hermione?"*

*"Professor Lupin?" she replied, surprised at the sound of his voice. At her words, he let her go, and she thought she heard him sigh. "What happened? Can you cast a Lumos? I don't know where my wand—"*

*"No," Lupin whispered. "It's . . . It's better that it's dark. You've been unconscious for several days, and . . . and the light could be painful."*

*She wondered if he was lying. He seemed to be choking on a few of his words, and she heard him sniffle twice. He had been crying and did not want her to see.*

*Hermione frowned and began to panic. "Professor, what happened? Where's Harry?"*

*"Harry is fine," he promised her. "Safe at least. The Order arrived at the Ministry in time. Well, none of you were . . . Some were injured, but you, Neville, Ron, Harry, Ginny, and Luna made it back."*

*"What happened to me?" Hermione was finally able to ask, now that she knew Harry and her friends were safe.*

*"Not sure." He cleared his throat. "You were hit with a powerful curse. Neville and Harry mentioned that the Death Eater who threw it had been silenced. We think you survived because of it."*

*The words sounded painful to him as he spoke them, and Hermione could not help but feel guilty for it. She wondered if he felt embarrassed by her actions. He had been the best Defence Professor she'd ever had, and somehow she allowed herself to get cursed.*

*"Can I see it?" Hermione asked and waited for him to reply, but he did not speak.*

*About a minute later, he wordlessly lit the end of his wand and handed it to her. Hermione stared at the wand, wondering if a professor—or any adult ever—had so willingly just handed over their wand to her. A wand was something sacred to a witch or wizard; their wands chose them. Staring at Lupin's wand so willingly held out to her, trustingly held out to her, she delicately took it and tried to smile at him, but noticed that his face was turned away from her. She realised that he had looked away to afford her some privacy as she was not properly dressed aside from bandages that wrapped around her chest all the way down her ribs.*

*She winced as she reached the bottom of the bandages, pulling at them lightly so that she could see the scar that had been left behind. She frowned at the sight of the thin purple line that—deeply—dissected her torso, surrounded by paling yellow bruises. Her breath caught, and she whimpered at the sight of her disfigurement, proof that she had not been quick enough, strong enough, or powerful enough.*

*"They're just scars, Hermione." Lupin cleared his throat again, but didn't turn to look at her.*

*"Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars."*

*Hermione smiled sadly. "That's beautiful."*

*"Khalil Gibran," he mumbled. "Poet."*

*"Wizard?"*

*Lupin took in a shaky breath. "Muggle."*

*"Professor, is there something you're not telling me?" Hermione inquired as she put her bandages back and pulled the bed sheet up around her chest. At her words, his shoulders began to shake, and she frowned at the sight of the strong man crying. She felt helpless as he sobbed quietly, his back to her. It was inappropriate, but she leant forward to pat his back consolingly.*

*He stiffened under her touch. "Sirius is dead."*

*She gasped, a cold sickness twisting in her gut. "No! Oh, no, is—Where's Harry? Oh God, Remus." She said his first name for the first time, not even noticing the faux pas. "Remus, I'm so sorry. He was your best friend and . . . Are you okay? I'm sorry, of course you're not—"*

*"Are you okay?"*

*She blinked in confusion before nodding. "I'll be fine. I'm more worried about you and Harry."*

*He paused, and his breath caught when he said, "I'm . . . I'm used to losing the people I love." Her heart broke for him. "But worry about Harry. I'll do what I can . . . It's my job now to take care of him."*

*"Mine too," Hermione whispered and frowned as he wept again.*

*Lupin nodded. "Our job."*

"It's just a scar, Mia," Remus said, pulling her from her memories as he kissed the mark again. "I've got plenty, and, if I recall, you once told me I was beautiful."

"You're more than beautiful, Remus." Mia bit her lower lip as she admired his body—scars and all—and threaded her fingers gently through his hair. "I will tell you about the scar, I promise. Just not today. It's important."

"All right. As long as you're okay."

Mia smiled affectionately. "Thank you for respecting my privacy," she said, giggling when he responded by leaning up to kiss her soundly. There was a large difference between how Remus acted upon seeing the scar and how Sirius responded to it, but Mia forced herself not to compare the two.

"Mmm. As much as I'd love to shag you again . . ." she declared with a grin, pushing gently against his chest, "you need rest and food, and we could both probably use a bath."

He beamed at her, and she laughed again.

"*Separate* baths. As lovely as the prefects' bathroom is—and I'm sure I'll eventually join you there again—people will be looking for the both of us, and I refuse to have Lily walk in on the two of us naked in a bathroom that I'm technically not even allowed in."

Remus smirked. "You told me that Lily knew about . . . us."

"She does, but frankly I'd like her to not know *everything*. Come on, get dressed."

Remus gave a low whine, and Mia smirked, ruffling his hair and enjoying the fact that the shaggy strands eventually fell back into place, unlike James, whose hair tended to take on a life of its own. She turned around to search for her clothing, and managed to get

back into her bra and knickers before large hands wrapped around her waist, pulling her tight up against a hard body.

"Are we really doing this?" Remus whispered against the shell of her ear, and she quivered at the feel of his hot breath. "Us? For real? All or nothing?"

She turned around and frowned up at him. "Never all or nothing, Remus. I will *never* lose you no matter what happens. So, maybe it's all or . . . or *almost* all."

She smiled, reaching up and brushing his bottom lip with her thumb, which he instantly captured between his teeth, a playful look in his eyes. She narrowed her own in response. "No. You need rest and food," she insisted with a laugh when he began to pout. "So, be a good *boyfriend*," she ordered, smiling at the word, watching as he mirrored her expression of familiar delight, "and listen to your *girlfriend*."

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They parted ways at the Whomping Willow, like normal, and slipped through secret passages in the castle in order to get to their destinations while avoiding their friends—most notably James, Sirius, and Lily—at all costs. Mia skived the one class she had that day, History of Magic, which she did feel slightly guilty over, but a hot bath was well worth the potential detention should Professor Binns even notice her absence, which was highly unlikely.

She and Remus met back up in the kitchens for lunch, avoiding the Great Hall entirely, before retiring to the Room of Requirement for a much-needed nap. When they woke hours later, it was time for dinner, and the two realised they could not hide forever—nor did they want to.

When they entered the Great Hall hand in hand, all eyes at the Gryffindor table turned and looked at them. Alice and Frank were smiling sweetly at the newly reunited couple. Lily and Mary looked positively beside themselves with excitement. James looked the perfect opposite—cross.

As Remus and Mia came to sit down across from the other three Marauders, Sirius smiled up at them knowingly and then held his hand out toward Peter, who placed a small stack of Galleons in it.

"You *bet* on this?" Remus eyed Sirius and Peter.

Mia rolled her eyes. "I'd consider that cheating since Sirius had inside knowledge."

Peter turned and glared at Sirius. "You *knew* they'd gotten back together?"

"No," Sirius said. "I knew they *would* get back together, hence the sudden profit of money. Speaking of money, though, Pete and I have another bet going. Prongs and I were locked out of a certain clubhouse last night. Any idea as to why? Because ten Galleons out of Peter's pocket says I have an idea."

Mia could hear James's teeth grinding together.

"Fess up," Sirius said with a grin.

"*You* were supposed to be in the hospital wing." Mia reached across the table in search of pumpkin juice, smiling when she felt Remus begin moving beside her, putting a biscuit on her plate.

"And *you're* avoiding the question, kitten. That's fine, though, I'll take that love bite on your neck as my answer." He pointed at the mark and then laughed when Mia gasped and brought her hand to her neck, casting a quick glare to Remus who turned his eyes downward as he flushed red, trying to hide the smirk on his face.

Sirius, ten Galleons richer, was beaming. She wanted to snap at him but remembered that he was the reason that she and Remus had reconnected, to begin with.

"You're okay with this?"

"Of course." Sirius nodded with a genuine smile.

Mia decided to believe him. It had been many years ago for her, but she was still insecure when it came to the jealousy issue in boys. Ron's hurtful words the night of the Yule Ball, and then his ridiculous little relationship with Lavender Brown, had made her think that anytime a boy did not get exactly what he wanted, a giant temper tantrum would await her. Instead, Sirius looked truly happy that she and Remus had taken the chance on a proper relationship.

James pouted bitterly. "*I'm* not okay with this. Not that anyone's bothered to ask me."

"That's because you don't *need* to be asked," Mia retorted, rolling her eyes. "It's *my* life, *my* relationship, and considering the fit you threw last week, you'll be lucky if I ever tell you anything again, James Potter. You get your temper controlled right now; I swear on your life, if you ever say the word 'maidenhead' again, I will hex you."

"Fine, I won't talk to *you*," James said irritably. He turned his eyes on Remus, who tried his best to sit up straight under the scrutiny. "Moony, I missed you last night," he said with a slightly threatening tone.

"I doubt he can say the same, Prongs." Sirius chuckled, and Peter snorted.

"Shut up, Padfoot." James scowled. "Care to explain yourself?"

Remus cleared his throat. "I won't need to."

"Oh, you *really* need to."

"Just . . . Just wait," Remus pleaded.

He let out a loud sigh of relief when there was a hoot from above, and a large, brown owl soared in through the windows. It flew over the Gryffindor table and straight to James, carrying a formal-looking, cream-coloured envelope with golden writing in its beak. There was a small, unbroken, crimson seal on the back of the letter, and many eyes were wide as they watched James carefully take the parcel from the bird.

"Is *that* what I think it is?!" Mary squealed.

Lily blinked in confusion. "What?"

James looked positively shocked, the previous scowl wiped from his face as he turned the envelope over in his hands, breaking the seal and removing the handwritten, official letter.

Alice and Mary were gasping at the sight while Frank and Peter looked wide-eyed and shocked. Sirius wore an expression of pride; he kept glancing across the table at a nervous Remus, who was purposely trying to keep his eyes focused on James despite the look of surprise Mia was giving him.

"Does someone want to explain to the poor, idiot Muggle-born what the hell is going on?" Lily snapped angrily at the rest of the table.

"That's a Letter of Intent!" Mary shrieked. "It's an old-fashioned pureblood thing men would send the parents of a girl they wanted to properly and publicly court. It's very formal and romantic and—"

"Completely unnecessary," Mia finished. She had researched pureblood customs, traditions, and old pureblood laws and magics years ago after being adopted by the Potters. In order to make her pureblood status believable, she wanted to know everything a proper pureblood witch would know.

"It's also binding," Alice whispered. "Remus has basically stated he'll take no other witches until Mia decides to cast him aside. Generations ago, that letter would have been considered a marriage proposal for her parents to consider."

The letter was not entirely a surprise to Mia, but the fact that it was from Remus had thrown her. Not only was he a half-blood, but in sending that letter so publicly, he had put his heart and pride on the line. If Mia stood up and said she wanted to marry him, Remus would be obligated to agree to it. She remembered how incredibly difficult the older Remus had been in accepting his own mate, Tonks. She had overheard an argument in the hospital wing the night Dumbledore died, during which Remus stated he could not be with Tonks because he was too old for her, too poor for her, and a werewolf to boot. Of course, they got over those little issues quickly and were married within weeks. Still, Mia felt guilty that Tonks had to fight for Remus, while she was apparently gifted his heart so easily.

"Ignoring the fact that this sounds incredibly archaic—if not slightly romantic," Lily said in a whisper, "why didn't he send one to her parents?"

"I did," Remus replied. "First chance I got." His eyes were still focused on James, who finished reading the letter and stood up, staring across the table at him. Remus followed suit.

"Then why is Potter reading the Letter of Intent?" Lily whispered, watching the scene as though it were a formal class on pureblood society.

"It's a gesture." Mia smiled as she watched James extend a hand to Remus. Remus let out a shaky breath and took James's hand, and James let a smile cross his face.

"Now that my honour is restored, can we eat?" The corners of Mia's mouth turned up in amusement as Remus and James retook their seats, ignoring the fact that every girl in the Great Hall was now eyeing Remus like he was the hero of one of Lily's ridiculous romance novels.

"All or almost all, right?" Remus grinned at her, and Mia laughed, throwing her biscuit at his face.

"I still don't see what the big deal is," Lily said. "I understand in older days that would have been the precursor to marriage, but *now*? From what it looked like, Remus passed James a note asking permission to date you, which he already did for a year."

"A Letter of Intent is about courtship," Mary explained, reaching across the table and snatching the letter away from James so she could look at it. "It means that neither

Remus nor Mia can engage in dating activities with anyone else while they're together. It also means that if they break up, it's permanent."

"Says who?" Lily asked.

"Society," Alice answered. "They could break it off again and get back together a year from now—again—but everyone here in the Great Hall saw that letter. Some of the purebloods would consider Remus to not be a man of his word, and Mia, well . . . they would not have good things to say. Depending on connections, it could derail their future career plans or marriage prospects if they treated the Letter of Intent frivolously."

Mary nodded, grinning as she read the letter before placing it back in the envelope and handing it to Alice. "Mia could have actually taken this letter and burned it, and Remus could never ask for her hand again if she denied him."

"Why do you think you've never gotten one from Jamie?" Mia asked Lily with a chuckle. "He knows you'd shred the thing, and then he'd never have another chance with you."

Lily scoffed. "He doesn't have a chance with me regardless."

Mia smirked as she saw the curiosity flash behind Lily's eyes. Ever since that Amortentia class, Lily had realised exactly what, or who, she was smelling behind the signature potion. If James *did* send her a Letter of Intent, Mia wondered what Lily's reaction would be.

## Chapter Fifty-Eight

### *Sweet Nothings*

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*This love is good, this love is bad  
This love is alive back from the dead  
These hands had to let it go free  
And this love came back to me  
(This Love - Taylor Swift)*

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**October 17th, 1976**

Remus's formal Letter of Intent was the most talked about piece of gossip floating around Hogwarts, and it remained so for weeks after the cream-coloured envelope was delivered to James Potter that early September evening. Everyone had something to say about the new public courtship between the seemingly-pureblood princess and the half-blood prefect.

James had quickly apologised for his rude behaviour toward Remus but continued his big brother stance. Sirius, abiding by his own rules in regard to Mia and Remus's relationship, stopped flirting with her—as often.

Charlus and Dorea sent an owl one week after receiving Remus's letter. Their response arrived by Balder, one of the family owls, who landed in front of Remus at breakfast and nipped his fingers once the envelope was removed. He nervously opened his letter, reading it silently while the Marauders and Mia watched with interest. Once he reached the end, he let out a loud sigh of relief and smiled, looking up at James.

"Thanks," he said quietly to his friend, and James nodded in response.

"What's he thanking *you* for?" Peter asked.

"I sent a quick letter home to Dad," James explained with a mischievous grin, glancing at Mia as he spoke. "Promised that if Remus behaved in an untoward manner with my sister, I'd find something extremely sharp and stab him in the ribs with it."

"Can we consider that promise fulfilled, or do I need to keep on guard?" Remus asked with a chuckle in his voice, clearly still a bit relieved over getting permission from her father to properly court Mia.

"Keep on guard, keep on your toes." James shrugged. "As long as you keep your paws to yourself, you and I won't have problems."

"If you keep your paws to yourself, you'll have problems with *me*," Mia cut in, turning narrowed eyes at her brother. "You can poke and prod all you want, Prongs, but I'm not afraid to bite; am I, Sirius?"

Sirius held up his forearm, which still bore scars from the first night of their Animagus transformation when she had bit Padfoot's front leg. "Maybe let them be for a bit, Prongs. Mia can take care of herself pretty well."

"Thank you." Mia smiled up at Sirius, who nodded to her. "Besides, if you're going to get in a huff over my dignity, maybe instead of worrying about Remus keeping his hands to himself, you should focus on someone *else* keeping their *eyes* to themselves." She glared across the table at Peter, who very quickly lowered his gaze.

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Surprisingly enough, the Marauders were the least of Mia's problems when it came to her new public relationship with Remus. The story of his old-fashioned gesture of courtship became a magnet to wayward witches, most notably the Ravenclaws who were neither friends with nor feared Mia—yet. Mary, Alice, and Lily did their best to keep the other House's girls at bay, but the other three Marauders began encouraging the flirtations because if there was anything funnier than a Ravenclaw acting like an idiot, it was an incredibly uncomfortable Remus.

Mia stumbled upon the boys in the library, early one Saturday, and was initially shocked to see Sirius, James, and Peter. Then she spotted a table in the back where a group of four Ravenclaws had surrounded Remus, who was doing his best to keep his nose buried deep inside an Ancient Runes book. She noticed how much he looked so very like his eleven-year-old self—terrified to be touched.

Three of the four girls, who were dressed in blue and bronze-lined robes that Mia thought were a little too tight for show, sat on either side of Remus. One actually perched herself on the table cooing at him for attention.

"You three enjoying the show?" Mia asked as she approached Sirius, James, and Peter, who were all grinning at the entertainment. Mary, Alice, and Lily stood beside her,

eyes narrowed at the flock of Ravenclaws that had—for all purposes—invaded Gryffindor territory.

"Absolutely, kitten." Sirius grinned, the end of an unlit cigarette hanging from his lips. "If I'd known the library was *this* much fun, I'd have started coming up here years ago."

"You're not bothered by this?" James asked his sister.

Mia huffed, snatching the cigarette from Sirius and tossing it into a nearby bin. "I'm bothered that Remus is being made uncomfortable. I'm bothered that Ravenclaws have a habit of touching things that don't belong to them." She was thrilled to see that Marlene McKinnon, at least, was not present.

Sirius laughed. "Remus is a *thing* now, is he?"

"Shut it. You know what I mean. Am I going to have to break this up by myself?" She put her hands on her hips and glared at the Marauders. "Or are you going to—?"

"Leave our friend to the wolves?" Sirius offered dryly.

"That's one way of putting it." She narrowed her eyes and turned on her heel, approaching Remus's table, sitting down across from him. She was followed by James, Sirius, and Peter. "Hello, love."

Remus dropped his book and pled for her help with wide eyes. She smiled at him and then turned her attention to the girls. "Is there something we can help you with? You all look terribly lost."

"We were just saying hello to Remus here," a blond Ravenclaw said. Mia recognised her as Callista Hitchins, one of the many girls who tried to poison Sirius with a love potion on Valentine's Day.

"Oh, what a coincidence! Well, Remus was just saying *goodbye* to *you*," Mia retorted with a cold smile.

Two of the other Ravenclaws gasped, and Mia rolled her eyes as she recognised them: Sophia Buckley and Mirabella Ellis, an additional two members of the Sirius Black Fan Club—they also happened to be members of the Cursed by Mia Potter Club.

"If you're here to try and slip him a love potion, you should know that he's smarter than that and, subsequently, smarter than *you*."

"He may be smart," Callista declared with narrowed eyes before gesturing at Mia and adding, "but he's clearly blind."

"I'd watch what you say, Hitchins." Mary glowered from behind Mia. "You wouldn't want to end up with 'Bitch' written across your face this time, eh slag?"

Callista, Sophia, and Mirabella all glared at the Gryffindor girls.

"Is that a threat, Macdonald?" Callista taunted, sounding hostile but not loud enough to wake the sleeping library matron despite the fact that her voice had risen several octaves.

"She doesn't need to threaten," Mia said calmly, purposely shifting her eyes to amber in a menacing way. "Try to manipulate, charm, spell, or poison *any* of my friends, and you'll have so much more to worry about than a few pustules."

"Honestly!" Callista scoffed. "Remus, I don't even know what you see in her!"

Remus was no longer looking uncomfortable; in fact, his eyes were flashing gold. He grinned as he reached across the table, taking Mia's hand within his own and running his thumb over her knuckles. "She walks in beauty, like the night. Of cloudless climes and starry skies." He brought her hand to his lips and kissed the tips of her fingers, ignoring the soft gasps coming from the Ravenclaws. "And all that's best of dark and bright, meet in her aspect and her eyes. Thus mellowed to that tender light, which heaven to gaudy day denies."

"Oh my goodness." Lily blushed and looked away from the couple as though she were intruding on an intimate moment.

"Mother of Merlin," Alice whispered, hand to her chest.

Mary grinned. "Holy shit."

"Fuck me." Sirius chuckled. "Good job there, Moony. If Mia ever sets you loose, *I* might just try to get a leg over." The wizards—sans a smug-looking Remus—burst into laughter.

"That was beautiful," Sophia cooed, her gaze lingering on Remus as she ignored the raucous happening behind her.

"If *anyone* other than Mia can tell me the name of the author," Remus began, turning green-again eyes on the Ravenclaws, "I'll reconsider my courtship with her."

All three girls paled, mouths agape, dumbstruck.

"No?" Remus challenged, waiting for them to answer. "Well, in that case, I'd appreciate being left alone with my friends and girlfriend. Thank you for the company," he said condescendingly. "It was very . . . enlightening."

The moment that the Ravenclaws left the library, Mia laughed and reached across the table to gently swat Remus on the side of the head with her free hand. "Quoting Lord Byron to me? That wasn't even trying."

"That was lovely, Remus." Lily smiled at her friend. "You're very lucky, Mia."

Mia grinned, lifting an eyebrow. "You should hear what he quotes to me when we're *alone*."

Almost immediately, James was at her side, forearms on the table as he leant over and stared at her. "Oh yeah? What exactly does Moony quote to you in private?"

"Arithmancy equations," Mia replied with a devious smirk as she turned her attention to her brother. "Why? What *else* would he say?" she asked innocently, and James furrowed his brow at her.

An ethereal voice interrupted their banter: "I thought it was quite lovely."

Mia looked up to see the fourth Ravenclaw girl standing nearby. She had waist-length blond hair, bright doe eyes, and a small smile on her face as she stared at the group. Lily and Mary took a defensive stance, but Mia shook her head at her friends.

"Hello, Pandora."

"Hello, Mia Potter," the sweet Ravenclaw said. "I wasn't certain that you knew my name, but I, of course, know yours." Mia could only chuckle softly in response. Luna was the very embodiment of her mother. Pandora sighed softly. "I wanted to apologise for my Housemates. I tried telling them that the two of you were in a courtship, but I don't think they heard me."

"That, or they ignored you," Mary pointed out.

"Oh." Pandora nodded thoughtfully as though it had not occurred to her. "Well, I just wanted to say 'sorry' on behalf of Ravenclaw, I suppose. We're not *all* bad, you know. And I promise I won't try to steal your boyfriend; he appears quite smitten with you."

Mia smiled, choking back the brewing nostalgia. "I appreciate the gesture. It's good to have at least one friend in Ravenclaw."

"Friends?" Pandora's smile widened. "Well, in that case, as a friend," she offered, turning to Sirius, "I'll do my best to make sure my Housemates don't try to slip love potions in your food anymore."

Sirius gave her a wary nod of thanks before looking to Peter and James with wide eyes. Mia knew that look—hell, she had likely given it to Luna on more than one occasion, thinking the girl mad.

"Oh, and you should really get the wrackspurts out of your head," Pandora said to James.

Mia fell over in a fit of giggles.

"Wrackspurts?" James raised a brow at her.

"Yes, they get in your head and can make your brain fuzzy. They seem to reproduce at an alarming rate when you're looking at . . ." Pandora's eyes drifted to Lily, who blushed at first and then glared at James.

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### **December 11th, 1976**

Mia held Remus tightly against her.

Locked within the confines of his four-poster bed, curtains drawn and charmed shut with a one-way Silencing Charm put on them, the two ravished one another during what was a rare moment alone. It was the last Hogsmeade weekend before the holidays, which meant most of the school was down in the village shopping for gifts. As for the Marauders, James had busied himself and Sirius with a last-minute Quidditch practice, and Peter had been urged to "get the fuck out or face dire consequences" by Remus. Left to their own devices, Remus wasted no time in throwing Mia onto his bed and divesting them both of their clothing.

He could not possibly get enough of the girl.

Prior to provoking the Pack Bond, moments of intimacy spent with Mia had left him aching, and not always in a good way. Certainly, their amorous activities wore him out physically, which often kept the wolf at bay near the full moon, but knowing that she was not his mate had his soul . . . itching for something he could never quite reach. Being with her had been a constant reminder that he could not have her the way he wanted, nor could he have whomever fate had apparently chosen for him.

After the pack had been formed, however . . . something was very different. Almost as though the bond had established her as one of his own, the wolf inside of him was delighted with the thought of being with her—and often. Instead of the empty need left behind when their bodies fell together in a pile of sweat-soaked skin and hot breath, Remus felt nothing but delicious ache and relief. In the back of his mind, the wolf was always there to remind him that this was temporary; once he found his true mate, he would not need this, want this, crave this the way he did now. No. He would crave something else—*someone* else—entirely.

However, Remus was fighting it—fighting for her, just as Sirius had told him to. *All or almost all*, they vowed, and he was putting everything he had into his relationship with Mia. It was why he sent that formal letter to her parents and brother. It was an unnecessary move, and he knew it, but he felt like he had something to prove. Mia was—at least for now—choosing him over Sirius. Choosing him, a half-blood werewolf, over a proper, noble, pureblood wizard with a pedigree longer than her own. Judging by the way the rest of the school treated him, Sirius was by far the better looking and more charming of the two. Remus had known Mia loved Sirius, and this last ditch effort for a relationship with her was just that: one last shot at happiness, and he was not willing to put anything less than his all into it.

Unfortunately, his public declaration had brought about trouble, and not only in the form of overbearing Ravenclaw girls who used Shrinking Charms on their skirts and robes. No, Remus could deal with the girls, knowing that if they had an inkling as to what he *really* was, they would run away screaming. His real trouble came in the form of a harshly worded letter from his father. It had taken a bit longer for rumours of Remus and Mia's relationship to reach Lupin Cottage; when it did, his father was none too pleased with Remus's willingness to draw so much attention to himself.

Remus was just thankful it had not been a Howler.

*"How bad?" Mia frowned as Remus opened the letter in the common room. Sirius, James, Peter, and Lily were all in attendance, and they watched silently as Remus scanned the missive. He felt his brows draw further and further together, his breath quickening with every word.*

*"He . . . He's been drinking. I can tell." He looked over the words, hurt filling him up inside in ways that years of awkward distance and lack of physical affection from his parents never had. "He says that I was stupid for making such a public display, and that when I . . ."* Remus growled and threw the

*letter to the ground roughly, bringing his hands up to cover his face in an effort to hide the surfacing anger, shame, and bitterness.*

*James sighed in frustration on his behalf. He picked up the letter from the ground, reading it aloud when Remus made no movement to stop him from doing so. "I can only hope that you wait until you're of age to maul and kill the poor girl, that way when you're arrested and sentenced to Azkaban or worse, I will no longer be held accountable for your actions."*

*James clenched his fists, crumpling the edges of the parchment in his hands. Sirius was pacing angrily. Peter was shaking, and Lily stood behind him, patting his shoulder. Mia was affectionately running her fingers through his hair, and the simple action reassured Remus that she did not fear him in the slightest.*

"Since you can't seem to control your actions, you are not welcomed home for Christmas. It's something that pains me greatly to say, as your mother has not been well for some time."

*"Looks like another Potter Christmas," Sirius suggested with a tense smile, trying to break the foul mood that had cursed the common room.*

Remus had forced his father's words out of his head and channelled his anger into a purpose: proving that he was not the monster his father thought he was. Every smile, laugh, and pleasure-filled moan Mia gave because of *him* fuelled Remus's desire to prove he was more man than beast—despite how often he found himself growling in her ear each and every time he buried his cock inside her.

"Thank Merlin for Quidditch." Mia laughed through panting breaths as Remus found his rhythm in slow, deep strokes, smiling down at her.

"Not quite the poetry I was hoping for," he teased as he leant down and nipped her earlobe before dragging moist lips down the skin of her neck. With one hand bracing himself against the headboard, he used the other to hike her leg over his hip, allowing him to thrust deeper inside of her as his fingers gripped at her soft curves.

"Remus," Mia moaned at the new angle, and his chest rumbled in amusement at her whimpers and cries. She grinned and laughed as well, swatting at his arm lightly. "*You're* supposed to be the poet."

"If you insist." He kissed at her pulse point, growing more excited when he felt it beat against his lips. "Your whole body," he said on a groan, "has a fullness or a gentleness destined for me." Kissing along her throat, he breathed in the scent of honey and rainstorm.

Mia clutched his lower back tightly and began moving her fingers higher. "When I move my hand up," she said, grinning, "I find in each place a dove that was seeking me." Her hands moved over his shoulders and down his chest, lovingly tracing the scars that rested against his taut skin. "As if they had, love, made you of clay for my own potter's hands."

She began to tighten around him, and Remus moaned, forcing his eyes to remain open so he could watch with abandon as her cheeks flushed deeper each time he filled her, her pink lips parting with every gasp.

"Your knees," he continued, trying his damndest to control the nagging urge to take her hard and fast. "Your breasts." Unable to stop himself, Remus leant down and brought a rosy peak into his mouth and sucked, eagerly stoking the fires that drew whimpering sounds from her mouth, enjoying the feel of her hands as they dug into his hair, grasping tightly.

"Your waist," he murmured as he released her nipple, returning his lips to the shell of her ear to whisper sweet nothings as he made love to her. "Are missing parts of me like the hollow of a thirsty earth from which they broke off . . ."

"Remus . . ." Mia breathed heavily, her eyes shutting tight, slender fingers digging into the muscles of his shoulders and her heels pressing into his arse, urging him deeper and faster.

"A form." He panted, picking up the pace of his thrusts. "And together we are complete like a single river, like a single grain of sand."

He winced as her body tightened around his cock, silk walls gripping him with hungry force and pulsing around him like a heartbeat as he sobbed her name into the hollow of her throat.

She cried beneath him when they came together, shattering apart.

Remus rolled to the side. Just as quickly as their bodies parted, he wrapped his arms around her small frame and drew her back against his chest, nuzzling the side of her neck where he continued to place lazy kisses beneath her ear. "I am *never* going to get my fill of you."

"If you keep inviting Pablo Neruda into bed with us, I will never have reason to complain."

The sound of a throat clearing intruded from beyond the closed curtains. "Ahem."

Mia groaned in irritation, and Remus growled, thankful at least in knowing that the Silencing Charm worked from the *other* side. While they could hear everything outside the curtains, no one would have been able to hear *them*. Remus began searching for his wand, frustrated that their wondrous afterglow had been interrupted.

"I've got it," Mia mumbled as she pulled down the Silencing Charm wandlessly.

"What?!" Remus snapped.

"Sorry," Peter mumbled.

"Didn't I tell you to fuck off an hour ago?"

"Remus," Mia scolded him even though she actually looked quite pleased with the tone he had taken.

"That was *two* hours ago," Peter uttered quietly.

Remus could not help the suddenly smug grin that crossed his face. He mouthed "two hours" down at Mia, who swatted him and giggled.

"I thought I'd come and tell you both before someone else went and told McGonagall."

Mia sat up quickly. "Tell us *what*?"

"The Carrows challenged Sirius to a wizard's duel."

"Fuck," Remus muttered in frustration. "We'll be right out. Where are they?"

"Pitch," Peter replied.

"Get dressed." There was no way in hell he would unlock the curtains until she was properly covered, considering Peter now had a history of being overly curious when it came to Mia. It was something he was determined to eventually address, but the timing always seemed off—usually too close to the full moon.

"McGonagall's down in the village," Remus said as he pulled his trousers up over his hips. "Where's Filch?"

"By the gates," Peter answered.

"So, we only have to worry about Lily, then." Remus sighed. "Peter, scurry off and make sure that she doesn't show up; Mia and I will be down there as soon as we can."

Remus and Mia ran through the castle as quickly as they could, glad that Filch was not roaming the corridors looking for wayward students to report. Rushing down the large marble staircase, Mia began wondering what on earth Sirius could have been thinking to accept a wizard's duel from *any* Slytherin, let alone the Carrows. There was a small chance that Sirius would abide by the rules and duel honourably; this would put him at a grave disadvantage, as Mia was certain neither of the Carrow twins even knew *how* to play fair.

As they burst onto the Quidditch Pitch, Mia saw Sirius's wand raised and red light flying out of the end, cutting off curse after curse being thrown at him by Amycus. James stood ten feet to the side of Sirius, his eyes carefully moving between Amycus and Alecto, who stood as her brother's second while James stood for Sirius.

Mia started to call out for her boys, but she was silenced by Remus's hand on her shoulder.

"You'll distract them if you say anything," he cautioned her.

Mia frowned, but she understood. Any distraction right now would actually put Sirius's life at risk. The Carrows played dirty. She took small relief in knowing that both were dead in the future.

"*Impedimenta!*" Amycus shouted, a vicious snarl on his face. He glared across the grass at Sirius, who looked smug and dodged the attack easily.

"*That's* all you've got?" Sirius barked a laugh. "I'm not even sure why I expected better."

"Shut your mouth, you filthy blood-traitor!" Alecto shrieked, trying to distract Sirius.

He ignored her. "*Levicorpus! Everté Statum!*"

Amycus was lifted from the ground by his ankle and then thrown half the length of the pitch, landing on the ground with a loud thud. Just as Mia suspected, instead of allowing her brother to finish the duel properly, Alecto jumped in, wand aimed at Sirius.

"*Defodio!*"

Mia's eyes widened as a red light emerged from Alecto's wand, hitting Sirius in the arm, gouging his flesh. Even from where she stood, Mia could smell the blood.

Sirius winced and pulled back as blood began soaking his Quidditch robes.

James had his wand pointed at Alecto to fight back, but Amycus was on his feet again, sending Stunning Spells across the pitch, and James had to put his energy into throwing up a proper shield to prevent himself from being stunned.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Alecto yelled, disarming Sirius, who had been barely keeping a grip on his wand with his arm injured as it was.

When James dropped his shield to come to Sirius's aid, Amycus followed his sister's lead and disarmed him with little effort. The Slytherins had clearly planned this all along, and neither James nor Sirius looked like they expected to be played so easily.

Suddenly, both Carrows turned their attention to the unarmed Sirius. This should have meant the end of the duel, but the Slytherin twins looked excited and feral as they stared ahead.

"Fine. You two win this round," James conceded bitterly.

"*This* round?" Amycus laughed, grinning madly. "Potter, we win *every* round. Two blood-traitors. You have no idea what we'll get when we tell *him* what we've done."

Mia paled and reached for her wand, taking quick steps toward the field, Remus following closely behind her.

"Tell who? What? That you finally beat us in a duel?" James laughed. "There's a first time for anything, I guess."

"As well as a last time." Alecto cackled, keeping her wand on Sirius while Amycus aimed his at James. "I'm going to be elite. He'll put me higher than Bellatrix, maybe."

The mention of his cousin's name wiped the smirk from Sirius's face; his eyes widened as he took an instinctive step toward James.

"I can't wait to see the look on the Dark Lord's face when I've told him that I've killed Sirius Black!"

Mia could see the spell sitting on the edge of Amycus's lips; before he had a chance to even whisper the first syllable, she screamed, "*Stupefy!*" and watched as he fell backward onto the ground.

She had expected Alecto to turn her wand toward her in retaliation, but the girl was solid in her determination to attack Sirius. Before Mia or Remus could bring a spell to their tongues, Alecto grinned maniacally at Sirius and screamed, "*Sectumsempra!*"

"No!" Mia shouted and rushed forward, tears already stinging her eyes.

Crimson blood soaked the field beneath their feet.



## Chapter Fifty-Nine

### *Tacere Veritas*

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*Another turning point, a fork stuck in the road  
Time grabs you by the wrist, directs you where to go  
So make the best of this test, and don't ask why  
It's not a question, but a lesson learned in time  
(Good Riddance - Green Day)*

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**December 11th, 1976**

Mia sat in the hospital wing, red-rimmed eyes staring down at the unmoving fingers threaded through hers, struggling with each and every breath. Each inhale a snuffle, each exhale a sob. The bandages that covered the wounded wizard on the bed beside her were wrapped tightly, despite the fact that she had done what she could to heal him. His skin was pale and ashen, but Madam Pomfrey insisted that colour would return when the Blood-Replenishing Potion took effect.

Remus stood behind her, hands on her shoulders, acting as her support—her rock. She closed her eyes and let more tears fall down her cheeks as she took the cold hand into her own, stroking her thumb gently over curled fingers. She could feel Remus's cheek resting against her head, and his breath calmed her when she concentrated on it hard enough.

Turning into Remus's embrace, Mia blinked away her tears. She saw Madam Pomfrey near the doors of the infirmary talking to Dumbledore and Professors McGonagall and Scrimgeour.

"They're certain?" Scrimgeour asked. "I've never even *heard* of this spell, and yet, you'd have me believe that one sixth year girl was able to cast it at a fellow student, nearly killing him in the process, and another sixth year girl was able to heal him within moments using a Healing Spell of which I've *also* never heard?"

McGonagall defended Mia, saying, "Miss Potter is a very talented witch."

Dumbledore inclined his head toward Scrimgeour. "I'm more concerned about the students who attacked."

"As am I," McGonagall said bitterly. "Three students from my House claimed to have heard Miss Carrow mention You-Know-Who, and then she threatened Mr Black's life clear as day, in front of the others."

"Are you certain they aren't lying?" Scrimgeour frowned, and McGonagall looked positively outraged at his accusations. "I mean no offence, but if I'm to report this to the Ministry, they'll want to know how not one, but *two* potential Death Eaters were found inside the school, let alone how they escaped!"

"Is this really the right place?" Charlus Potter asked as he stood from his seat beside his wife, to approach the trio of professors. "Certainly this argument could be had elsewhere while my family tries to heal through this ordeal?"

"Please accept my apologies, Charlus," Dumbledore said sadly. "Rest assured, I will make certain to do everything I can to see that the boy is well tended."

With that, the headmaster led the professors out of the infirmary, leaving behind the Potters, Sirius, Peter, and Remus.

"It's my fault."

Mia watched her mother envelop Sirius in her arms as he sobbed into her shoulder.

"I'm so sorry, Mum," he cried. "It's *my* fault. It should've been *me*. It was supposed to be *me*."

"Don't you dare say anything of the sort," Dorea chided him, and Mia stifled another sob as she looked back down at James's unconscious form, lying there on the bed.

While she could never blame him, Sirius was right. It *was* supposed to have been him. Alecto had her wand aimed at Sirius, and from that angle, the Sectumsempra Curse could have easily slit his throat open. She had first heard of the curse when Harry used it in her original sixth year in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom against Draco. The second time was after she and Kingsley landed at the Burrow and were told about George's injury during their retrieval of Harry from Privet Drive. The third instance she had seen with her own eyes at Malfoy Manor when Draco took down Lucius in defence of his mother.

Mia had never been that close to the curse. Not until today.

*The word "Sectumsempra!" ripped through her consciousness, and Mia felt her blood run cold. Her body went completely numb, and she did not even feel the movement to the side of her as James willingly leapt in front of Sirius, taking the curse in the chest.*

*"No!" she screamed and threw herself at her brother as he hit the ground, bleeding out onto the grass. She was unable to think clearly; her blood began to boil with uncontrolled rage.*

*Have to mean it, have to mean it, Mia repeated in her head. Aim your wand and mean it! Her wand was brought up almost of its own accord, and she let her gaze linger for the briefest of moments on James's body before the grief was consumed by rage.*

*Have to mean it.*

*Her eyes locked onto the Carrow twins, and she shouted, "Avada Ke—"*

*Her spell was muffled by a hand covering her mouth and another gripping her arm tightly, diverting her curse away from the future Death Eaters. Remus stood behind her, holding her as she fought against him, struggling to get free so she could kill them, kill the Carrows, kill them both. The twins cackled and then rushed off the Pitch, disappearing from view as Mia cried and screamed against Remus.*

*"Mia! You have to heal him," he yelled, snapping her out of her rage.*

*Taking a deep breath through her nose, she nodded. When Remus released her, she collapsed to her knees beside her dying brother. She held her shaking wand over his chest, tracing it over the deep wounds that the curse had made, muttering the *Vulnera Sanentur* Healing Spell that almost sounded like a song.*

*She was grateful that, despite a foolishly young Severus Snape creating the *Sectumsempra* Curse, a much older and wiser Professor Snape had created the counter-curse and had thankfully left detailed instructions in some of his notes that she had discovered one afternoon during her original sixth year while helping Professor Slughorn clean up the potions room.*

*The flow of blood eased, and she pulled James's robes open to look at the wounds as they began to knit themselves back together.*

*It had taken three passes with the counter-curse before she deemed James stable enough to be moved to the hospital wing, where Peter had rushed off to the very moment that the Carrow twins vanished.*

*When James was stabilised an hour later, a nervous Madam Pomfrey looked at the Potter parents and cleared her throat. "You all can stay the night, but only family will be allowed in the room from this point forward."*

*Dorea raised a daring brow at the mediwitch and hovered near the three remaining Marauders. "These boys are family." The issue was immediately put to rest.*

*Sirius sat on the bed next to James, staring at his best friend with a mixture of guilt and rage. Mia knew how he felt, and a part of her remembered an older Sirius Black in the Room of Requirement, arguing with Hermione Granger over his methods of fighting.*

"Trust me, Hermione. If you knew the Alecto Carrow that I knew growing up, you wouldn't give her memory a passing thought."

*"You'll have your revenge," Mia whispered to Sirius, who looked up at her with confusion, but the sincerity of her tone had him nodding his head before returning his gaze to James.*

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### **December 12th, 1976**

Mia walked into the infirmary the following morning after being forced out of it in the first place by her well-meaning parents and a protective Remus, all of whom had insisted she needed to eat.

She and Sirius stayed up all night, keeping watch over James as he rested and recovered. Her parents slept in an enlarged bed at the end of the hospital wing, and Remus stayed in the bed opposite James. Peter tried to remain in the infirmary with the rest of them, but anytime he came close to James, Mia tensed up and breathed hard—to the point that her magic could be seen radiating off of her as a warning. Peter apologised to her parents, saying that it would be best if someone returned to Gryffindor Tower to inform the rest of their House about what had happened. No one argued with him.

That morning, Mia had been reluctant to leave her brother's side, but at the very least she knew she needed coffee, so she went to the Great Hall to fetch a cup. Returning to the hospital wing, she was surprised to see Lily sitting in her chair. Mia silently slipped through the double doors, watching curiously as her friend studied James.

Lily tucked a strand of her long, red hair behind her ear and then twisted the end of it, a nervous habit Mia had picked up on years earlier while watching her prepare for exams. Anxiety, worry, and fear were written on Lily's face, and Mia frowned at the sight, but the corner of her mouth turned up when Lily seemed to hesitate only briefly before taking James's hand within her own.

Mia tried her best to stand quietly as long as possible to give Lily as much time as she could, but a yawn overtook her.

Startled, Lily dropped James's hand and stood, spinning around. "I just wanted to see if I . . . Peter told us what happened. I needed to see it for myself. Are you okay?"

"I've been better," Mia admitted.

"Where are your parents?"

"Meeting with Madam Pomfrey." Mia took Sirius's empty chair so that if Lily felt like sitting back down, she could. She let out another yawn and then took a large gulp of her coffee. "They want to take us all home for Christmas now, seeing that holidays are only a week away, and Jamie won't be able to attend classes anyway, even if he wakes up today."

"All of us?" Lily asked.

"Me, Jamie, Sirius, and Remus."

"How bad was it?" Lily questioned hesitantly as she looked over the bandages across James's chest.

Mia frowned. "Bad. He could have . . . He almost died."

"I overheard Professors Scrimgeour and McGonagall arguing last night," Lily whispered. "When Mary and I got back from Hogsmeade, they were practically screaming at each other in the entrance hall. Is it true that the Carrows were using curses that no one's ever heard of?"

Mia nodded.

"How is that possible?" Lily challenged, shaking her head in disbelief. "Those two are incredibly thick."

Mia scowled, thinking of the myriad of ways she wanted to hurt Severus Snape. *For enemies* is what was written inside his Potion book next to the curse, or so Harry claimed. Mia knew who his enemies were, and while she did not doubt that James and Sirius could use being knocked down a peg or two, there was a difference between schoolyard fights and creating a curse like this one. If she had never found Professor Snape's notes on the counter-curse, James would have bled out.

"*They* didn't invent them. Someone else in the castle did. Another Slytherin . . . I'm guessing. He either taught them the spell, or, like a bunch of reckless idiots," she said, rolling her eyes and thinking of Harry, "they just saw the spell written down somewhere and decided to try it out."

"Someone . . . Someone invented it?" Lily's voice was shaky, and her eyes were wet. Mia figured that, being best friends with Snape for so long, Lily would be privy to at least some of his processes when creating new spells. "Mia, I think—"

"Dumbledore already knows," Mia interrupted her, knowing that Lily was taking a risk by confessing that she had known about Snape's Advanced Potions book. "When he first came to question us, Remus insisted that there was no way Alecto nor Amycus could have invented it themselves. Sirius mentioned that Snape created Levicorpus and Langlock. Last I heard, there was no proof."

"He has a book," Lily whispered.

"He'll have gotten rid of it. He's not stupid. The moment word reached him that the Carrows had used his curse . . . There's nothing to be done now." She knew that Snape did not join Dumbledore until after the prophecy, but she wondered if the headmaster was now considering the potential threat or asset that he could be.

"Stay away from him, Lily." Mia looked up at her friend with pleading eyes. "I honestly believe that one day Snape can come back from whatever it is that he's fallen into, but *you're* not the one to save him. He has to save himself."

Lily let a few tears escape, but she made no noise as she looked back down at James. "Did he really save Sirius?" Mia nodded in reply. "That was . . . very brave of him. Very stupid," she said with a huff of annoyance, "but brave."

Mia smiled down at her sleeping brother. "Ever the gallant Gryffindor."

Lily sniffed, shaking her head and looking confused. "He was wandless. Had you and Remus not been there, they would have killed him and then killed Sirius right after. What was he thinking?"

"Love," Mia replied. "It's a powerful type of magic."

"Love isn't magic."

"It *can* be. I . . ." She hesitated as she felt something in the air, something magical and moving, nudging and pushing at her somewhere in the back of her mind. Mia closed her eyes as she almost immediately realised the prompting. "I read somewhere about how love can be harnessed. Sacrificial love can protect others."

"Your brother tried to sacrifice himself?" Lily looked up, eyes wide in horror.

"No." Mia shook her head, worrying her thumb along the handle of her coffee cup. "He was just trying to save Sirius. I don't even think he thought about it for a second. Besides, it wouldn't have worked."

"Why not?"

"There are circumstances that allow it," Mia explained, a tightening in her chest after every word. "You have to face death willingly, be given the option to fight back, but not take it."

"That sounds horrible, but . . . beautiful at the same time." Lily frowned, tilting her head as she looked at James's face. "Your brother loves his friends. I can't imagine loving anyone that much."

Mia did her best not to sob as she remembered Harry crying in the cemetery of Godric's Hollow on Christmas Eve. "You will."

"I can't stand it anymore," Lily said in frustration as she stood and hovered over James's bed. She pushed her fingers through his hair, desperately trying to get the locks in the back to lay flat. She breathed a sigh of relief when they finally did, though they had to be tucked against the pillow to stay that way. "That's been bothering me for years," she admitted with a laugh. "Don't tell him I did that."

"Witch's honour." Mia brought her cup back to her mouth to try and hide the smirk that was threatening to overtake her. "You know he really does love—"

"I know," Lily interrupted, looking unsure of herself. "I just . . . Even after everything good he's done, he's still an arrogant arse."

Mia shrugged her shoulders, in complete agreement with her friend. "And Remus is *still* a werewolf with self-esteem issues. And Sirius is *still* a foul-mouthed prat from a family of blood supremacists. Doesn't mean they aren't worth loving. Jamie will always be a bit of an arse, but he's learning to channel that arrogance properly these days."

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### **December 13th, 1976**

The sun was rising in the distance as Sirius watched as James slowly opened his eyes for the first time in over twenty-four hours. He reached up and scratched at the mess of hair on top of his head and moved to stretch his arms but winced in pain. Sirius watched silently, guilt and fear and anger and relief building up inside of him all at once.

Blinking in confusion, James pulled down the sheets that covered him to see a pink, closed scar that ran diagonally over the length of his chest.

"Oh," he mumbled thoughtfully.

"Oh?"

James turned to see Sirius glaring at him with narrowed eyes. "Morning, Pads."

"You dickhead!" Sirius lunged at him, momentarily forgetting where they were as he smacked his best friend hard in the side of the head. "You almost died, and you wake up and say 'Oh' like nothing happened?"

"Ow! Arsehole, stop hitting me!" James weakly put his hands up to try and fight back, hitting Sirius once, right in the mouth.

Unphased by the slap, Sirius put his hands on James's shoulders and just shook him because he needed to do something, and it was taking every ounce of strength not to throttle the self-sacrificing wanker.

"What the hell is going on in here!?"

Sirius ignored Mia's shrieks, determined to smack as much sense into James as humanly possible. He only relented when Remus pulled him off, allowing Mia to run to the bedside.

"Jamie!" She wrapped her arms tightly around him, sobbing into his neck, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he continued to try and strike at Sirius from over her shoulder.

"Padfoot! He's still injured!" Remus tried to reason with Sirius, as he continued to struggle.

"Fuck him! He's an arrogant martyr who needs his arse kicked!" Sirius snarled when Remus's grip tightened. He allowed his body to relax, but only because he knew from experience that Remus could easily force him to black out with the right pressure, and Sirius was not in the mood to be next to James in a hospital bed. When Remus let him go, Sirius sighed irritably and ran his hands through his hair.

"You're *welcome*," James said in a snippy tone.

Suddenly, Sirius was being restrained again.

James scoffed. "Bloody hell, you save a mate's life and *this* is the thanks you get?"

"Sirius is right. You almost died, Jamie!" Mia sniffed, wiping away the tears that had spilt over onto her cheeks. "What were you thinking?"

Looking away from them all, James shook his head, refusing to make eye contact. "I was thinking that I couldn't let her kill you. You heard what that bitch said, Pads. She was going to *kill* you. I . . . I couldn't let it happen. I couldn't live without my best friend."

"But *I'm* supposed to live without *mine*?!" Sirius snapped, finally breaking out of Remus's hold. "Prongs, do you have any idea what I would have done if you'd died?"

James kept his expression tight, but Sirius noticed that Mia recoiled at his words and averted her gaze entirely. Assuming that she was reliving the moment when she had tried to kill the Carrows over what they had done, Sirius sighed. While he did not blame her for her rage in that moment, he did not know if he had it in him to do the same. Revenge, certainly, but killing? He very briefly pondered what it would take for him to cross that line, only making him angrier when he remembered how terrified he was when James fell and when Mia confronted Bellatrix.

"Fuck," he growled, dark eyes darting between the two of them. "When will you bloody Potters get it through your heads that I am not worth saving if it means risking your own lives?"

"Can't help it," James offered with a shrug. "If it makes you feel any better, I would have done it for Moony, Wormtail, or Mia."

"It *doesn't*," Sirius, Mia, and Remus all responded at the same time.

James laughed. "Look, I'm fine. Wizard's honour."

Sirius groaned and headed for the door. "I need a cigarette. Mia, come with me." When she hesitated, he turned, stalking toward her in a predatory manner, and Remus stepped forward. Sirius put a hand out. "No, Moony. She and I need to have a chat about what happened on the pitch."

His eyes met Remus's, and the two shared an understanding. Mia's near use of an Unforgivable had gone unreported to the headmaster and Aurors that interviewed them all after the Carrow twins disappeared, and none of them had dared to mention it while James remained unconscious.

"I can do that," Remus insisted.

"Like hell. *You're* the boyfriend, the good guy who reads her poetry and makes her feel better. *You* won't hurt her, and right now she *needs* to hurt a little," Sirius insisted, ignoring the look of protest that was crossing Mia's face.

"*Our* job, means we share responsibility. *I'll* be the bad guy who gets to tell her what a fucking idiot she is." He turned and glared at her for a moment, catching the way her eyes flashed amber at the insult before he turned back to Remus. "*You* can wipe her tears when I'm done and agree that I'm an asshole."

"Oh please," she muttered indignantly.

He looked back at Mia and lifted a brow. "I know you're thinking it."

She narrowed her eyes at him and pursed her lips as she thought, *Fine, arsehole.*

Remus, for some reason, nodded in agreement. Suddenly, Sirius had her wrist gripped in his hand, and he was dragging her out of the infirmary despite her protests.

"What the hell, Sirius!?" She struggled against him, reaching for her wand but quickly noting that she had left it behind in the infirmary on James's bedside table. She thought to use wandless magic to get him to release her, but a lack of sleep and no real desire to actually hurt Sirius held her back.

The moment they walked through the back door that led out near the greenhouses, Sirius released her arm and reached into his robes, pulling out a pack of cigarettes and removing two sticks. He handed one to her in a friendly manner as though he had not just dragged her screeching through the halls.

Mia huffed at him, arms crossed over her chest for a long moment before she finally relented and took the fag from him.

Sirius cupped his hands together against the chilly December air and mumbled a spell, wandlessly lighting a hovering bluebell flame in his hand. He leant in, allowing the cigarette to light, breathing in several puffs of smoke before holding his hand out to Mia.

She followed his motions, doing the same, save for choking on her first inhale, which drew a smirk from Sirius. "Jamie's right," she said, hoping to change the subject before he even brought it up. "You would have died."

"Maybe," he said slowly. "Or maybe you would have saved *me* the way you saved *him*. Either way, I wouldn't have to wake up every morning owing a life debt to my best friend because he's a prat."

"Life debts aren't so bad." Mia smiled knowingly. "Come in useful when you need them to."

Sirius turned and glared at her, inhaling deep, and letting the smoke blow out his nose before flicking the cigarette to the side and stepping close to her, his slate grey eyes narrowed. "You tried killing the Carrows."

Mia looked away from him. "To be fair, they tried killing you and Jamie first."

"Mia!" Sirius snapped. "You almost used an Unforgivable! Are you at all comprehending the severity of the situation? Do you know what would have happened had you succeeded?"

"They would have died," Mia admitted, still not looking at him.

"Yes! They would have died, and you would have killed them!"

"We're at war."

"*We* are not," Sirius said, looking shocked by her admission. "There *is* a war, but *we* are not soldiers. Mia, you almost crossed a line—"

"That's your problem, Sirius!" She turned her eyes on him, growling. "You still think there *is* a line! Dark magic, Light magic . . . It's not all black and white. You can kill a person with a Severing Charm—that we learnt as *first years*. Magic is grey!"

"Fine," Sirius conceded, "but we weren't in battle, Mia. It was a fight. An unfair fight, I'll give you that, but the Carrows weren't even marked Death Eaters—"

"The world isn't split into good people and Death Eaters, Sirius. If the people I love are attacked, I will do what I need to stop them. Or avenge them. Some people are irredeemable," she said, thinking of Future Remus's letter. "Some people just can't . . . can't be saved."

Sirius reached up and took her face into his hands. "I'm not trying to redeem or save *them*. Screw them all. I'm trying to save *you*," he insisted and then pulled her into a hug.

The moment her arms wrapped around his neck she burst into tears, letting the cigarette between her fingers fall to the ground as she wove her fingers together, holding him close as she wept.

"Mia, please don't let anger consume you," he pleaded with her. "I know it's hard. I've been there, I'm . . . I'm there too often, myself." He sighed and ran a hand against her hair consolingly. "You can't take lives without consequences. Don't end up like them. You're not a killer. Promise me you won't do anything like that again. Azkaban is a better punishment for Death Eaters than death."

Mia pulled away and frowned, her eyes clenched tight. "Azkaban might not always be a permanent punishment. What happens if they—?"

"Escape?" Sirius snorted in amusement, looking at her as though her lack of sleep had forced her to lose all common sense. "Mia, you can't escape Azkaban."

Something about his words made anxiety bubble up inside of her. The past few days had been too much. James almost dying at the hands of future Death Eaters. Sirius's life being threatened so openly, and on Hogwarts grounds no less—the one place they were supposed to be safe. All this talk of Azkaban and death and Unforgivables brought back a flash of memories that Mia had worked so very hard to repress over the years. The image of an escaped Sirius Black in the Shrieking Shack, dementors breaking onto the Hogwarts Express, Harry telling her how he could hear his parents when the dementors were near—hear them screaming as they were murdered by Voldemort.

"Sirius . . . I need to tell you something," she said as the words began to rush up her throat, begging to be set free. Screw Remus's letter *and* his rules. Screw Dumbledore and his condescending looks and his fucking Greater Good. She would change everything. She would save them all.

"Azkaban *can* be broken out of. I know this because y-you—" She tried to say the words but a bubble formed in her throat, and her tongue felt numb. *Just nerves*, she thought and tried again. "B-Because y-you—" Her eyes widened in a panic when she realised something was wrong. Something was preventing her from speaking the truth. She tried once more, but felt woozy, only hearing the words in her head: *Because you broke out of it in 1993, after being imprisoned for twelve years.*

"You all right?" Sirius rose a brow.

Mia shook her head and tried a different tactic.

"Sirius—" *James and Lily are going to be killed, Peter is a traitor!* "I—" *know that your brother is going to become a Death Eater, and Snape too.* "I'm—" *from the future!* "No!" She pushed her hands through her hair in frustration, shaking as she felt this unfamiliar magic pooling in her throat and her head, stopping her from telling him.

"Mia?"

"It's nothing," Mia mumbled, letting go of her hair and biting her thumbnail in contemplation. She did not care one bit that she likely looked mental. She would later blame it on stress. "I was just thinking that if anyone could break out of Azkaban, it would probably be one of you." She smiled sadly. "Just don't try to prove me right by ending up there, okay?"

"I'll do my best. You do the same, yeah?" he asked, and Mia nodded, trying to hold back tears. "You sure you're all right?"

"Yes. I need to see Professor Dumbledore. I want to make sure that we're all okay to head home now that Jamie's awake." She turned and rushed back toward the castle as unshed tears stung her eyes.

She had waited six years to tell him the truth, to try and change something. Six years she had followed each rule as it had been set out before her, and, finally, when she got the courage to do something about it and tell someone something . . . she could not.

A part of her knew why.

Dumbledore had spelled her not to.

"Lemon drops," Mia hissed at the gargoyle before it opened the staircase that led to the headmaster's office. Without knocking, she burst through the door to find the old wizard sitting behind his large desk and a baby Fawkes on his golden perch beside him. In the chair opposite Albus Dumbledore sat her mother looking up at her with a frown.

Mia turned on the headmaster, tears spilling onto her face. She wiped them away immediately, not wanting to look weak. "What did you do to me?"

"Mia, love, come and sit down." Dorea reached for her daughter's hand, gesturing to the chair beside her.

Mia turned and looked at her mother with wide eyes as realisation fell over her. "You *knew*," she whispered. "You *knew* that he did something to me?"

"We've talked about this before, love." Dorea sighed, looking regretful and angry about the situation. Mia wondered if Dumbledore had threatened Obliviation. "If the war is won in the future, you cannot try and change that. It's too important."

"What did you do?" Mia turned and scowled at the headmaster. "I tried to tell Sirius th-that—" she tried, but the words would not come out, and she gritted her teeth in frustration.

"I am deeply sorry." Dumbledore sighed sadly, and it made Mia bitter because she believed he truly was remorseful over whatever it was he had done to her. "When you came to me several months ago, eager to tell me secrets about the future and the war, I felt it was necessary to take precautions to prevent you from telling *anyone*. It's a spell called Tacere Veritas, modified specifically for you. It will prevent you from intentionally speaking about the future in order to change its outcome."

"You don't understand," Mia sobbed as she fell into the chair beside her mother, who immediately wrapped her arms around her shoulders. "I have to s-save—" *James and*

*Lily*, she tried to say, but the words stuck in her throat. "I have t-to stop—" *Sirius from being framed.*

"Please take caution, my dear," Dumbledore said kindly, daring to look concerned. "The spell may cause some unpleasant side effects if you fight it too hard."

"I can't just sit back and do nothing," Mia whispered through her tears.

"I don't expect you to. You were sent back for a reason," Dorea insisted. "I've memorised that letter too, and I believe that you are, indeed, a catalyst for events that are meant to unfold."

"I don't *want* to help these events unfold," Mia admitted. "I don't want to be the catalyst for m-my own—" *brother's death!*

"No, I imagine not the bad things," Dorea said softly, stroking Mia's hair. "Bad things will happen, good people will suffer and even die, but if you try to change something, someone else could take their place, or worse. A potentially painless death could instead become one of great torture and suffering. A Killing Curse becomes a Cruciatius. A minor injury becomes a death. Perhaps, think of the *good* you will do. What if the reason we win the war, in the end, is because of what you will do here?"

"How can I help when I've been silenced?" She felt her eyes shift amber in her rage, and she turned that anger on the meddlesome headmaster.

She was reminded of how very angry Harry had been with him during their fifth year:

*"So why's Dumbledore been so keen to keep me in the dark?" Harry asked her and Ron when they explained that the headmaster told them not to tell him anything about the Wizarding world over the entire summer, while he had been left alone at Privet Drive.*

She remembered a furious Mrs Weasley screaming over the dinner table at an irate Sirius:

*"You haven't forgotten what Dumbledore said, I suppose?"*

*"Which part?"*

*"The part about not telling Harry more than he needs to know."*

She remembered the moment when Harry got his hands on a copy of *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*. Finding out about Grindelwald and "The Greater Good." She had tried to defend their fallen headmaster to her friend, even while Sirius sat silently by—

neither agreeing nor disagreeing with her, which had irked her at the time. Harry's outburst had been hard to counter, though:

*"Look what he asked from me, Hermione! Risk your life, Harry! And again! And again! And don't expect me to explain everything, just trust me blindly, trust that I know what I'm doing, trust me even though I don't trust you! Never the whole truth! Never!"*

Mia sighed, feeling utterly defeated as she stared at the man. "What do you want me to do?"

"Learn," Dumbledore replied. "Learn as any other student here would. If you are indeed the catalyst to help bring about the eventual end of this war, then I would have you do so under as much protection as possible. Keep the future in the future and focus on the here and now."

"If I were to discover Death Eaters being recruited inside the school . . . ?"

"Then you may bring the information to me," Dumbledore agreed. "However, I would prefer that you not put yourself at any risk. It appears that Potters have a habit of putting their lives in great danger for the benefit of others."

"For the 'Greater Good'?" Mia challenged bitterly.

"Perhaps, Miss Potter, perhaps."

Tearing her eyes away from the headmaster, Mia looked at her mother, who at least seemed remorseful over her part in this. She forgave her quickly, believing that Dumbledore only included Dorea because she had discovered Mia's secret in the first place. If Dorea Potter had insisted that Dumbledore keep his nose out of Mia's business, she had a feeling the headmaster would have had no qualms about Obliviating her of the knowledge she held and then silencing Mia regardless. Dorea, however, was a Slytherin and knew how to keep her enemies close if needed. She also had not one, but two children to look after—three or four when Sirius and Remus were included. Keeping on the headmaster's good side was beneficial to the entire family—for now.

"Can we go home now?"

"Yes." Dorea offered her an apologetic smile. "Let's go get your brother and the boys." She stood from her chair and smiled politely at Dumbledore, who stood to walk them to the door.

Mia turned and looked at him. "Professor?"

"Yes?"

"I just wanted to s-say—" *Voldemort has created Horcruxes. One will curse you and bring about your death. Severus Snape will become a Death Eater. He's going to kill you.* "Happy Christmas."

## Chapter Sixty

### *Snuffles and Muggles*

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*The wind is howling  
Like this swirling storm inside  
Couldn't keep it in  
Heaven knows I tried!*  
(Let it Go - Idina Menzel)

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**December 23rd, 1976**

At the feel of the wards being lowered at Potter Manor, Mia made her way down the stairs from her room where she had secluded herself for hours, hiding away from James and Sirius. A smile crossed her face as the front door opened and she overheard her parents speaking with Lily, just having returned from Cokeworth.

"Thank you so much for letting me stay with your family over the hols, Mr and Mrs Potter," Lily said brightly, using the tone of voice she generally reserved for professors at Hogwarts.

"Not at all, dear," Dorea replied enthusiastically. "You are more than welcome to come to the manor anytime you wish. It's always lovely to see Mia around other young witches. I think the boys have been a bad influence on her over the years."

Mia rolled her eyes as she strolled into the foyer.

"Either that or they've driven the poor girl mental," Charlus added once he spotted her.

"Heard that." Mia smirked at her father then turned to grip Lily tight in a hug. "Thank Merlin you're here! Sirius charmed all the mistletoe and hung them with Sticking Charms in every room. Showing off because he's the only one of us who's of age."

Both witches were irritated by the fact that, out of everyone in their year, it was Sirius who was first to turn seventeen and legally be able to use magic outside of school. Mia had asked Professor Dumbledore about her own status only to find that, since her Ministry records stated her birthday was shared with James in March, the trace would only come off at that time.

"I think it's a good bit of magic," Charlus declared with an amused grin.

"You would." Mia glared affectionately at her father, who laughed as he looped his arm through Dorea's before leading her out of the foyer and through the corridor that opened out into the back garden.

Lily stared at a sprig of green hung up in the corner of the room. Red ribbons curled down from the bow in the centre near the plant's berries, looking perfectly charming and innocent. She bit her lower lip apprehensively. "Do I even want to know what the mistletoe does?"

"They're charmed to make a loud screeching noise anytime Remus and I are alone in a room together," Mia said in a huff. "I still haven't figured out how he's done it. Clearly a mixture of a Caterwauling Charm and a Tracking Spell."

The first time the charm activated was in the middle of the night when Mia sneaked into Remus's room to lend him a book to read before bed. She had not stepped more than one foot over the threshold before the tiny Christmas decoration had begun screaming. Sirius and James burst into the room, wands drawn and grinning, as Mia and Remus stood ten feet apart, looks of absolute horror plastered on their faces.

"That's horrible," Lily said, even as she tried to stifle a laugh. "Really clever, but horrible."

"Talking about me?" Sirius asked as he sauntered into the room wearing Muggle jeans and a tight, white shirt that was stained with motor grease.

Lily smirked at him. "How did you know?"

"I heard 'really clever' and just naturally assumed."

Mia glared at him. "She also said horrible. As in, 'you are horrible for creating those awful, screaming mistletoe.'"

She put her hands on her hips as she spoke, a tactic she used to use with Harry and Ron when one or the other would misbehave. It always worked on them. They would feel guilty and then go finish their homework and apologise; however, Sirius just laughed at the action, completely unaffected by her narrowed gaze.

"All I heard was 'clever,' so I'm going to stick with that." He grinned and winked at both girls. "You going to be around long, Evans?"

Lily nodded, looking like she was struggling to hide a frown. "Until we go back. Having some family issues," she admitted quietly, an embarrassed flush creeping over her cheeks.

"Welcome to the club," Sirius said. "It used to be exclusive, but then the Potters just started letting any old riff-raff in. Oh, speaking of riff-raff."

"Hullo, Lily," Remus greeted as he walked into the room wearing clothes similar to Sirius's.

The sight of Remus in Muggle jeans and a tight shirt caused Mia's breath to catch in her throat. Just as her thoughts were turning less than polite for mixed company as she stared at her boyfriend, the mistletoe in the corner of the room began screaming loudly.

"Bloody hell, Pads!" Remus snapped. "We're not even *alone* in here!"

"Yeah." Sirius tilted his head to the side and scratched it with one hand, reaching for his wand with the other to silence the charmed decoration. "That one's faulty."

"You need help with your trunk?" Remus asked Lily as he stepped forward, holding his greasy hands out toward Sirius in silent request for him to Scourgify the black oil from his fingers. "Tilly would probably come and take it for you, but Mia forces her to take a day off for Christmas."

"It's her gift to me," Mia announced proudly, still amused with the way that she had been able to manipulate the little house-elf over the years.

"Thank you, Remus, I would love the help." Lily smiled appreciatively, glancing at the ease with which Sirius cleaned Remus's hands and then his own. "Or maybe Sirius could just levitate it for us since he's able to actually use magic," she said with a jealous tone.

Sirius grinned, jutting his chin out and putting his hands on his hips. "It's good to be an adult."

Mia smirked at him. "Yet still act like a child."

"I'll *never* stop that."

"Don't I know it."

Interrupting the pair, Remus turned his attention to Lily, who was stifling laughter as she watched Mia and Sirius. "So, why aren't you with your family, if you don't mind me asking?"

He reached down and lifted her trunk from one side, gesturing to Sirius to take the other if he was not going to help by using magic.

Sirius gaped at Remus for a moment before scoffing loudly, flicking his wand over the trunk and mumbling a quiet spell as the large container levitated into the air.

"My sister invited her Muggle boyfriend over for the holidays," Lily said with a grimace.

Mia mirrored her expression at the thought of Petunia and Vernon Dursley, two of the most heinous Muggles that Mia was glad to *not* have had the displeasure of meeting yet in this time.

"Since we can't let him know that I'm a witch, I was forced to just sit there and try to explain my boarding school without any details while he looked at me like I was some nutter." Lily sighed dejectedly, adding in a slightly bitter tone, "I'm pretty sure Petunia told him that I was sent away to an asylum."

"Your parents just let that happen?" Mia snarled, remembering stories from Harry about how his aunt and uncle had told their friends and neighbours that they had sent him away to St Brutus's Secure Centre for Incurably Criminal Boys.

Lily shrugged and stared down at the floor. "Petunia's pretty sure that Vernon's going to propose soon, so my parents didn't want to ruin her chances by making a fuss. Plus, I think they miss the old days when I was . . . normal."

Sirius threw an arm around her shoulders and smiled as he continued to levitate her trunk in the air. "Muggles aren't normal, Evans; when will you learn?"

Remus and Mia followed behind as Sirius led Lily and the levitating trunk down the hallway.

"I would have thought you'd rather be with Alice or Mary," Remus said in a teasing tone, "what with James living here and all."

Lily smirked, feigning nonchalance, her tone much too light—the one she used when lying—as she said, "It's a sacrifice I'm willing to deal with."

Mia was one of few people who knew that Lily was not so hard on James lately. After seeing what had happened when he nearly sacrificed his own life to save his best friend, even Lily had to admit that James Potter was not a complete and total prat.

"Alice is spending Christmas with Frank's family—"

"Ouch." Sirius laughed. "Hols with Madam Longbottom. That ought to provide some good stories when we get back to school."

"—and Mary is in France with her mother," Lily added, looking slightly perturbed over being interrupted, especially since Sirius briefly lost concentration and her trunk rattled mid-air.

"Peter too," Remus said. "His dad's working some sort of business deal over there, so the family just decided to make a holiday out of it. Opening up a new shop, I guess."

"I'm glad his family's doing well," Lily said, giving Sirius a smile of thanks as he gently lowered her trunk outside the guest room down the hall from Mia's. "I know his parents' apothecary had trouble for a while after his father was accused of dealing in the Dark Arts. Absolute rubbish!"

Mia purposely looked down at her nails as though she were examining them carefully.

"Mia, have you seen Tilly?" James shouted from the opposite end of the long hallway. He stepped around the corner wearing jeans much like Sirius and Remus, but instead of a grease-stained white shirt, he was bare-chested, having already divested himself of the filthy garment. "I know it's her day off, but I can't find my Puddlemere United shirt, and she always knows where—Evans?"

"Potter," Lily greeted him, eyes wide.

James blushed and crossed his arms over his chest nervously, leaving motor oil streaks on his skin. "Oh, umm . . . Hi."

He cleared his throat as he attempted to lean up against the wall, only to have the small amount of oil left on his palm cause him to slip and stumble and leave a greasy print behind.

Sirius hid a snort against Remus's shoulder.

James cleared his throat again after casting a glare at his best friend. "I . . . umm . . . Welcome to our home?" Forgetting again that he was shirtless, he ran his hands through his messy hair—likely ridding himself of whatever oil remained on his palms—turning to look at his sister. "Mia, you seen Tilly?"

"No." Mia laughed at the sight of her brother so very flustered, standing half-naked and smudged with oil in front of Lily; he actually looked embarrassed instead of cocky. Lily's red face was equally amusing as she averted her gaze from James's pale frame. "Besides, I told her not to come unless Mum or Dad call for her; if you really need it, go ask them."

"Yeah, okay." James nodded and then looked at Lily once before turning around. "See ya, Evans."

Lily gaped as James left the hallway, disappearing down another corridor. "He barely said hello to me."

Mia, Remus, and Sirius all shared an incredulous look before shaking their heads.

"Maybe he's moved on," Sirius suggested and smirked when a look of rage crossed Lily's face.

Remus and Mia silently chuckled as Lily's hair crackled with magic.

"Oh," Lily huffed, folding her arms in front of her chest, shaking her hair as she raised her chin defiantly. "Well, good for *him*."

"Or maybe we requested that he tone it down for Christmas," Remus confessed with a smile. "No reason you need to wake up every morning with a bouquet of flowers and love notes."

"Yeah, what witch would like something like *that*?" Mia asked sarcastically.

"Shut up and show me my room." Lily narrowed her gaze as she was led into the room by Mia.

Just in case, Remus stayed out in the hallway beside Sirius, not wanting to accidentally set off another potentially faulty mistletoe.

"Hurry back down and you can help me wrap presents!" Sirius shouted.

Lily poked her head out of the room. "Why can't you just use magic to do it yourself? And you better not have bought anything for me."

"Don't bother, Lily. His uncle left him his inheritance when he turned seventeen, and Sirius has decided to waste it all on gifts for the rest of us." Remus rolled his eyes before sticking his hands in his pockets and turning to follow Sirius, only to find that he had turned back around to argue, sticking his finger up into Remus's face.

"First, it's not a waste. I'm barely making a dent in the vault, trust me. My uncle walked me through Gringotts last summer before he died. I would need a broom to reach the top of the gold pile in there. Even then, I'm slightly afraid of an avalanche."

Mia smirked and shook her head. Having seen the Potter vaults for herself, she could believe that Sirius's inherited gold was no exaggeration. It was obscene, and she was determined to find a way to get him to use it properly.

"Secondly, I am not just wasting it on you lot. I bought myself a very nice Christmas gift as well."

"By 'very nice,' you mean 'utter and complete death trap,'" Mia said.

"A new broom?" Lily asked.

"A Muggle motorbike," Remus muttered. "Used. Thing doesn't even run. We've been working on it all morning."

"Why didn't you just buy a new one?"

Sirius chuckled. "Where's the fun in that?"

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### **December 27th, 1976**

"Mia!" Sirius screamed from his room. "Come and get this stupid cat away from me!"

It was only a few days after Christmas, and the residents and guests of Potter Manor had fallen into a lazy routine of reading books in the late evening. Weather permitting, James, Sirius, and Remus would take their brooms into the backyard and toss around the new Quaffle that James got for Christmas. Most afternoons, Lily and Mia caught up on homework, still surprised that somehow the boys had already finished theirs. Dorea had insisted that Sirius take down the Caterwauling mistletoe at least from the library, allowing Remus and Mia to cuddle in the large armchair, surrounded by books and one another. It was a wonderfully quiet existence.

Except for when Sirius would start shouting about her new cat.

"What are you screaming about?" Mia poked her head into Sirius's room to find him in Animagus form. The bear-sized, black dog stood growling at a black and grey cat, who did not seem afraid of the large beast in the slightest, hissing and narrowing its small blue eyes.

"Padfoot!" Mia snapped and watched as Sirius shifted back into human form, pointing an accusing finger at the tiny feline pacing back and forth in front of him, growling.

"The cat, Mia. Get your bloody beast, and take him back to your room!"

"You leave my poor Snuffles alone," Mia cooed as she scooped the little kitten up into her arms, smiling as it nuzzled its head into the side of her neck, meowing quietly in contentment.

"Stupid name for a cat," Sirius muttered as he walked back to his bed, holding up his red sheets, showing that her cat had already clawed its way through them.

"Stupid name for a *dog*," Mia replied under her breath. "If you didn't like the cat, you shouldn't have bought it for me. You're a dog, and my boyfriend is a werewolf. Honestly, how could you have thought that a *cat* would be a good gift?" Mia laughed as Sirius pulled the destroyed sheets from his bed, reaching for his wand to try to repair the damage.

"You should have at least bought one that's part kneazle; then, it would have been able to sense that you're an Animagus," she said, a part of her nostalgic for Crookshanks.

Though she knew nothing would ever replace her first familiar, Mia could not hide her excitement on Christmas morning as she unwrapped the small, red box, only to find the tiny kitten sitting inside, hissing loudly.

"Can I take Snuffles back and switch it with a kneazle then?" Sirius asked.

She laughed when Snuffles hissed at Sirius again. "Not on your life."

"Fine," Sirius conceded as he walked to his bedside table to pick up a book. "But speaking of terrible presents, this Muggle book you bought me is ridiculous." He shoved it toward Mia as he walked back to the doorway. "Ask Evans if Muggles really think this about witches and wizards."

"It's just a story, Sirius." Mia sighed, taking the book in one hand as she placed her cat on the ground, urging it to run down the hall and not back into Sirius's room. "Not History of Magic."

"He's not even a *real* wizard, Mia!" Sirius shouted.

"Oz isn't a *real* place. It's a *story*, Sirius. It's supposed to be read for fun."

He shook his head. "It's mental. Wizard doesn't have actual magic, half the witches are clearly Death Eaters, and the *big twist* is that the Muggle girl was wearing her Portkeys the whole time?"

"Her shoes were not Portkeys." Mia giggled at how ridiculous he was being. If he was this irritated by the *Wizard of Oz*, Mia was determined to get him a collection of Muggle tales for his next birthday. *Maybe* The Lord of the Rings. *No pictures and lots and lots of words. Big words too.*

"Useless object charmed to take her home?" Sirius crossed his arms, ready for a debate over this. "What the hell else would you call that?"

Mia thought for a moment and then grunted, "Ugh, fine, they were Portkeys."

"I'm still not entirely certain that the whole thing wasn't set up by those goblins."

"Munchkins," she corrected him.

"You're not allowed to buy me books anymore."

"You're not allowed to buy me *pets* anymore."

"Fine. Can we take them *both* back now?"

Mia narrowed her eyes and shoved the book back into Sirius's hands.

"Are we talking about the cat?" Remus inquired as he walked into Sirius's room, the book he and Mia had been reading together in the library was in his hand, a thumb marking the page they had left off on.

"You don't like Snuffles either?" Mia gaped at her boyfriend, looking down as her cat wound itself around his leg, rubbing against him affectionately. She laughed at the look of pure disgust on Remus's face as he tried to non-violently shake the cat away from him. "Just look how pretty he is!"

"I love *you*. I *hate* your cat."

She smirked. "He'll grow on you."

"Bring him out next full moon, and I'll eat him." Remus's nose twitched. "I'm not even joking about that. Little bugger bit me this morning."

"At least you heal quickly. The bastard was using me as a scratching post all afternoon," Sirius complained, showing off his left arm and all its tiny scratches as he thrust his book into Remus's hands. "Here. Remus, she won't take this back. *You* read it."

Remus smiled and tapped the book lightly with his fingers. "Finished already?"

Sirius folded his arms across his chest and threw a hard smile at Remus. "I *can* read, you know. I got more O.W.L.s than you."

Remus chuckled, passing his own book into Mia's open hands before he flipped open the cover of *The Wizard of Oz*, casually glimpsing over the pages. "Not calling into question your intelligence, Pads. So what did you think of it?"

"Don't ask him that," Mia cautioned her boyfriend.

"He wasn't even a *real* wizard!" Sirius shouted.

"He also thinks that the silver slippers were Portkeys," Mia informed Remus, who immediately burst into laughter. "Speaking of Portkeys though, I've been playing around with an idea I could use some help with if either of you are interested. I want to make

Portkeys that are connected like your chain." She gestured to Sirius, who still wore his silver chain Portkey, never having removed it once since she'd gifted it to him years earlier, especially since it had saved his life. "Only, instead of keying them to a place, they would be connected to another charmed item, a twin."

"What for?" Remus asked, passing the book back to Sirius, who took it begrudgingly.

Mia threw her head back dramatically and sighed. "Honestly? I'm bored."

She had gone through Hogwarts twice now. While she fully planned on finally completing her seventh year the following fall, there was only so much that she could do without accidentally making herself Head Girl, a position she knew was meant for Lily. Mia spent years holding back her own talent in class, doing what she could not to show off, since she had not only already learnt most spells but mastered them years earlier, non-verbally at that, and many even wandlessly. She spent a short time fourth year doing her Animagus training, but aside from creating new spells, potions, and charms, Mia put all of her effort into reinforcing her Occlumency shields and trying to learn Legilimency without actually breaking into someone's mind against their will, something she found to be absolutely foul.

Remus smiled at her affectionately. "I meant, what would you *use* these connected Portkeys for?"

"Maybe for Aurors?" Mia suggested with a shrug of her shoulders. "Think about it. Say an Auror is tracking someone who Disapparates. He can't be followed, especially if he Apparated into a place where wards prohibit unknown entry, but Portkeys are different, and they can override some wards. If the Auror were to slip a charmed half of a Portkey into their target's robe pocket, they could follow them."

Remus raised a brow. "And appear out of the *pocket*."

"It's a work in progress." Mia scrunched up her face in irritation.

"It's genius." Sirius grinned. "I can already think of seven—no, eight—ways to use them for pranks."

**December 29th, 1976**

*The memory of blood was overwhelming and caused her stomach to turn. Her head turned to the side as she stared into the glare of Bellatrix Lestrange. It had been years since she had had a nightmare about her Death Eater torturer. Confronting the witch outside of Malfoy Manor after Narcissa and Lucius's wedding had somehow cured her of her fear, but Bellatrix was still staring at Mia.*

*Instead of cold and ruthless eyes looking back into her own, these eyes were empty.*

*Mia could briefly hear the sound of a Cruciatus Curse being thrown in the distance as she looked down and realised that the blood she had been smelling was pouring out of a large gash in Bellatrix's throat. Sight and smell were overpowering, but the sound was muffled other than the loud noise of a crying dog. She could scarcely hear the sound of a man and woman fighting, but one word was clear as day, "Sectumsempra!" She turned her head to see an older Lucius Malfoy collapse to the ground bleeding, revealing a furious Draco behind him.*

*Suddenly, she was standing outside of Gringotts beside Harry, Ron, Sirius, and Draco. A pile of Death Eaters behind them. Dream or memory? Mia wondered to herself as she stepped close to Sirius.*

*"You're not a killer," he said to Draco but looked at her.*

*She stared down at the pile of bodies where one had been left breathing: Crabbe Sr.*

*In the blink of an eye, he stopped breathing, and she glanced down to see a green light leave her wand, striking the man repeatedly in the chest as though she could not stop herself. His body quickly shifted into the unmoving bodies of the Carrow twins—this time at the young age of seventeen, both branded as Death Eaters—Amycus with a smug expression on his face, and Alecto laughing even as the green light of the Killing Curse struck her over and over.*

*In the distance, she could see a seventeen-year-old Hermione Granger with a large book in her lap, Ron and Harry sitting beside her.*

*"Isn't there any way of putting yourself back together?" Ron asked.*

*"Yes," Hermione affirmed with a hollow smile, "but it would be excruciatingly painful."*

*Harry looked at her, curious, and challenged, "Why? How do you do it?"*

*"Remorse. You've got to really feel what you've done. There's a footnote. Apparently, the pain of it can destroy you. I can't see Voldemort attempting it, somehow, can you?"*

*Mia felt a sharp pain in her chest as she looked back down at the laughing bodies of the Carrow twins; unaffected by the Killing Curse her wand was throwing at them of its own will. She tried to get it to*

*stop, but it would not relent. Tears poured down her cheeks as she screamed, begging it to end, and it finally did when a chill fell over her body and a high, cold voice penetrated her mind.*

*"Allow me to show you what a Killing Curse is supposed to look like," Voldemort hissed and aimed the Elder Wand at her.*

"No!"

"—a!—ia!—Mia! Mia!" Remus's voice penetrated through her subconscious; an echo slowly increasing in volume and tugging on the corners of her mind.

However, it was not his voice that eventually pulled her out of her nightmare. A loud screaming noise echoed inside her room at Potter Manor, and her eyes opened quickly, shocked by the alarm coming from the mistletoe hanging over her bedroom door.

"Fuck!" Remus cursed. "Sirius!"

Sirius appeared in the doorway with a grin on his face, having heard the alarm. Glancing at the scene, his smile faded instantly. "What's happening?"

"Your bloody alarm is going off, and Mia's having a nightmare!" Remus snarled.

"Shit! I'll fix it." He aimed his wand at the mistletoe, looking guilty even as he silenced it. He then spotted Mia, shaking on her bed, pale and sweaty as Remus pulled her against his chest, wrapping protective arms around her. "Mia, I'm *so* sorry."

"It's all right, love," Remus whispered into her mane of curls. "You're safe. I've got you. I've got you." He kissed the top of her head.

Sirius knelt down at the side of Mia's bed, looking up at her mournfully as he took one of her hands within his own.

The doorway was suddenly filled by Lily, who had heard the commotion and came running from her room, only to find both Remus and Sirius taking care of Mia. She frowned at the sight, looking like she wanted to help but was at a loss as to how.

Suddenly, James shoved past Lily with little regard, and she gasped as he burst into the room, completely ignoring her other than to say, "Move!"

Remus stood, letting James take his place on the bed, pulling Mia into his long arms.

"Are you all right?"

"M'fine, Jamie," Mia mumbled. "Just a bad one."

"Mia?" Lily whispered as she walked into the room. "Do . . . Do you want to talk about it?"

"No." Mia shook her head, trying to rid herself of the image of dead Death Eaters and Voldemort.

Lily stepped closer. "Mia, I think you should—"

"She said no, Evans! Back off!" James snapped at her.

Mia watched as a look of shock passed over Lily's features at James's anger; she had only seen him angry a few times in the years that they had known one another, and never once had it been directed at *her*. She gulped at the sight, clearly caught completely off-guard by this version of the boy who had sought after her for so many years.

Taking a breath, Lily threw her shoulders back and lifted her chin determinedly. "No. She's *my* friend, and I've been watching her go through this for six years." She stepped closer to the bed, ignoring the dirty look that James continued to give her.

At least Sirius and Remus looked guilty over the news that Lily had known about Mia's nightmares, which meant that she had been having them during times when they had not been able to help her.

"You can't just put a plaster on a problem like this and hope it goes away."

"What's a plaster?" Sirius asked, his brows furrowed in confusion. Everyone ignored him.

"Evans," James growled. "You have no idea . . . no right to—"

Mia put a hand on her brother's arm. "Jamie, it's fine."

"It's *not*."

"I'm a Muggle-born," she blurted out.

"Mia!" James shouted, his hazel eyes wide. Remus, Sirius, and Lily all stared at the siblings, looks of confusion and shock covering their faces.

"Jamie, I'm so tired of secrets," Mia admitted quietly, a sob being held in the back of her throat. She frowned, wishing she could say more and unburden herself of all of her secrets, but Dumbledore had spelled her to prevent exactly that. "They're killing me. It's too much. It's too heavy, and I can't keep them all in anymore."

"I don't understand . . ." Sirius gaped. "How are you Muggle-born?"

"I'm adopted," Mia confessed. "The Potters took me in a month before we all started Hogwarts. My family—my *biological* family," she corrected herself at the look of sadness on James's face, "they're . . ." *in the future . . . somewhere in Australia, Obliviated*, "gone . . . because of Death Eaters. Because of You-Know-Who," she added,

working her way around the truth that Dumbledore's spell kept her from uttering. "Dumbledore placed me with the Potters to protect me."

"That's how you know so much about the Muggle world." Lily sat down on the other side of Mia, opposite James, and took her friend's hand while Sirius and Remus stared on.

"Were you . . . ?" Sirius hesitated, guilt overwhelming his expression. "Do you know who the Death Eaters were?" He swallowed hard, looking terrified to hear that perhaps it was someone he knew, someone to whom he was related.

"No," Mia lied, frowning as she realised the reason Sirius was asking. How could she tell him that it was, in fact, *his* family that had done such awful things? That it was Bellatrix who tortured her—tortured them *both*. "I'm so sorry I've lied to you all, and that I've made Jamie lie—"

"Don't apologise for anything, Mia," James insisted. He kissed her temple and hugged her close. "I've never lied. You're my sister and always have been, as far as I'm concerned. You're a Potter."

"Doesn't make a difference to me in the slightest," Remus promised.

"Nor me," Sirius agreed.

"Certainly not me." Lily smiled brightly, trying to help remove the tense air around them. "Although, I'm a little annoyed that you let me go on and on teaching you about television." She laughed, and everyone joined in a little when Mia cracked a smile.

After half a minute of absolute silence, Mia quietly said, "I don't want to be broken anymore," still clinging to James with one arm while she squeezed Lily's hand with one of her own.

"Mia, you're not—" James tried to insist, but Mia interrupted him.

"I *am*," she stated clearly. "Jamie, I really, *really* am. I could have killed Carrow. It would have been easy, and I didn't even think about it. I don't want to be a killer. I don't want to have a broken soul." She frowned, thinking of the future, of Voldemort and Horcruxes. "So I'll try and talk about things when I need to . . . when I can, but I need you all to promise me to never tell another soul. Not Mary, or Alice, or Frank . . . and not *Peter*," she added with great emphasis.

One by one, they made an oath, swearing upon their magic to keep her secrets.

## Chapter Sixty-One

### *House Mia*

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*We're teenagers.  
We count the years,  
We think we're smart  
But we're not.  
We don't know anything*  
(Teenagers - Haley Williams)

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**January 9th, 1977**

When the Marauders, Mia, and Lily arrived at King's Cross, they were shocked as the train left the station with one of their friends missing. They had not heard a word from Peter over the hols. Not even his usual Christmas package for all of them, filled with a large selection of Honeydukes sweets, had been sent; the one for which Remus was historically known for keeping the chocolate part all to himself, setting aside the Sugar Quills, Ice Mice, and Licorice Wands for the rest of them. But Christmas came and went with not a single owl.

A part of Mia had been happy not to have to think about Peter over her hols. Nevertheless, after dealing with her nightmares regarding the Carrow twins and her lingering guilt over the accidental death of a future Crabbe Sr, she felt a strange worry for Peter, especially since James, Sirius, and Remus were a nightmare of concern over their missing comrade.

When they arrived back at Hogwarts, all five teenagers made their way to Dumbledore's office, lingering outside, shouting random sweets names at the gargoyle. Finally, it opened; not to let them in, but rather to let Dumbledore and a terrified-looking Peter out.

Purplish-blue skin puffed out from underneath the boy's eyes, adding to the prominent five o'clock shadow on his chin. Mia frowned at the sight. As much as she hated the person Peter would become, as much as she disliked most of who he was *now*, she knew the look on his face and felt mildly sympathetic. She had worn similar shadows under her eyes during the year that she, Harry, Ron, and Sirius were on the run from Death Eaters

and Snatchers while searching for Horcruxes. Being hunted did something physical to a person; it took years off lives, and Peter Pettigrew suddenly looked poorly aged.

Dumbledore smiled. "Ah, I see escorts have already arrived for you, Mr Pettigrew. I'll leave you to the care of your Housemates," he said before returning up the spiral staircase to his office.

"Wormtail, where the hell were you?" Sirius asked loudly, his brows furrowed in concern.

"Sorry." Peter frowned. "My . . . My family was . . . attacked."

Lily gasped, covering her mouth before wrapping Peter into a hug. "Are you okay?"

Peter smiled sadly, patting her on the back a few times, looking as though he did not want to get too close to her with James hovering, though he appeared gratified to see his friend looked more concerned for *him* than Lily at the moment.

"I'm fine. Can we head back to the tower? I really just want to get out of the hallways." He looked around suspiciously as if someone was hidden in the dark shadows of the alcoves, listening in on their conversation.

Once the six of them reached Gryffindor Tower, Remus and Lily went into prefect mode, ushering the younger years to their dorms and out of the common room before everyone retired to the boys' dorm room to hear Peter's story. Sirius and James sat on Sirius's bed. They watched as Peter sat on the edge of James's mattress next to Lily, who continued to try and comfort him. Meanwhile, Mia crawled in beside Remus. He put an arm around her as Peter informed them that his family's new apothecary in France had been burnt to the ground, and he and his parents had narrowly escaped with their lives.

"Mum's still at St Mungo's," Peter told them with a frown, looking guilty. "They said she'll be okay, but the burns were pretty bad."

Mia disliked the look he wore; it strangely reminded her of Harry, which put her on edge over the comparison. Peter was blaming himself for not being able to protect his family the same way that Harry had been grief-stricken over not having saved Sirius, or Cedric, as well as taking on the blame for what Bellatrix had done to *her*. Mia struggled with the surge of sympathy coming from within her, trying to shut out her knowledge of the future.

"Is she in the Spell Damage Ward?"

"Why *would* she be?" James asked. "It was a fire, right?"

"Yes, but Peter said that they were *attacked*," Mia said.

Peter nodded slowly and whispered, "It was *cursed* fire."

Lily inhaled sharply in shock. "Someone used . . . used Fiendfyre against your family? God, you're all lucky to be alive!"

"I'm sorry, Peter," Mia whispered.

"I felt so helpless," Peter admitted, a rapidly rising expression of anger flashed across his soft features. "We couldn't see anything. If the people in the back of the shop hadn't started screaming . . ." He shook with fear and bitterness simultaneously, scowling as he said, "We wouldn't have even known to run. Mum went back in to try and help . . . So stupid."

"That was very brave of her," Mia told him.

"She almost *died*!" Peter turned and glared at Mia. "She *could* have died."

"But she didn't, mate." Sirius stood from his bed and moved to Peter's side, patting his shoulder. "You and your parents all got out safely."

"We were the only ones," Peter confessed. "Everyone else just . . . The . . . The smell . . ."

"The Aurors will protect your family," James insisted. "Everything's going to be okay."

"The Aurors are the reason my family was targeted!" Peter stood and, for the first time in his entire life, faced James as though he had the ability to fight him.

Mia reacted immediately, reaching for her wand only to have her hand stilled by Remus, who looked at her in disbelief. She silently berated herself for acting so impulsively, trying to calm down as Peter continued to yell at them all.

"They arrested my dad, and he hadn't even done anything wrong," he spat bitterly. "It's not illegal to go into Knockturn Alley!"

Mia frowned and shook her head. *Merlin, this is a slippery slope.* She could already see the future being written out in front of her. Peter was afraid, losing what little moral certainty he might have once had, and thanks to Dumbledore's Truth Spell, Mia could not warn anyone.

"He was just . . . He *wasn't* doing anything dark," Peter continued, defending his father. "They took him anyway, and now Death Eaters are . . . I don't know, maybe they

think he's trying to spy on them or something? But Aurors won't do anything. They wouldn't even put security around my mum's room at St Mungo's."

"Maybe you should talk to Dumbledore," Mia suggested quickly. If she could not vocally do anything to change the future by telling everyone the truth, perhaps she could use a few loopholes to try and direct Peter down the *right* path. Draco had turned spy for the Order of the Phoenix, just like Severus Snape. Maybe if she got Peter to ask Dumbledore for help, she could prevent him from his ultimate and eventual betrayal. "He can help you. Keep your family safe."

"You don't understand, Mia."

"Peter, your friends will protect you!" Mia stood up, facing him. She gestured to James, Sirius, and Remus, who were all nodding emphatically. "That's what they're there for. They would die for you, just like you would die for them," she said, hoping that maybe she'd finally struck a nerve.

Peter looked like he was contemplating a few things, but the sudden sounds of fifth years below their floor shouting and laughing caused him to jump and look around in distrust.

"I shouldn't be talking about this," he muttered. "What if someone's listening?"

"We're in Gryffindor Tower," Sirius replied. "The only people here are other Gryffindors."

"I'm not a Slytherin, but I can sneak into *their* common room; same with Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw," Peter said firmly, still looking around the room as though checking for someone hiding beneath an Invisibility Cloak.

"Wait, you've been in the other common rooms?" Lily asked, but everyone ignored her.

"The tower isn't safe." Peter shook his head as he made his way back to his four-poster, pushing his way past Lily who tried to stop him. Once safely in his bed, he flicked his wand, shutting the curtains. "Hogwarts isn't safe. No one is safe!"

**May 12th, 1977**

It took months—and a substantial amount of secretly stashed firewhisky—to get Peter to relax a little. It had not helped that Death Eater reports filled an entire page of the *Daily Prophet* at least once a week. Fortunately, they were getting farther and farther away from Britain, with the last reported sighting being somewhere outside of Bulgaria.

Instead of focusing on O.W.L.s as they had the year prior, the sixth years had all signed up for Apparition testing. Bitterly, Remus could not afford the classes, especially since his father had withdrawn what little money had been deposited in his personal account at Gringotts and refused to return any of his owls. Ignoring his unspoken pride, Charlus and Dorea insisted on helping out. They paid for Remus's Apparition classes and license testing, even secretly adding money to his vault to cover anything he needed at Hogwarts. Regular reports were given to them from Mia, James, and Sirius as to whether or not Remus was properly taking advantage of the gifted Galleons.

Mia prided herself on being the first in her year to get her license. She allowed only a small part of herself to feel guilty, considering she had been Apparating for close to a decade and had been able to successfully Side-Along at least two other people—it had been the third extra person during the hunt for Horcruxes that had caused her to be splinched. Thankfully *that* scar was not due to show up for another six months or so, but Mia was already worried about what she was going to say to people who saw it—mostly Remus, who often had access to her bare skin. *One* dark scar was something he was currently willing to ignore at her request, but a splinching scar that ran down her back? She was not certain that Remus would be willing to remain silent on the matter.

Lily and Remus gained their Apparition licenses right after Mia, followed by Snape and several other more focused Slytherins like Damocles and Adrian Abbott, as well as a slew of Ravenclaws. James, Peter, and Sirius struggled, but only because they found it more interesting to try and distract one another than focus on their own Apparating. After a good scolding from Mia, all three boys put more effort into not splinching themselves. Mia was grateful she did not need to treat a splinched Sirius Black—again.

As spring began preparing for summer, Remus, James, and Mia celebrated their coming of age with butterbeer and a feast from Honeydukes. Firewhisky had long since been banned at Lily's behest, though Sirius kept a stash of it in the bottom of his trunk,

just for special occasions—or Fridays. During Easter hols, Sirius, James, and Mia all returned to Potter Manor, while Remus decided to stick around Hogwarts with Peter, who had been told by his parents to stay behind for his own safety.

When the Potter Manor residents returned to school, Sirius was eager to share how they spent their short holiday.

"I can't believe you three got tattoos for your birthdays." Remus shook his head in amusement as James pulled open his shirt to show off the freshly healed ink on his chest.

Mia held down the back of her blouse, revealing the most rebellious thing she had ever done in the form of permanent Latin text flowing over her right shoulder blade.

"*They* got tattoos for their birthdays," Sirius insisted with a smirk. "*I* got a tattoo because *they* didn't know where the tattoo shop was, and I wasn't just going to walk in and not buy something. That's rude," he said primly as though it were an obvious truth that Remus and Peter were unaware of.

"Evans is going to kill you if she ever sees that." Peter laughed at James, who was busy standing in front of a mirror examining the lily of the valley tattoo running the length of his Sectumsempra scar. It was with magical ink so that the lilies closed and bloomed when touched.

James grinned, touching the flowers obsessively just as he had been doing since he left the tattoo shop. "Well, it was either *this* or turning my scar into a zip."

"I told him to have the guy tattoo 'open at this end' at the top of it," Sirius said.

"And despite those lovely ideas of *permanent body modification*," Mia said sarcastically, "you *still* settled on a flower." She shook her head at her brother, who continued to fondle his ink and watch with interest as each flower opened and closed, smacking away Peter's hand when he tried to touch one.

James, ignoring the obvious insult, grinned proudly. "Not just *any* flower."

"No, I suppose not." Mia smiled, wondering if there would be one day when Lily would appreciate the ridiculous sentiment. "I still wouldn't show her . . . for a very long time," she said with a decided insistence, and then added, "if ever."

Remus hovered behind Mia. He ran his fingers over the Latin words, sending a shiver down her spine. "I *like* yours," he whispered, a small growl in the back of his throat that only she could hear. "*Vita frui vita vivet*. What's that mean?"

"It means 'live life and enjoy life.'" She smiled brightly and turned to kiss him, though Remus would not have been able to tell why she was so affectionate with him over a tattoo. "I consider them my own *personal* House words. House Mia."

"I got *my* House words too!" Sirius announced with a barking laugh.

Remus turned on his friend and gaped at him in disbelief. "You *actually* had someone permanently ink '*Toujours Pur*' on you?"

They had all seen the scar that was permanently etched across Sirius's hand, something he had tried to cover up multiple times by provoking Mia in her fox form to bite him during full moons. The small words were barely legible now, having been sprinkled with a variety of small scars in the shape of sharp tooth marks.

"Padfoot, you hate your House *and* your House words."

"Which is why I got them tattooed on my *arse*," Sirius announced as he pulled down the right side of his black jeans, a look of utter glee on his face despite the fact that each of his friends turned away at the sight of his pale backside. "Get it? Get it?"

Mia rolled her eyes. "Yes. *Very* clever."

"Get it, Moony?" Sirius grinned as he scooted closer to Remus. "*Toujours Pur* my arse."

"How drunk was he?" Remus asked James, turning his attention away from Sirius with a laugh.

"I was the only sober one," James answered. "We had to take the Knight Bus home because I was afraid these two would splinch themselves if they tried Apparating," he said, gesturing to Sirius and Mia.

"If Walburga wasn't such a psychotic bitch hell-bent on having me killed, I'd want to show her this," Sirius declared with pride as he looked over his shoulder at the full-length mirror that James was standing in front of.

"Pads, please pull your trousers up," James pleaded as he finally buttoned up his shirt.

Sirius waggled his eyebrows at his best friend. "Turning you on, Prongs?"

"Well, I think I've seen all I want to," Mia began as she turned to leave.

"Nothing you haven't seen before, kitten!"

Mia rolled her eyes at him. "Remus and I are going to go enjoy a nice day outside while you two sit in here and ogle Sirius's arse." She waved to Peter and James with a smirk. "I'm sure he'll be very appreciative of it."

She grabbed Remus's hand and pulled him out the door.

"Are they gone?" Sirius whispered from the open door of the room, listening carefully for the sound of Remus and Mia.

Peter nodded. "Yep."

"Good." Sirius grinned deviously. "I came up with a lovely prank that Remus wouldn't approve of and might cause Mia to feed us to the Giant Squid," he announced as he walked back into the room, buckling his trousers before reaching for James's trunk and digging out the Invisibility Cloak and the Marauder's Map.

"That bad?" James asked with great interest.

"Probably worse. I don't expect to come out of this one with all my limbs intact. But it'll be so worth it. Evans for sure will have our bollocks for this," Sirius said knowingly, and yet, still enthusiastically.

"Go on," James said eagerly.

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Down by the Black Lake beneath the beech tree, Mia leant back against Remus's chest as she sat between his long legs. One of his hands had its fingers laced with hers as he kissed along the back of her neck while she read from the newest edition of *Hogwarts, A History*.

"I *really* like your tattoo," Remus whispered against the shell of her ear. His free hand pulled against the back of her blouse, leaning down to place a soft kiss against the mark.

"I'm glad you approve." Mia grinned, tempted to go back to the dorms and kick the other boys out. James would make a fuss, but it would be worth it to convince him to leave. "The words mean a great deal to me."

"Any reason you chose them?" he asked curiously as he ran the pad of his index finger over it before leaning forward and kissing the crevice where her neck met her shoulder.

Mia smiled softly. "A reminder. I worry too much, and I need to focus on being happy."

"I like that. I like you being happy."

"I like you being happy too." She turned and looked up at him, relaxing as he brushed his lips against hers.

Mia closed her eyes and sighed into his mouth as the world around them disappeared. Here, in his arms, kissing him, she was certain she could be led to believe that everything in the world was perfect. When he pulled away, she touched his cheek, running a finger along the top of the scar that bisected his face.

"Promise me you'll always try to be happy."

"I think I can do that . . ." Remus grinned and moved to kiss her again.

Mia pulled away from him. "I mean it, Remus," she said seriously. "No matter what happens. If everything just turns to shit, please try to find happiness in something. Don't hold yourself back for anything."

He groaned, burying his face in her tangled mess of chestnut locks. "You're doing future talk again. I thought we weren't going to do that anymore," he reminded her, brushing his knuckles up and down her bare arm.

"You don't think about it at all?"

"I'd rather think about you, this, us."

She sighed, nuzzling against his head. "I'm sorry, love."

"You can make it up to me." Remus reached over her shoulder, closing the book in her hand and setting it carefully to the side, putting it down on top of his book bag.

Mia appreciated the extra effort he took in making sure the book was not damaged in the slightest by the nearby wet grass.

"I seem to remember recently reading something about enjoying life," he said with a grin, putting his large hands on her hips and turning her around in his lap until she was straddling him. "I wonder how we could put that to use."

He threaded his fingers through her thick hair before kissing her soundly, groaning when his tongue came into contact with her own, massaging it languidly.

"Mmm," Mia moaned. "Do you think it would be suspicious if we sneaked off to the Whomping Willow?" she whispered against his lips, and Remus chuckled in response before kissing her again.

Their quiet moment was disrupted by the sound of high-pitched screaming in the background, followed by screeching, and the feel of a rough breeze just above them. Mia and Remus separated and looked up as Sirius, James, and Peter flew their brooms quickly overhead, all laughing as they made their way over the Black Lake.

"POTTER!" Lily's yell came from just up the hill, causing Mia to turn and watch as her friend mounted a broom and flew upward, gripping the handle tightly with a look of pure fury on her face as she continued screaming. "BLACK!"

"PETTIGREW! YOU'RE DEAD!" Mary came up just behind Lily as she quickly followed on her broom. Both girls flew off in the direction of the lake.

"We couldn't have been gone twenty minutes. What on earth has my brother done now?" Mia asked with a scowl, crawling off of Remus's lap as Alice and Frank walked down to join them. Alice wore an expression of disapproval. Frank looked positively scandalised. "Better yet, what has Sirius talked him into doing?"

"I don't know how they did it, but they were able to break into the girls' dorm rooms and steal our . . ." Alice's voice lowered to a whisper as she finished, "our underthings."

"Mia," Remus said, tapping her shoulder, "your bra is hanging off the back of Sirius's broom."

Mia groaned. "Which one?"

"The pink lace."

"Oh." She sighed in relief and reached for her book. "I didn't really like that one."

"I did," Remus said bitterly. His eyes narrowed at Sirius, who was laughing as Mary sped after a screaming Peter, who was trying to use a flailing Giant Squid arm for protection and distraction as he flew across the lake, dodging the few hexes sent his way as he rode off with her red knickers hung over the handle of his Cleansweep.

"Then *you* go get it back from them," Mia told her possessive boyfriend. "I'm not playing into whatever game this is." She opened her book, trying to find the place where she had last left off. "I can't believe they got Lily on a broom to chase them. She hates flying almost as much as I do."

"Why *is* that?" Frank asked as he and Alice sat down, hand in hand, beside Remus and Mia.

"It's unnatural," Mia explained. "If we were made to fly, we would have been born with wings."

"Or with magic . . . to enchant brooms and then fly on them," Remus said sarcastically. He laughed when Mia smacked his arm.

"Don't get smart with me, Moony," she scolded with a smirk on her face. "Go and get my bra before Sirius feeds it to the Giant Squid."

He kissed her, muttering against her lips, "Do I look like I play fetch?"

"*You're* the one who likes me in pink lace," she whispered, and Remus growled low against her skin, causing gooseflesh to pop up over her arms.

"Not to interrupt what's clearly a very private moment—which I should have walked away from several minutes ago," Alice muttered, blushing as she was forced to interrupt Remus and Mia, "but I think something's wrong."

"What?" Mia turned and looked above the lake where Sirius and James were flying in large circles. Lily, who had been chasing them, stopped abruptly in the centre of their circles, her broom hovering for several long moments before bucking and thrashing about. Lily gave a shout as she clung to the handle tightly.

"Evans? Evans! You all right?" James called, turning his broom around to look at Lily.

"What is she doing?" Remus asked.

"Oh, Merlin." Mia stood up. "Someone's jinxed her broom! Jamie! Sirius!" she shouted up at the boys, waving her hands to try and get their attention. "Get Lily back on the ground!"

Sirius looked confused, but James immediately went into action. He turned his broom and aimed it toward Lily as hers tilted back into a vertical position, causing her to scream and dangle over the lake, gripping the handle as tightly as she could.

"Remus, look for someone," Mia told him. "She's being jinxed. Someone will have to be keeping eye contact with her, so start looking." She turned, looking around as well. She had seen a jinxed broom before, during Harry's first Quidditch match, and a part of her was not surprised when she noticed Severus Snape hanging back near the edge of a group of trees, watching with wide eyes and muttering to himself.

Mia growled and moved to reach for her wand when she remembered that the *last* time she had suspected Snape for jinxing a broom, he had been the one trying to *save* Harry. Was he trying to save Lily as well? Mia stopped and scanned the rest of the area in the hopes of finding the *real* culprit. Before she could spot anything other than a

head of *non-greasy* black hair disappearing into the castle, Lily screamed, and everyone turned to see her fall sixty feet into the depths of the ice-cold water of the Black Lake.

"LILY!" James screamed, forcing his broom into a nosedive in an attempt to try and catch her before she hit the water. He missed her just as she disappeared beneath the surface. Not wasting a single moment, both James and Sirius dove off their brooms, plunging into the water.

Mia gasped and ran toward them, but Remus reached the water first, jumping in and swimming until he met his friends halfway, helping to hold Lily's head above water as the three of them dragged her back to the bank.

When they got there, Alice and Mia took over. They lifted Lily in their arms and laid her flat on the ground just as Mary and Peter landed, looks of worry and shock on their faces as they dropped their brooms and rushed over.

"Lily!" James shouted, pulling her into his arms and tilting her head back to look at her. Face pale and lifeless, Lily's eyes were closed and her skin was cold. "Lily!" he shouted again, reaching for his wand. "*Rennervate!*" Nothing happened. "*Rennervate!*"

Mia pushed at her hysterical brother. "Jamie, move; let me get to her!"

"Lily, please wake up," he cried, cradling her to his chest desperately.

"Pull him back," Mia ordered.

Remus slipped his arms under James's and lifted and dragged his friend away from Lily's unconscious body, struggling as James fought against him.

"Sirius, I need your help," Mia said.

"Is she dead?" Sirius asked in horror as he stared down into Lily's pale, cold face.

"Pay attention!" If *anyone* needed to know in detail what she was about to attempt, it was Sirius, who would have to one day do the same thing to save *her* life.

"We didn't mean to . . . It was a joke . . ." he stammered, running a worried hand through his hair, tears springing to his eyes. "I don't know what happened with her broom, but—"

"Sirius!" Mia yelled. "I need you to pay attention to what I'm doing. I'm going to tilt her head back and breathe into her mouth for her," she explained quickly. "When I stop, I need you to press here." Taking his hands, she placed them against Lily's sternum. "Press hard, over and over again, until I tell you to stop, so I can breathe for her again. Okay?"

"Mia . . ." Sirius whispered.

"Okay!?"

He nodded.

Mia tilted Lily's head back and pinched her nose before placing her mouth over the redhead's, sealing it and breathing a deep breath into her. She watched as Lily's chest rose slightly. A few more breaths and Mia nodded to Sirius who began to follow her instructions to the letter, trying to ignore the sounds of James crying in the background—threatening Remus, who continued to subdue him—as they focused completely on Lily.

"Come on, Lils," Mia whispered before she breathed again, fear sinking into her as she could see the future evaporate right before her eyes. No Lily. No Lily and James. *No Harry*. She breathed again and tried to block out the sounds of Alice and Mary weeping nearby. One last breath and Mia felt Lily's body twitch against her. She sat up quickly, just in time for Lily to jolt forward, coughing roughly until water expelled itself from her throat.

Sirius gasped, falling back onto the grass in shock at the sight, his grey eyes pale and wide.

"Lily!" James shouted, breaking away from Remus, who looked just as surprised at the sight of Lily taking in deep breaths. "You're alive, oh thank Merlin, you're alive!" He knelt in front of her, taking her face into his hands gently as he studied the depths of her eyes. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, Lily."

"Potter?" Lily whimpered, her dull gaze raking over his face. She leant back after blinking repeatedly, placing a hand out to balance herself on the grass. James released her cheeks, and there was half a second before her free hand smacked clean across his face, hard enough to turn his head to the side.

"Did you three jinx her broom?" Remus demanded, his eyes narrowed at Sirius, James, and Peter.

"No!" Peter yelled. "We just stole their bras and—"

"It was just supposed to be a joke," Sirius muttered, still grief-stricken.

"Well, it wasn't funny!" Lily shouted hoarsely. "Mia, do you really think someone jinxed my broom?" She was still taking the time to take in slow, deep breaths. "It's not really my broom; I borrowed it from the shed when we came running out here. Whose broom was it?"

Mia shook her head as she reached for her wand, casting a Warming Charm over everyone. "It doesn't matter. A jinx like that wasn't put on it *before* you picked it up. It was put on while you were flying."

"Someone did this to her on purpose?" Mary asked with wide eyes.

"Maybe it was an accident," Lily mumbled.

"Maybe we should tell Dumbledore." Sirius moved to stand up, holding his hand out to Lily to help her to stand. She looked at it suspiciously for a moment before taking it.

Peter gaped. "What? Why?"

"I . . ." Sirius hesitated. "I think Death Eaters are being recruited still. And *that* was an initiation."

"What?" James shouted before getting to his feet.

"When . . ." Sirius paused and groaned, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Fuck. When I was attacked last summer, someone mentioned that they were doing things wrong with me. They were trying to brand me *first* and let me prove myself later. Proving yourself amongst Death Eaters means killing someone," he explained, ignoring the looks of shock provided by Frank, Alice and Mary, "specifically a Muggle, a blood-traitor, or a Muggle-born."

Mia nodded in understanding. "*That's* why Alecto and Amycus came after you and Jamie."

"It was Snivellus," James declared. "I know it!"

"Don't you dare, Potter!" Lily snarled. It was clear to everyone at Hogwarts that Lily Evans and Severus Snape were no longer friends, but Lily was not the type of person to see someone innocent blamed for something they might not have done just because James had a bad history with him.

"Jamie, it's not Snape," Mia said before her brother rushed off to do something stupid.

"How can you be so sure?" he asked her, ignoring Lily's glares.

"Because if he was planning on joining the Death Eaters and had his pick of Hogwarts, he would have jinxed *yours* or *Sirius's* brooms! Not Lily's!"

"Then who the hell did it?" James demanded, pacing back and forth along the bank, running a hand through his wet hair and shaking the water out of it.

"I can't believe they're recruiting Death Eaters inside Hogwarts . . ." Lily whispered in horror.

Mia nodded, thinking of Draco. "Supposedly, they only have to be sixteen."

Sirius's eyes widened, and he turned to look at her, his face draining of colour.

"What day is it?"

"What? Why?" James asked.

"The twelfth of May," Lily answered. "Why? What's wrong?"

"I know who did it," Sirius growled and stormed up toward the castle shouting, "Fuck!"

## Chapter Sixty-Two

### *Suspicious*

---

*Everything you say to me  
Takes me one step closer to the edge  
And I'm about to break  
I need a little room to breathe  
Cause I'm one step closer to the edge  
I'm about to break  
(One Step Closer - Linkin Park)*

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**May 12th, 1977**

"Sirius, where are you going?" Mia called after him as he stormed up the hill away from the Black Lake.

The moment he took off, Mia turned, trying to find the words to explain to the rest of their friends what caused him to storm away; somehow she could not bring herself to tell them that Sirius was convinced his younger brother was responsible for the botched attempt on Lily's life. Instead, she requested that Remus and Frank escort Lily to the hospital wing so Madam Pomfrey could give her a quick check and make certain she was all right. James tried protesting, but when Lily gave him a scathing look, he backed away with multiple apologies, offering to scan the lake with Peter to retrieve the fallen brooms and any undergarments that surfaced.

"Sirius!" Mia yelled. "Padfoot! Where are you going?"

"To see Dumbledore!" Sirius snapped at her when she finally caught up to him, taking two of her steps to match each of his long strides. "I fucking knew it! I knew that I should have brought Regulus with me to the manor when I escaped Grimmauld Place. It would have technically been kidnapping since he wasn't going to come willingly, but I wasn't of age at the time, so it's not like I'd be sent to Azkaban for it."

"Don't say things like that," Mia said sharply at his casual mention of going to Azkaban. The image of Sirius's mugshot in the *Daily Prophet* came to mind. She recalled his sunken face, and his long, matted hair; Sirius had looked the perfect mixture of madness and defeat. She clenched her eyes tightly and shook her head side to side as though she could erase the image from her mind like an Etch-a-Sketch.

"If I'd done something right about my brother, he wouldn't be a bloody Death Eater to-be!"

Sirius's volume pulled her from her dark thoughts, and she found herself trying to keep up with him once again, as the two of them burst through the doors into the entrance hall.

"It was him, Mia. I know it was."

Mia also had a strong feeling it had been Regulus. She had spotted a head of black hair ducking out of sight while everyone else was distracted with retrieving Lily from the lake. The only other wizards with hair *that* black were Sirius and Snape, both of whom had been in her sight at the time.

"He tried to kill Evans," Sirius said, as though he could not quite believe the words as he said them—as though he needed to continually remind himself in order to be able to report his own flesh and blood for attempted murder. "Merlin, if he'd succeeded . . . I'd never be able to live with myself. Never be able to look James in the face again. Fuck! Stupid little prick."

"Don't tell Dumbledore," Mia said as Sirius took a turn toward the headmaster's office.

He spun on his heels, looking at her in complete disbelief. "Are you actually defending my brother's actions? Are you kidding me?"

She forced herself to forget that, at this moment in time, Regulus was a Voldemort supporter and potential Death Eater. It would not be long before he defected.

"Of course not! But first, we don't have actual *proof* it was Regulus. We only have the knowledge that Death Eaters *are* accepted at the age of sixteen, and it just happens to be your brother's sixteenth birthday today. If you go to Dumbledore, he'll just nod his head with that twinkle in his eyes, and offer you a sweet."

Sirius would not have a chance to prove anything, especially if Mia went with him. Dumbledore would assume that Mia was trying to change the timeline, and he would ignore their suspicions of Regulus.

No, there had to be another way.

"So, what do you suggest then, Mia?"

She smiled as the answer came to her. "McGonagall."

Minerva McGonagall had been one of her favourite professors in both time lines, though her life here as an unofficial Marauder had changed the dynamic of the relationship she had once shared with the Deputy Headmistress. While *Hermione Granger* had been an apt pupil, perhaps even a favourite of the older witch, *Mia Potter* was often considered a troublemaker, and not in the "saving the world with Harry Potter" kind of trouble that she had grown used to.

"Even if we don't have proof it was Regulus, Professor McGonagall is suspicious enough that it'll plant the idea in her head, and she'll keep an eye on him."

Twenty minutes later, Sirius and Mia found themselves sitting in front of Minerva McGonagall, who was staring at them with a mixture of suspicion, relief, and annoyance. Mia had seen the same look tossed across a desk or classroom to Harry, Ron, and even Neville, but she suddenly felt unbelievably guilty for somehow disappointing the professor who had essentially been Hermione's escort into the Wizarding world. She wondered if Minerva thought of Mia as just a spoilt pureblood witch who was wasting her talent. She made a mental note to work hard during her seventh year to prove that she was more than just James Potter's sister. Once Lily became Head Girl, it was not as though Mia needed to hold back for her friend's sake anymore.

"So, I am to believe that Mr Black—a sixteen-year-old boy—jinxed the broom of Miss Evans with the explicit purpose of ending her life. And yet, all this happened in the middle of the day, out in the open, in front of no fewer than eight students?" Minerva raised a sceptical eyebrow as she stared across the desk, looking at Sirius as though he were trying to distract her from something horrible that he had planned.

*Merlin, have the boys put this witch so on edge that she can't trust any encounter?*

Minerva turned her attention to Mia. "Did you happen to witness young Mr Black at the scene?"

"No, ma'am," Sirius said, answering for Mia, for which she was grateful, not knowing exactly what Dumbledore's Truth Spell would allow her to say, "but Death Eaters are marked when they turn sixteen, and it makes sense that—"

"How would *you* know what age Death Eaters are recruited at?" McGonagall's eyes widened, sitting up straighter as though preparing to jump to action any moment.

Sirius swallowed hard and avoided her scrutinising gaze. "Because they tried to make me one," he muttered, ignoring the soft gasp Minerva let slip past the tight line of

her mouth. "Last summer, I was . . . I was attacked in my own home. I refused and escaped, and that's why I live with the Potters now."

"Was this incident reported?" Minerva asked. "Dear boy, how on earth did you manage to get away?"

Mia's eyes widened only slightly, watching as Sirius nervously toyed with the silver chain that hung around his neck. She quietly hoped that he would not tell the entire truth, considering the creation of unofficial Portkeys—while not *technically* illegal—was greatly frowned upon.

"Floo was open," he lied. "By the time the Potters got me to St Mungo's, my parents had, apparently, already disowned me. They didn't report me missing, and I didn't want . . . I didn't want to see them again. I'm not sure what Mum and—" Sirius began but paused to correct himself, "—what *Mr and Mrs Potter* did."

"Aurors were called," Mia chimed in, recalling the memory with little effort, as that particular evening and the following days had imprinted themselves on her subconscious. The sight and smell of Sirius's blood, the burn on his forearm, and the panicked way that the Aurors and hospital staff reacted when she and James turned on them all when they had tried to separate them from Sirius. "The Ministry knows what happened."

"Is Miss Evans all right?" Professor McGonagall asked after a long moment of silence.

Mia nodded. "Yes, Professor. At least, she was well enough minutes after to start screaming at my brother," she said, earning a snort from the Deputy Headmistress.

"As charming as young Mr Potter thinks he is, I believe Miss Evans could find it in her to still berate the boy if *unconscious*," McGonagall stated primly. "Why was she flying over the lake? It was my understanding that she's not a fan of brooms."

Sirius paled, coughing into his hand. "That's really not important. We need to find Regulus."

"And you are certain this isn't some leftover sibling rivalry?"

"What?!" Sirius's grey eyes darkened, and he stood from his chair.

Mia reached up and took hold of his forearm, trying to pull him back down as the infamous Black temper took control.

"Absolutely not! Let him keep his stupid parents so long as he leaves my friends alone!"

"I understand the subject is of a sensitive and personal nature," Professor McGonagall said quietly, not looking the least bit threatened by the outburst. "But I would request that you lower your tone in my office, young man. Miss Potter, do you have reason to believe that Regulus Black is at fault?"

"Regulus is . . ." Mia began, but the words caught in her throat as she tried to focus her efforts on speaking. *Regulus is a Death Eater. Regulus is a Death Eater. Regulus Black will betray the Dark Lord.* "I . . . I believe Sirius," she managed to say clearly.

"Very well." the professor sighed, looking both concerned and burdened by the information. Mia wondered what, if anything, Dumbledore had been telling her about potential Death Eaters in the school. "I will report this to Professor Dumbledore and Professor Slughorn. Should young Mr Black display suspicious behaviour, it will be dealt with. In the meantime, I'd suggest you both see yourselves out. If you'd be accommodating, check in on Miss Evans for me."

Mia moved to leave, nodding gratefully to her professor, but Sirius did not seem ready to budge.

"What's going to happen to Regulus?"

"Should something be discovered because of the information you've provided, it will be handled. But not by *you*," Professor McGonagall insisted. "*Your* responsibility is to be a student, focus on your work, and—for the love of Godric—*try* to stay out of trouble. Leave the war to the adults."

"I'm of age," Sirius pointed out.

"That is neither here nor there, Mr Black."

"I want to fight," he added, and Mia growled at the words.

Professor McGonagall narrowed her eyes and scoffed at him. "Do I appear to have a signup sheet recruiting soldiers?"

Mia took hold of Sirius's hand and tugged. "Thank you, Professor. We'll see ourselves out."

"Oh, Mr Black? Miss Potter?" the professor called as the two opened the door to leave.

They each turned back curiously, watching as the corners of her mouth turned up ever so slightly.

"Fifty points each, for your efforts in reviving Miss Evans. Should the moment come for you to prove useful in these dark times, I believe you both to be very capable. Until you leave Hogwarts, however, I would *insist* that you focus on enjoying the few freedoms left to you."

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### June 7th, 1977

Annoyed, Sirius followed Minerva's advice to remain an unburdened teenager for as long as possible. Not long after the conference, he, James, Peter, and Remus managed to set off some of Dr Filibuster's Fabulous Wet-Start, No-Heat Fireworks in the middle of the fourth-floor corridor. The prank earned all four boys detention.

When they had come to see if Mia had seen their grand display, she rolled her eyes and said, "I've seen better," thinking fondly of her original fifth year, when the Weasley twins had so spectacularly escaped from Hogwarts under the suppression of Dolores Umbridge.

While the boys continued to cause trouble, Mia spent every last effort trying to work around the loopholes in Dumbledore's spell. She spent hours focusing on Occlumency, knowing that a skilled Occlumens could overpower Veritaserum—and since the spell was somehow the opposite of the truth serum, she thought it would help.

Despite all her efforts, she was not even able to say the words "My name is Hermione Granger" aloud, let alone warn anyone of the things that were to come. Trying to tailor her efforts to something more specific, Mia found that the Truth Spell prevented her from even *writing* the word "Horcrux" down.

Powerless to speak the truth about the future, she decided to work hard at proving things she suspected but did not yet know, as Dumbledore had advised her when he explained the Truth Spell. She spent an entire month moving through the halls of Hogwarts, her nose buried in parchment, and fingers stained with ink. Dark shadows formed under her eyes as sleep began to elude her again. If Voldemort was recruiting Death Eaters at Hogwarts, then Snape and Regulus could not be the only ones. Certainly, if she

spied on the other Slytherins long enough, she would stumble upon *new* information, and *that* she could bring to the headmaster.

Unfortunately, her efforts were proving fruitless as not a single serpent showed a hint of a Dark Mark, even in the privacy of their own common room. Mia had gained access there thanks to James's Invisibility Cloak and an extremely loud second year Slytherin, who shouted the password before slipping into the snake pit.

What she watched under the protection of the Hallowed Cloak was nothing to write home about: Regulus bore no Dark Mark on his arm, nor did he indicate that one would come anytime soon. He and Snape barely ever crossed paths anymore; when they *did*, it often resulted in a mild confrontation. It was clear the two Slytherins had exchanged their youthful alliance for a bitter animosity, which Mia could only assume had to do with Regulus's choice to attack a *particular* Muggle-born that Snape still held regard for. Either way, neither boy spoke a word to the other about it, nor did they say anything in reference to Voldemort or other known Death Eaters.

Her poor eating habits and lack of sleep began to rival those of her first experience in using a Time-Turner during her original third year. She was stretched to the breaking point; exhausted and suffering from all her efforts to change the future. Few asked her about it aside from occasionally questioning how she was sleeping and if she had eaten anything that day. Remus was hovering more than usual, despite her efforts to get some space from him and everyone else in Gryffindor Tower.

Early June found Mia at the Astronomy Tower, gazing up at the stars in a daze. A cool breeze soothed the skin around her eyes that had become sore from rubbing away the exhaustion. Leaning against the rail, she glanced straight down to the ground several hundred feet below.

Curiously, she looked at her right forearm where a new triangular-shaped scar sat on her skin, shiny and white. She scratched at the mark, bitterly recalling how stupid she had felt when she received it during her original sixth year. A stray hex courtesy of Death Eaters in the castle that had been let in by Draco. Dumbledore was dead, but no one had known that yet, so they fought on—she, Ron, Luna, and Ginny—side by side with the Order of the Phoenix.

The hex hit her from around a corner; had the older Remus Lupin not knocked her to the side, it would have struck her in the chest instead of her forearm where the scar now

sat permanently. Unable to spare a moment to acknowledge the fact she had almost been killed, Death Eaters descended upon them all. Shortly after, everyone was too busy trying to get an injured Bill Weasley to the hospital wing, so Hermione postponed taking care of her own injuries. By the time she was able to reflect on the day's event, she concluded she needed this scar to remind her what happened in the war, and how she had almost lost her life to Death Eaters—again.

The scar was a reminder of Moody's words: *Constant Vigilance*.

"You know," Remus called to her from the door of the tower. Mia turned around in surprise at his sudden appearance. "It's after curfew, and as the honourable and constantly rule-abiding prefect I am, I *should* have no problem taking away points from you, Miss Potter."

Mia snorted, turning back and resting her forearms on the railing as she stared up at the sky. "Taking points away on my account won't even be noticed at this point. Sometimes, I think Jamie and Sirius are purposely trying to lose the House Cup every year, just for the sake of continuity." She smiled softly as she felt Remus's arms winding their way gently around her waist, his chin resting on her shoulder.

"Hey, Peter and I do our part," he said, sounding offended, "but I think you're right. Winning the *Quidditch* Cup but losing the *House* Cup is tradition now. Who are we to put an end to it?"

Mia turned and smiled at him. "You're especially cute when you're sarcastic. Did you know?"

"I *did* know that." Remus grinned, and Mia felt a warmth in her heart at the sight, wishing he could always be this confident. "However, I like to keep *you* around to remind me from time to time, in case I ever forget. You going to tell me why you're up here?"

"Needed some peace and quiet. Can't find that anywhere else."

"Are you *ever* going to tell me what's wrong?" Remus asked with an irritated sigh; clearly, the past month had been wearing down on him more than he had let on. Suddenly, that confidence he so recently displayed was gone. "You've been . . . I don't know, distant all month. Have I done something wrong?"

Guilt dropped into the pit of Mia's stomach. "No, absolutely not. It has nothing to do with you. I just need to work some things out in my head. I've been distracted."

"I've noticed," he answered worriedly. "Unfortunately, so has everyone else. Lily's blaming herself for whatever's going on with you. She thinks that her near-death experience traumatised you, and now you've pulled away from everyone."

Mia sighed in frustration. "I have not. And it has nothing to do with Lily. I've just been . . . worried about N.E.W.T.s next year."

Remus frowned and narrowed his eyes at her as though he knew she was not being truthful. Maybe he did know. She had never bothered to ask if his lupine senses could pick up varied heart beats indicating lies. "I see. Are you planning on taking Advanced Slytherin next year as an elective?"

"What?"

"You have a list that you keep in your robes with names of Slytherins." He stepped back from her, folding his arms across his chest. "Current students and even some that have graduated, like Lucius Malfoy."

"You went through my stuff? How *could* you?" Mia snapped viciously, the lack of sleep and stress adding to her already irritable state.

"Of *course* I didn't!" He stared at her, an offended scowl marring his beautiful face in reaction to her accusation. "Lily saw it on your desk this morning and thought you were either planning some elaborate prank or that you were hell bent on revenge. Either way, she thought it would be smart to tell *me* and see if I could talk you out of whatever crazy plans you've concocted."

Mia grimaced and muttered "Shit," under her breath.

"Care to let me in on whatever it is you're hiding? And maybe take that 'Fuck you, Remus' look off your face in the process?" he said sharply.

"It's none of your business what I'm doing!" Mia snarled defensively.

"No, you're right. It's not like I'm your *boyfriend* or anything," he said sarcastically. "Though, to be fair, I barely see you anymore other than at breakfast and in class, so who knows what you're thinking these days."

"Merlin, is *that* what this is about?" Mia rolled her eyes. "That I've been too distracted to shag you for a few weeks?"

Remus's face turned quickly from anger to shock, and his mouth fell open. "Excuse me?"

"Shit." Mia winced, realising her mistake the moment the words left her mouth. Unfortunately, she had no way to retrieve them. "Remus, I didn't mean—"

Remus gaped at her in hurt disbelief. "You *really* think my concern for your *well-being* is because we haven't *had sex* lately?"

"I didn't mean that." She frowned, feeling horrible for her accusation. "I just snapped, and I'm sorry . . . I haven't been sleeping well and—"

"Then take care of yourself!" He growled at her, whatever sympathy existed previously long gone. "Merlin knows you're not letting anyone *else* do it for you lately."

His voice deepened, and his eyes briefly flashed gold. Instinctively, Mia's own eyes turned skyward where she quickly noted the waning moon in the sky. Before she could bring her eyes back to look at Remus's face, she heard him inhale sharply.

"Did you just . . . ? Are you checking to see what stage the moon is in?" He stared at her. "Are you joking? Please, tell me you're joking."

"I just think you're being a little temperamental," she mumbled.

"Right," Remus scoffed, his nostrils flaring. "So, that must mean that my anger is irrational and unjustified. I'm just a moon's glance away from snapping at any moment, right? I can't just be worried about you. No, the *monster* in me must be on edge."

Flinching at his self-deprecation, Mia shook her head. "Don't put words in my mouth, Remus."

"Since when do you even *need* to look to tell when the moon's coming?" he asked her, gesturing to the sky. "You've had the dates for each full moon over the next decade memorised since we were eleven."

"I . . . I just . . ." She closed her eyes and put her fingers against her temples. Lack of sleep mixed with heightened emotions and his increased voice volume was not helping her thought process.

"Mia, what day is today?"

"I . . . Sunday?"

"The date, Mia, the *date*," he specified, waiting for her to reply. When she took too long to answer, he groaned and ran a frustrated hand through his sandy blond hair. "Merlin, you don't even know?"

She sighed. "I told you I haven't been sleeping well."

"Why?" he asked, suddenly back to looking worried. "Are you having nightmares again?"

"No, I just—"

"What's the list for, Mia? I let you keep all of *my* secrets; don't you think it's only fair that you trust me enough to keep *some* of yours?"

"I trust you more than anyone, Remus."

"Prove it then! What are you up to?"

"I'm spying on the Slytherins to see which of them are Death Eaters!" she snapped, blurting out the one thing that she had not planned on telling him.

He gawked at her, his eyes back to green. Somehow, despite the colour shift, his gaze looked much more intimidating than when she saw the wolf reflected in his golden stare. "What did you just say?"

She frowned, watching as his look of shock and worry turned to foreboding. "I . . . I take Jamie's cloak every night, and I sneak into the Slytherin common room and listen . . . and look for the Dark Mark. That's what the list is for."

Remus pinched the bridge of his nose, looking more frustrated with her than he had ever looked when dealing with James, Sirius, and Peter. "Why . . . *Why* would you do something like that? Mia, what if there really *are* Death Eaters down there?"

"Then I'll find the proof I need," she answered indignantly. It was not as though she had not fought Death Eaters before. Then again, Remus did not know that.

"If you're suspicious that there are actual Death Eaters in Hogwarts, then go and tell Professor Dumbledore!" he yelled, his voice echoing in the circular stone tower.

"I can't! He won't listen to me! I have to do this on my own," she tried to explain, hoping that Remus would just give up and let her have this. Let her try and do this for the rest of them. "They tried to kill Lily. They tried to kill Sirius and Jamie. If they try for you next, Remus, I . . ." Mia said, her breath becoming short and heavy, her chest tightening at the mere thought of Death Eaters coming for Remus. It made her see red, and she could feel her magic rolling beneath her skin like an electrical current.

"I have to stop them, Remus. It's my job. I can't waste the chance . . . Time's running out, and they're going to just get away with everything." She breathed in slow and deep, not even noticing that he had stepped forward to run his hands up and down her arms, trying to calm her down from her mild panic attack.

"Mia, what's *this*?" Remus soft voice broke the momentary silence as his large fingers gently ran across the new disfigurement on her arm.

"What?"

"This scar, it's new," he said, touching it carefully.

"I-I . . ." *I got it when you saved my life from Death Eaters. Right here, right outside this room where Dumbledore was killed.* "I don't know."

"Don't lie to me." He frowned, waiting for her to tell him the truth. When she only averted her gaze, he exhaled and shook his head, stepping away from her grasp. "Nothing? You're not even going to say a word to me? Fine. I'll . . . I'll see you." He turned toward the door. "I'll just see you later. My rounds are over, and I'm going to bed."

"Remus!" Mia called after him, tears beginning to sting her eyes.

"Goodnight, Mia," he said sharply, vanishing down the staircase without looking back.

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"Hermione?"

*Hermione jumped at the sound of Professor Lupin's voice, and she turned to watch as he walked through the broken pieces of rubble that had yet to be cleared away from the entrance of the Astronomy Tower. Prior to his arrival, she had been leaning against the railing, her tear-filled eyes staring downward at the ground several hundred feet below.*

"Remus!" *Hermione took in a breath, cringing a bit. She still was not used to calling him by his first name, but he had insisted on it repeatedly.* "You startled me."

"Forgive me," *he said with a frown, hands shoved into the pockets of his shabby, second-hand robes as he slowly approached her.* "I didn't think anyone would be up here. I didn't think anyone would want to be up here, not for a while at least."

"I couldn't sleep."

"Nightmares?" *he asked, his brow furrowed; it was a look that made Hermione think he might actually be worried about her.*

"What? No." *She shook her head, wiping away a stray tear as it fell against her cheek.* "I've just been thinking about Professor Dumbledore, and well, everything I suppose. I just can't believe that Professor Snape . . . I mean, I know he did it. Harry wouldn't lie about that. It's just hard to imagine."

Remus nodded as he joined her by the railing, leaning his forearms against the metal. "I know what you mean. I've been doubting myself for years over everything I once believed. For twelve years, I thought Sirius was responsible for James and Lily's deaths, and now a man I trusted, because Albus Dumbledore asked me to, is a . . . I don't even know if we can call him a traitor. I have to wonder if he was ever loyal to our cause."

"Was he always this bad?" Hermione asked him. "You went to school with him."

"Went to school with a lot of Death Eaters," he said, letting a frustrated scowl pass his generally stoic face. "Of course, we didn't exactly know it at the time."

"Were you ever suspicious?" she asked, taking note of the fact that he avoided looking her in the eye when he nodded his head, looking ashamed.

"Some of us were."

"I'm sorry." Hermione sighed. "I know it must be painful to talk about the past. What with losing—"

"Everyone?"

Hermione's heart broke for the man who had indeed lost nearly everyone he ever loved. She did not know much about his family, but considering the state he always looked to be in, it did not appear he had any left. If he did, they were not very good at taking care of him. The only family he would have likely claimed for his own had been ripped away from him one by one by Voldemort and Death Eaters: Harry's parents, Peter Pettigrew, Sirius, and now Professor Dumbledore.

"What's going to happen now?" she asked, trying to change the subject from past to present.

"There's the funeral I suppose." He shrugged his shoulders. "And then the Order needs to find a new headquarters because Grimmauld Place has been—"

"I'm sorry, Remus," Hermione interrupted him. "I actually meant . . . what's going to happen with you? I know Profe—Snape was the one who brewed your Wolfsbane Potion. Is there another Potions Master who could help?"

Despite the severe topic at hand, he turned and smiled at her. For some reason, it made her feel guilty, like she was not living up to some strange expectation or that he knew something she was supposed to understand without being told.

"No, unfortunately not," he answered. "Perhaps you could give it a try."

"Me? You put too much faith in me, Remus," she said, shaking her head. "I'm not anywhere near talented enough to brew such an advanced potion. I'd be terrified of hurting you."

*He smiled sweetly at her. "I won't put that pressure on you. It's not your responsibility. For the record, I don't put too much faith in you; I have just enough faith in you and your talents, Hermione," he said as he stepped closer to her, looking as though he wanted to put a comforting hand on her shoulder, but he stopped and ran it through his greying hair instead.*

*"I'll be fine, though. It won't be the first full moon I've gone without the potion. Just the first in a . . . a very long time."*

*"Will Tonks make it easier?" Hermione asked and watched with mild amusement as a wide-eyed Remus gaped at the mention of the young Auror.*

*"What?"*

*"I'm sorry." She smiled at his flustered expression. "I don't mean to pry, but after the umm . . . umm . . ."*

*He raised an unamused brow. "Spectacle in the hospital wing?"*

*"Yes. Well, I assume she's your mate?"*

*"How would you know that?"*

*"Books?" She shrugged her shoulders and laughed softly, though her answer was anything but a joke. "I once wrote a very interesting essay about werewolves, you see, and only in my third year. Two rolls of parchment worth."*

*"Three," Remus corrected, smirking. "I read every word you wrote, you know. I imagine then, in addition to being able to recognise a werewolf, you learnt how a werewolf recognises its mate?"*

*Her smile faded into a frown. "You told Tonks that you were too dangerous for her."*

*"Also, that I was too old and too poor," he reminded her.*

*"Excuses," she insisted, and Remus reacted with a look of surprise. Hermione could not deny that she had clearly nailed it on the head with her answer. "You're not a very good liar, you know."*

*Remus chuckled. "Not many Gryffindors are."*

*"The safety of a mate is a werewolf's primary instinct," she said, as though quoting a book. "It goes above and beyond that of the need to hunt, even."*

*"Rivalled only by the need to protect one's pack." Remus frowned and turned from her, leaning against the rail to her side as he stared out at the open, black sky, watching the approaching waxing moon with interest.*

*"Do you have a pack?" Hermione asked.*

*"I did." Remus nodded. "Once."*

*"And you lost them." Hermione sighed in understanding. "Is that why you tried to push Tonks away? Because you're afraid of losing someone else?"*

*"For someone so against Divination, you have quite the skill for it."*

*Hermione blushed at the way he looked at her. As if he were trying to share with her some inside joke to which she had not been made privy. "No, I just have eyes," she teased him. "I know my opinion doesn't matter."*

*"You'd be surprised, Hermione." The genuine look in his eyes caught her off guard. "You're a friend." Hermione smiled at the word, grateful that a man she respected so much no longer thought of her as a swotty little know-it-all child. "And your opinion matters a great deal to me."*

*"I . . . well . . ." She blushed again, her face heating up at his words of praise and familiarity. "I think you should be with your mate. Professor McGonagall is right; Dumbledore would have been happier than anybody to think there was a little more love in the world. How long have you known that Tonks is—?"*

*"Longer than I feel appropriate to mention aloud." Remus groaned in embarrassment, his eyes turning away from her face to fall on a large wound on her arm. His brows furrowed in what looked like recognition. "Hermione, are you all right? Let me see your arm."*

*"It's nothing," Hermione insisted. "Stray hex. Had you not been there, I'm sure it would have been worse."*

*"Did this happen in the battle? Why wasn't it treated?"*

*"I cleaned it myself," she replied. "It'll heal naturally."*

*He gestured to the door. "Madam Pomfrey should have some Dittany back in the infirmary."*

*"No. I . . . I need it to scar." She pulled her arm away from him, nervously picking at the healing wound. "I need to remember. I need to always be able to look down and remember Professor Dumbledore, and . . . and Snape. I need to remember to always be on guard. Remember that not everyone can be trusted. Remember that Hogwarts isn't always safe."*

*His gaze was intense, and she could not help but feel like he was pitying her, something that made her grimace in response.*

*"I should head back to the hospital wing. I want to check on Bill and make sure he recovers well."*

*Hermione smiled. "He's lucky to have you there for him. Maybe you could rebuild your pack. Tonks and Bill."*

*"Maybe." Remus nodded slowly, a sad smile crossing his features. "In the meantime, there's a war to fight."*

*"You shouldn't wait," Hermione blurted out. "You should . . . You should let Tonks take care of you. And you her."*

*"I'll make you a deal, Hermione. I will think about taking care of Tonks, and even . . . letting her take care of me—" He looked displeased with the idea. "—if you promise to take care of yourself," he said and then added, "and Harry," as a quick afterthought.*

*"Those two things are often mutually exclusive," she said with a smirk, and Remus laughed.*

*"If anyone can figure out how to balance the two, it would be you, Hermione." He leant forward and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tightly against his chest in a hug.*

*Hermione breathed in the scent of him, her magic relaxing under his comforting touch. She smiled curiously, wondering how a gesture so unfamiliar could feel like . . . home.*

## Chapter Sixty-Three

### *Pronouns*

---

*I hope you know, I hope you know  
That this has nothing to do with you  
It's personal, myself and I  
We've got some straightenin' out to do  
(Big Girls Don't Cry - Fergie)*

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**June 7th, 1977**

Mia let out an angry scream as the door slammed shut behind Remus's back. How could he be so upset? What had she done wrong? Concealed a scar and refused to tell him its origin? It was not the first, and certainly not the most lethal-looking scar she bore, and yet, he had been perfectly content to let her keep her secrets while she was shagging him in the Shrieking Shack. Tears stung her eyes as her stomach rolled, and she suddenly realised that she had not eaten dinner. Had she eaten lunch? Mia frowned as she tried to remember, but couldn't place the last time she actually sat down to a meal. No, she certainly knew that she ate breakfast because she remembered Remus asking if she wanted coffee instead of tea while he fixed her . . .

*Shit.*

She sighed and slid down to the ground, leaning her back against the cold stone wall. She had been ignoring her friends, family, and boyfriend for a month, and Remus was still making sure that she at least got fed once a day. And how had she repaid him? Accused him of using her for sex, implying that his temper was because of the moon and not because of her actions and words, and then keeping *even more* secrets and lying to him.

"Are you quite done?" a familiar voice called out from the shadows.

Mia's tired eyes looked up. She watched as a bushy-haired brunette stepped forward, wearing a familiar set of black and crimson robes over a pleated grey skirt. Her red and gold tie was done up perfectly, while *Mia's* matching one hung loosely around her neck.

"Distress of this nature doesn't look well on you. Or *me*. Or is it *us*? I'm not entirely sure which pronoun would be appropriate in this situation," Hermione mused.

"What situation is that?" Mia blinked in exhaustion. "My complete and utter nervous breakdown?" she asked, rubbing her red-rimmed eyes. *Merlin, I really have lost it.*

"Thirteen years in the magical world, and you *still* resort to physiological symptoms before considering a magical alternative?" Hermione tutted. "Well, at least not *that* much has changed since you came back here."

"Has it really been thirteen years since I first got my letter to Hogwarts?" Mia briefly gaped, ignoring the fact that she was talking to her own doppelganger. "I'd lost count."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You have not. It's all still in your head."

"Like *you*? Is this a dream or a hallucination?" Mia asked the swotty version of herself.

"Both is the most likely scenario," Hermione answered and then went on to detail her theory. "You're physically and magically exhausted. Pretty soon you are going to end up in the hospital wing, and Madam Pomfrey is going to be scolding you for letting yourself get this way. Dehydration, insomnia, nutrition deficiency, and Mum and Dad would be appalled to see that you've been grinding your teeth again."

"I'm not dehydrated or lacking in nutrients," Mia said with a scowl as Hermione sat down in front of her. "I eat every morning, thank you very much."

"Yes, because Remus fixes your food for you," Hermione pointed out plainly. "Would you be taking care of yourself otherwise?"

"This is more important than studying for O.W.L.s. If I have to sacrifice a few nights of sleep, then so be it."

Hermione sighed, pinning Mia with a patronising expression. "It hasn't been a few nights. You've been too hard on yourself for years. Certainly, there were moments of reprieve when you were actively reading Remus's letter and following its guidelines, but lately you've broken every one of the rules." She said it with such disapproval in her voice, Mia almost started feeling guilty for somehow offending her 1990's self.

"Just because Future Remus says it doesn't make it true," Mia insisted.

"No," Hermione agreed. "But you know the rules of time travel, Mia."

"The rules no longer apply, *Hermione*." She said the name as though it were suddenly offensive. Having not heard it in so many years, her name sounded foreign to her ears and felt strange on her tongue. Somehow, it felt like a *nickname* now. She hated nicknames. "Even Dumbledore said—"

"*Professor* Dumbledore."

Mia gawked at her former self and shook her head incredulously. "Merlin, maybe Ron was right all along. You *are* a bit of a nightmare."

"Letting Ronald control our sense of self-worth again?" Hermione rolled her eyes and pursed her lips, her Gryffindor student uniform suddenly shifting to floaty dress robes made of a soft periwinkle-blue material. Her hair was no longer bushy but pulled back into a sleek and shiny knot at the back of her head. "I'd thought we'd gotten over that long ago."

"Are we a *we*?" Mia asked, purposely ignoring the memories of the Yule Ball and the ensuing fight with Ron over Viktor Krum as they crept up from her subconscious. "Are we even the same person anymore? We don't even have the same name."

"Not entirely," Hermione replied. "But, then again, the 'Hermione Granger' *I* am is certainly not the 'Hermione Granger' I was at eleven. Progression and growth are natural. Although, repeating our teen years has thrown a bit of a loop in our overall development."

Mia narrowed her eyes, on the lookout for an insult. "And what's *that* supposed to mean?"

"That going through hormonal upheavals twice probably wasn't the best plan," Hermione said. "Although I do have to admit, you're handling it quite a bit better than I did. There appears to be a lot less weeping during our second bout of puberty."

Mia smirked, remembering so many nights crying in the dorm rooms, in the owlery, in the library, and plenty of dark corridors. Crying over Ron being mean to her. Crying over her worry for Harry. Crying over Draco calling her names.

"It helps having friends who don't constantly make you cry," she admitted.

"And yet, you're going to lose them," Hermione pointed out.

Mia growled and stood up, storming across the room. "That's exactly what I'm trying *not* to do!"

Hermione turned to watch Mia's pacing. "It won't work, you know. The rules say that—"

"I know the bloody rules!" Mia snapped.

"Language!" Hermione scowled.

"Oh, fuck you." Mia groaned and ran her hand down her face in frustration.

"Of *course* you know the rules." Hermione stood up and made her way over toward Mia, her clothing shifting again, this time to Muggle attire. She tugged on Mia's robes, pulling at the blouse beneath to reveal her inked shoulder blade. "God, you've got them inked into your skin. I can't believe you've tattooed us! You do realise that's permanent, don't you? It's *magical* ink," she said with a judgemental tone. "You can't even have that removed in the *Muggle* world."

"If I recall, *you* did permanent things to our body as well," Mia snarled at the girl, reaching out and lifting Hermione's red jumper, revealing the soft skin beneath which was flawless, save for the purple scar on her ribs.

"Yes, well . . ." Hermione flushed, embarrassed as she tugged her jumper back down to cover herself. "Not *intentionally*. Your splinching scar will appear soon," she pointed out. "Just a few months."

"I know."

"You'll have to explain that one."

"I *know*."

"Remus will be upset."

"I *know*."

"And even if you're able to get them to believe another lie, the scar that will appear after that is . . ." Hermione gestured to her forearm where letters had been cut into her flesh.

"I know what scar comes after that!" Mia yelled and turned away from the sight of it, her eyes looking down to her own forearm, which was still, thankfully, unblemished.

"It wasn't our fault," Hermione whispered, putting a hand on Mia's shoulder. "We did what we had to do, you know that. We bear the scars of our past because we sacrificed our childhood to help Harry. A childhood that Remus has *tried* to give back to you. You're throwing his gift away."

"I'm trying to be useful," she said, shrugging off Hermione's hand. "If that means sacrificing again to help Jamie, then so be it. It's the same thing."

"It's *not* the same thing, and you're well aware of that," Hermione snapped, her tone resembling an irate Molly Weasley. "You've just somehow repressed the part of your brain that's logical. Maybe *that's* why I'm here. Your subconscious knows what you're doing is detrimental, not only to your health but to the relationships that you've spent years

building. You're throwing away a gift that's been given to you, even though you know nothing can change what will happen. *You* are the catalyst."

"I have to try."

"And if you succeed?" Hermione asked, hands on her hips in a challenging way.

"Then Jamie and Lily live."

"And who dies in their place? Remus? Harry? Sirius?"

"No one will die; I'll fix everything," Mia answered, choking back the thought of losing anyone she loved.

"Mia, you need to listen to me." Hermione reached for her hands. "History has already been written. Snape gives the prophecy to Voldemort. Peter betrays Harry's parents. Harry becomes the Boy Who Lived. It *has* to happen that way. We *defeated* him, Mia. Voldemort's gone, and we finally have a chance at a peaceful Wizarding world."

"I don't want Harry to become the Boy Who Lived," Mia cried, letting tears fall and feeling bitter over it. "I want him to be the boy who has both of his parents. I want him to have a happy childhood filled with family and love and not . . . not the life he lived. He didn't deserve any of that."

Hermione frowned with genuine sympathy and understanding. "And if you are successful, what then? If Lily doesn't sacrifice herself to save Harry, then Voldemort is still in power. He won't stop. He'll come after Harry again and again, and if he doesn't attack *Harry*, it'll be Neville. Are you willing to sacrifice Neville to save Harry's parents? Do you know what Neville's doing now that the war's over? He's dating Hannah Abbott. Sweet, shy Neville actually had the courage to ask her on a date."

"It'll be fine. I'll save Alice and Frank too." Mia made a mental list in her head to be gone through later, especially since, thanks to Dumbledore, she was incapable of physically writing any truth of the future down, even if it was for her own benefit. "Neville can have both of his parents as well."

"Very well." Hermione sighed irritably. "It seems you're set on your course, so let's work it all out, shall we?" She pulled Mia's hand back over to the centre of the tower where she tugged her down. They sat cross-legged in front of one another. Hermione released Mia, and suddenly, in her hands was a bit of parchment and a quill. "How do we save Neville's parents? They were tortured by the Lestrage brothers, Barty Crouch Jr, and Bellatrix, correct? Do you plan on killing four Death Eaters all by yourself?"

"If I have to." Mia frowned watching as Hermione began writing something. "What're you doing?"

"I'm doing the Arithmancy equations. If you plan on changing the future, you should be aware of what your success rate is, shouldn't you?" Her tone of self-righteousness would have bristled Mia's fur if she was in her Animagus form. "Or have you already done the equations?" Hermione frowned knowingly, her lips a tight line. "No? Oh, so you're just jumping to conclusions, running head long into the fray, and going up against Death Eaters to save your loved ones. Because that worked out so well for Harry. If I recall, it was an action like *that* which caused Sirius's death."

"I brought him back."

"He wasn't the only one who died due to someone acting rashly without thinking things through. You need to start thinking less like a Gryffindor right now and more like a Ravenclaw."

"Actually, this time I was almost put in Slytherin," Mia pointed out.

"I'm ignoring that comment, thank you," Hermione replied haughtily. "Now, you'll have to kill Bellatrix, Crouch Jr, and both Lestrangle brothers. That's four rips in your soul. Add that to Crabbe Sr, and that's five." She made a note on the parchment. "How many Horcruxes would you be making for yourself then? Do we want to go with special items like Voldemort? I always thought he was a bit obvious. Maybe use a seashell and throw it in the ocean."

"Fine," Mia said with a growl, jumping to the point, "I don't have to *kill* them, but I can stop them."

"How?" Hermione refused to make eye contact with Mia, continuing to write her equations down. "Professor Dumbledore has prevented you from being able to tell anyone anything about the future. And if you are able to get them put into Azkaban, they'll break out. You know that. Crouch will escape as the Polyjuiced form of his mother, and Bellatrix will escape with the Lestranges after Voldemort rises again."

"I don't know! I'll just... I'll get rid of them and then destroy the Horcruxes *before* Voldemort can come back."

"With Bellatrix and the Lestranges captured, how do you expect to get into the vault to get the cup?" Hermione asked. "Draco got it for you last time."

*Shit.* Mia had forgotten about access to the Lestrangle vault.

"Does the Order of the Phoenix have a spy in place? No, they don't, because the only spies we had were defected Death Eaters. Snape, who only came back because of—"

"Lily. I know." Mia sighed. "I'll just—"

"And you won't be preventing Voldemort from returning, Mia," Hermione interrupted. "Because he'll still be in power. If you plan on saving James and Lily, then Harry wouldn't have defeated him. Voldemort would remain in power, and Death Eaters would continue attacking. Harry's parents can't stay in hiding forever. And while Voldemort searches for them, how many other people will die? Sirius? He wants to be an Auror, you know. We've read the statistics on the history of the First Wizarding War. You *know* how many Aurors died in the Death Eater attacks."

"Fifty-seven," Mia whispered, feeling sick. She wondered what she would vomit up since she had not eaten anything since breakfast. Had she actually eaten?

"Maybe *fifty-eight* if Sirius ends up in the crossfire. Or he could just take a different job. After all, it's not like he's already trying to sign up for the war, right?" Hermione said sarcastically. "Perhaps go into hiding with Harry's parents. Sirius has, after all, proven to be *completely* calm and cautious when forced to never leave a safehouse. Yes, let's lock him up again for his own good. That will turn out well."

"You really are an insufferable know-it-all," Mia growled.

She hated it, but her other self was right. After knowing James, she was surprised that he had been willing to go into hiding at all, assuming that it had everything to do with protecting Lily and Harry. But to think that *Sirius* would go into hiding? That Sirius Black, of all people, would stay out of the fight? It was ridiculous to think such a thing. The man had gone out of his mind with boredom—likely also dealing with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder—being trapped in Grimmauld Place before he fell through the veil. Mia could not imagine a younger Sirius reacting much better to a similar situation.

"And what about Remus?" Hermione asked.

Mia felt her defences flare up again, and her stern gaze turned on the witch in front of her.

"Will he survive? Your other friends here? Mary? Pandora? Maybe Luna will never be born. What about the Weasleys? They've been like a family to you for so many years. How many of them are you willing to risk? Are any of *Ron's* brothers worth sacrificing because you can't face losing your own? Is changing everything worth the chance that

Ginny might never be born? You would give Harry back his parents and then take away the love of his life."

"No, but I—"

"You can't change anything, Mia," Hermione said firmly. She held out the parchment with the Arithmancy equations on them, showing her the actual results.

Mia frowned at the sight, double-checking the calculations only to come up with the same answers. *Nothing mattered. Nothing changed.* "No."

"Remus has already told you this," Hermione stated, "which means that sometime in the future *you* will have told *him*. You've figured it out yourself. You know that his letter to you is just your words repeated back through time in *his* handwriting, don't you? You tell him, he tells you, it's a circle—just like you've been told."

"I feel like a failure if I don't at least try," Mia admitted sadly. "Like this second chance I've been given will have been for nothing if it means that Jamie and Lily still die. How can I love them, be with them, and let them trust me, only to willingly step aside and let them walk to their deaths?"

"What about Sirius and Remus?" Hermione asked, the parchment and quill vanishing into thin air. She stood and reached her hand out again to comfort Mia.

"What about them?"

"You made a promise to yourself, years ago, that you were going to do everything in your power to ensure they were loved enough; to enable them to survive what's to come," Hermione said as she turned Mia forcefully by the shoulders to face her. "You saved Sirius's life, Mia. He would have been killed by his own family, in his own home, were it not for your emergency Portkey. That was brilliant, by the way."

"Thanks."

"And Remus? You befriended a boy who needed love more than anything in the world. You've seen how terrified his parents were of him. His father still is." Hermione scowled at the thought, and Mia nodded firmly. "*Now* look at him. He's strong enough to stand up to *you* of all people, and that took a lot of courage for him to do that. You've helped make him strong. You even provided him with the Wolfsbane Potion."

Mia lifted a brow. "You mean I *stole* the Wolfsbane Potion from its actual creator."

"Well, you *were* almost put in Slytherin," Hermione muttered.

Mia grinned. "Fair point."

"So, has your second chance been for nothing?"

"When—*If* I ever get back home . . ." Mia ignored Hermione's question as a deep frown set into her jaw, and worry crossed her features. "Back to 1998 . . . Harry will hate me."

Hermione shook her head firmly. "Harry could *never* hate you."

"Sirius and Remus will—"

"They will understand," Hermione said quickly. "Sometime between now and 1998, Sirius and Remus come to terms with Lily and James's deaths and your role in their lives. You think they're stupid enough not to have recognised you? God, Sirius called me 'Mia' the moment I brought him back from the veil. It was the first thing he'd said."

Mia's eyes widened in shock, and she took in a sharp breath. "I'd forgotten about that."

"He knew who you were. Remus knew who you were. And did they hate you? Did Remus throw you out of his house? Did Sirius abandon you at first chance? No, they stood by your side. Sirius protected you, killed Bellatrix for you. They *love* you." Hermione smiled sadly. "Focus on that; focus on living and enjoying your life. Enjoy James and Lily's lives while you still have a chance to."

Mia sighed. "What do I tell Remus?"

"Well, an apology might go a long way, considering how he left you."

"I meant about the scar." Mia narrowed her eyes at Hermione's judgemental tone. "He's going to ask."

Hermione exhaled. "Then tell him the truth."

"I can't! Dumbledore made it so—"

"*Professor* Dumbledore."

Mia's jaw tightened, and she briefly wondered what would happen to her if she attacked her own hallucination. "*Professor* Dumbledore," she said through clenched teeth, "spelled me so that I can't say any truth about the future."

"No, Professor Dumbledore spelled you so that you can't *intentionally* confess secrets about the future with the purpose of *changing* the future," Hermione corrected her, ignoring the murderous look Mia was giving her. "Remus believes that you're spying on suspicious Slytherins. Tell him where you got that scar. From a duel at the hands of a suspicious Slytherin. It's the truth, isn't it?"

"He'll want to know more."

"One day soon, he'll *need* to know more. You didn't get sent back in time on your own, you know. Eventually, Remus will have to know the truth if he's ever going to be able to send you back again when it's time."

"Fine," Mia conceded. "Apology and then a half-truth with a promise to confess everything one day. That'll go over well," she said sarcastically, rolling her eyes.

"You're very pessimistic when you haven't been sleeping," Hermione pointed out with a frown.

"I'm very pessimistic over the thought of having to sneak into my boyfriend's bed to apologise for something I can't properly explain, while trying to quietly slip past my brother, Sirius, and Peter," Mia snarled.

"I never said you had to sneak into Remus's bed." Hermione's cheeks turned bright red at the implication.

"Are you blushing?" Mia laughed loudly. "Merlin, do we even blush anymore?"

"*You* certainly don't." Hermione refused to make eye contact with her doppelgänger. "Do you even have anything to be ashamed of anymore?"

"I had nothing to be ashamed of from the beginning," Mia pointed out proudly.

"You're having *sex* with your *professor*," Hermione said with wide eyes, scandalised.

"He's not my professor right now." Mia grinned in reply. "Would you like me to stop?"

"Well . . ." Hermione thought about it for a few moments and then shrugged her shoulders ever so slightly. "I didn't say *that*. It's only natural, I suppose. Remus has always been quite—"

"Fit?"

"Attractive," Hermione corrected. "Now, go before a Slytherin prefect finds you here and gives you *more* detention!"

Mia chuckled. "Detention really isn't all that bad you know."

"I'll have to take your word for it." Hermione shook her head in disappointment. "I find your lack of respect for authority and structure appalling."

"Will I see you again?" Mia asked.

"Anytime you look in a mirror, I suppose."

"No." Mia shook her head sadly. "You're not there when I look. Sometimes I wonder, if I ever get back to 1998, will my friends even recognise me? You and I—Hermione and Mia—we're different people now, aren't we?"

"Not entirely." Hermione shrugged. "I'm still somewhere in there. The logical and loyal part of you that's quite a bit less violent and openly wanton."

"And a lot less fun too."

"Don't you have an apology to make?" Hermione said while glaring at her. "Wake up, and get to it!"

Mia's eyes opened, and she gasped at the sudden chill that fell over her body.

She was sitting up against the cold stone wall of the Astronomy Tower, her eyes still raw and heavy as she looked around to find that she was perfectly alone. She sighed and tried to remember the Arithmancy calculations from her dream. It was a dream, but the calculations were still accurate. Admitting to ultimate defeat, Mia let herself cry for several long minutes, just to get it all out of her system. Then she stood, wiping her tears off on the sleeve of her robes before making her way from the tower back to the Gryffindor common room.

After a quick dash up to her own room, she quietly made her way up the staircase to the boys' dormitories and slipped into the room shared by the Marauders. Tiptoeing past her snoring brother, she rolled her eyes at the way his leg hung off the edge of his bed, wrapped tightly around the twisted crimson bed sheet. She was extra quiet as she passed Sirius's bed, knowing that his hearing was very nearly as sensitive as Remus's. She narrowed her eyes at the sight of Peter's bed, thankful that his curtains were closed so she did not have to look at him sleeping peacefully when so many others were not.

Herself included.

"Are you going to just stand there?" Remus asked from inside his own closed curtains.

Mia sighed, realising it was stupid to think she could slip in unnoticed. Pushing down her lingering pride, she slowly pulled back Remus's curtains, revealing him leaning against the headboard of his bed, red sheets pulled up to his waist. Mia winced over the fact that he was shirtless. *He had to make this harder, didn't he?* She brought her attention to his face and noticed that he was glaring at her. *Still pissed off then. Right.*

"My, my, my, what big eyes you have," she said sweetly, trying to get a smile out of him.

Remus was not playing, and his scowl deepened. "The better to see through your bullshit with."

She flinched at his tone. "I deserve that. Scoot over please, I don't want to wake the others."

His face softened slightly as he moved to the side, allowing her to crawl into bed with him. She closed the curtains behind her and watched as he threw up a Silencing Charm.

Without another word, Mia turned and faced him, pulling her jumper over her head and throwing it to the foot of the bed. Remus whimpered at the sight of her skin, his green eyes lingering over the swell of her breasts, encased in his favourite pink lace bra that James had fetched from the lake.

"Mia . . . you can't just take off your clothes and expect me to—"

"I got this scar the summer that Sirius was attacked," Mia said, interrupting him as she pointed to the long, thin, purple line over her ribs.

Remus's eyes widened and his mouth fell open, shocked at her confession.

She frowned but continued speaking, doing what Hermione instructed her to do. Work through the loopholes of Dumbledore's Truth Spell. She lucked into the fact that the "summer that Sirius was attacked" could refer to both 1976—when he had been attacked by Death Eaters in his own home—as well as 1996—when Sirius fell into the veil after being attacked by Bellatrix. No lies, no complete truths.

"I can't tell you how, or why, or honestly what curse it even was. It was a Death Eater, one that's already been dealt with," she said, knowing that Dolohov had been killed by Sirius in the Battle of Godric's Hollow. "Dumbledore knows, and he—" *has prevented me from telling you everything.* "It's sensitive information, and I can't tell you. Dumbledore made it so that I can't tell anyone."

Remus sat up straight. He had been running his finger over the scar on her ribs, his eyes never leaving hers as she spoke. When she mentioned Dumbledore, his gaze hardened. "He put you under an Unbreakable Vow?"

"It's not that," she promised. "It's . . . something else."

"Does Dumbledore know about that one too?" Remus gestured to the scar on her arm, the one that had caused their fight.

"No." Mia shook her head and sighed. "That one was my own fault. I wasn't paying attention, and I ended up duelling some Slytherin piece of crap in the corridors." *Twenty years from now. And oh, by the way, it was you who saved my life.* "I didn't see who he was, just his robes."

"Then why didn't you have Madam Pomfrey take care of it?" he asked, running the pad of his thumb over the mark. "Mia, you use Dittany on me every month to prevent me from scarring too badly."

"I wanted the scar," she admitted sadly. "I need to remember to always be on guard. Remember that not everyone can be trusted. Remember that Hogwarts isn't always safe."

He frowned. "That's a dark way to look at life."

"It's the truth. Jamie almost died. Sirius would have if my brother hadn't stepped in. And Lily was attacked just last month. It's going to get worse, Remus. I c-can't—" She tried to speak, but the words stuck in her throat, and she inwardly cursed Dumbledore for silencing her this way. She frowned and stifled a sob when Remus leant forward and pulled her into his arms. "I was only trying to help. Now, I realise I can't. I can't do anything."

"I just wish you'd have told me," he whispered into her hair. "You've barely been existing lately."

"I know, and you've been taking care of me."

"It hasn't been easy," he complained.

"I know. I'm so sorry, Remus." She turned her head up and stared into his eyes. "Can you forgive me?"

"Are you done keeping secrets?" he asked bluntly.

"No." Mia winced, praying that he would not let her go now. "Dumbledore is preventing me from saying more, but I *will* find a way around it because I want—I *need* to be open and honest with you. I promise you, I will tell you *all* of my secrets when I figure out how."

It was the *how* that was becoming problematic. She had a few thoughts, of course, but considering how delicate their relationship was after this fight, Mia was not certain it was time to tell Remus the entire truth.

"Are you done spying on Slytherins?" he asked, raising a brow.

"Yes," she admitted begrudgingly.

"Are we okay?"

Mia frowned, looking up into his sad eyes. "You tell me."

Remus brushed his lips chastely against hers, sweet and reverent as if he were trying to heal whatever break this night had caused in their relationship. He pulled away from her briefly to look down into the depths of her eyes, searching for answers. She let out a soft exhale, and their lips reunited under a bruising kiss. His demanding tongue invaded her mouth, and Mia buckled beneath him, moaning with pleasure against the welcomed intrusion.

She felt his hands skim the flesh of her back until he found the clasp of her bra, undoing it with ease after months of practice. He pulled the lace garment away from her breasts, which he stared at desperately as he tore away from her mouth. His eyes flashed gold briefly before he hungrily took a tight, pink peak between his lips, plucking the other with his fingers. She gasped when his lips released her, and he let the flat thickness of his tongue run against the pebbled flesh while he stared up into her eyes.

Mia whimpered at the feel of his mouth, but it was his predatory stare that had her blushing and breaking eye contact. Remus's intensity was often too much for her, and the little fox inside her forced her to submit, to turn her neck to the side and give in to the dominant wolf pressing his hot, bare skin against her.

When Remus pulled himself upward to kiss and lick along the expanse of her neck, she reached her hand between them, dipping beneath the band of his pyjamas until she grasped his hard length, grinning at the sound of him growling in her ear.

She stroked him twice before he placed his own hand over hers, putting a stop to her ministrations.

"I can't believe I'm going to say this, but I feel like after what you said earlier, about me being upset because we haven't—"

"I didn't mean any of that. Remus, I know you're better than that," she promised him, pulling her hand out of his pyjamas quickly, placing her palm against his chest, directly over his heart as though she were trying to convey how her need for his love overpowered her need for his body. At this point, though, those two needs were having a war inside her head.

Remus nodded, his eyes shifting back to green as he chastely kissed her. "I know, but I feel like if I just give in right now and shag you, then I'm just confirming that I was upset over not having sex in a while. That, or it'll feel like you've bought my forgiveness."

"You're actually turning me down right now?" Her eyes widened a little. "I'm half-naked in your bed."

"I know." Remus winced, shutting his eyes tightly as he leant his forehead against the valley between her breasts. "I hate myself right now."

"All right; get off, you noble bastard." Mia chuckled and shoved at his body, laughing harder when he refused to move away from her. She smiled and kissed the top of his head before he finally pulled away from her, rolling onto his back, the perfect picture of absolute frustration and self-loathing.

She stretched for her jumper and watched, amused, as Remus's gaze grew ever curious before she retrieved a chocolate bar from the jumper's pocket. "How about a consolation prize?"

"Well, it would be rude to refuse *everything* you offer me," he conceded, snatching the sweet from her hand.

"He turns down *sex* but willingly accepts the *chocolate*." Mia smiled at him sweetly, admiring his body with yearning despite the fact that he was content to feast on sugar instead of her. "I guess you wouldn't be my Remus if you weren't at least somewhat predictable. I love you, you know."

"I love you too," he said, smiling at her affectionately, a look of apology in his eyes.

"Goodnight, Remus." She kissed his cheek, slipping beneath the covers and rolling onto her side.

"You're sleeping *here*? Do you have any idea what'll happen if Prongs wakes up?"

"Then lock the curtains," she mumbled. "If you haven't noticed, I haven't slept in about a month, and I put every last ounce of reserved energy into snogging you, so I don't have the ability to go back to my own room."

"Fine," he conceded. "But if I wake up to find another antler stabbed into my ribs, I'm blaming you."

"Duly noted."

## Chapter Sixty-Four

### *You Won't Change Me*

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*Tonight  
We are young  
So let's set the world on fire  
We can burn brighter than the sun  
(We Are Young - FUN)*

---

**June 25th, 1977**

"Why do I feel like we're about to be mugged?" Lily asked, grimacing at the sight of a puddle. It was more than likely water, but in the darkness of the back alleys of London, it could very well have been a variety of things, none of which any of them were willing to investigate closer.

"Because you lack a sense of adventure, Evans," Sirius said, grinning at her from over his shoulder.

"I would like to point out that I am not the one you had to strong arm into coming tonight," Lily said defensively, dodging another puddle in the middle of the alley and glaring at James when he tried to offer her a hand. She turned to smirk at Mia, who was tugging uncomfortably at her clothes. They were more revealing than almost anything she had worn since arriving in the seventies.

"I agreed to come along, didn't I?" Mia hissed and yanked once again at the hem of her black skirt, still wondering how she ended up being coerced into this get up while Lily stood there looking comfortable in high-waisted Muggle jeans. "I'm even wearing the outfit you lot put together for me, despite my better judgement."

"A sacrifice I am greatly appreciating, love." Remus grinned, chuckling as she tried to jump delicately over the large puddle and failed, slipping backward and tumbling into his arms.

She growled at her blunder but let out a small giggle when Remus kissed her as he brought her back to her feet.

James scowled at the pair. "Moony, can you wait to paw at my sister when I'm . . . I don't know . . . blind and deaf? And for the record, Lily, Wormtail, and I had nothing to

do with that outfit." He gestured to his sister with the same look he reserved for drinking Skele-Gro. "That's all Padfoot and Remus."

"You *do* look amazing in that skirt," Lily told Mia, ignoring James but looking amused at his brotherly displeasure.

Mia knew that she had spent far too many years during her original timeline silently harbouring self-esteem issues in regard to her looks; this time she was surrounded by boys who fancied her, a boyfriend who could not get enough of her, and girlfriends—actual friendly girls—who did not constantly put her down like Lavender and Parvati had.

"Then why aren't you wearing a leather skirt to match?"

Lily laughed wholeheartedly. "First, because you have the hips for it, and I don't," she said, counting on her fingers matter-of-factly. "Second, because I saw the tag on the back before you put it on. I couldn't afford that designer if I emptied out my Gringotts vault."

"When you marry me, Lily, I'll buy you all the skirts your heart desire—Ow! Fucking hell, Evans!" James winced and rubbed his collarbone where she had decided to pinch him.

Lily had a knack for attacking the sensitive parts, not just punching a shoulder like Mia. She was ruthless when she wanted to be. James was lucky he decided to forego the open waistcoat and low neck shirt that he had thought about wearing; the top would have revealed a portion of his tattoo.

"Don't count your doxy eggs before they're hatched, Potter."

"Is anyone going to comment on the fact that Sirius and Remus have joined forces to somehow get Mia into a leather skirt?" Peter pointed out. He was doing his best to keep up with the rest of them as they rushed through back alleys and side streets of London, all following Sirius as if they actually believed he knew where he was going.

Remus grinned. "I've convinced myself I'm gaining the benefit of Padfoot's fashionable eye."

"And Padfoot gets . . . ?" Peter prompted.

"Hey, just because I'm not allowed to climb to the top of the mountain doesn't mean I can't enjoy the view from the bottom," Sirius said with a laugh before taking a sharp left turn, looking down at his wand and muttering a quiet Point Me Charm.

"Sirius, are you sure you know where you're going?" Mia frowned, blowing a curl out of her face, wishing that she had not followed Lily's advice to let her hair—that had a mind of its own—run wild for the night.

"Please, Mia," Sirius scoffed. "I could sniff my way through London with my eyes closed. It's just up here."

"Oh my God!" Lily screamed and jumped to the side, accidentally landing in James's arms. He grinned at her, but she scowled and pulled away just as quickly before pointing down at the side of the street behind a large bin. "There's a dead rat beside that bin."

James chuckled. "Don't eat anything off the ground, Pete."

"Shut up, Prongs."

"I can't believe I agreed to this," Lily hissed, running to catch up with Mia and Remus who were on Sirius's heels. "Then again, it *is* better than going to Petunia's hen party. Not that I was invited."

"You weren't invited to her hen party?" Mia rolled her eyes, making a mental note to deal with Petunia Evans—soon to be Dursley—the next chance she got. "Are you even going to the wedding?"

"Forcibly. She's has me dressed in the most hideous magenta dress." She tugged at her hair and groaned. "Mia, *me* in magenta! Can you imagine?"

Mia laughed. "Unfortunately for you, yes. Please take photographs."

"Hey look, there's a tattoo shop across the alley!" Sirius said excitedly. "Want to go and get another one, Prongs?"

"You have a tattoo?" Lily's eyes widened. A mixture of shock and . . . *intrigue* flashed across her features as she turned to stare into the face of a suddenly awkward-looking James, who stopped mid-step, letting Peter stumble into his back in the process.

"Uh yeah, Sirius, Mia, and I got them for our birthdays," James mumbled.

Lily hesitated, but her curiosity got the better of her. "Can I see it?"

"NO!" Remus, Mia, and James shouted all at once, leaving Lily looking even more curious and Sirius laughing at the front of the group.

"He's just shy, Evans. If you want, you can see *mine*." Sirius winked at her and watched with amusement as James's face turned briefly red.

"Shouldn't we be focused on getting to the venue?" James growled.

"All right, all right, Prongsie, keep your pants on. We're there," he said with a tone of victory as he held his hands upward, gesturing to a small building across the street. No lights were on, the windows were boarded up, and what used to be the neon sign of a Chinese restaurant had clearly been vandalized with paint.

"I don't get it. This looks like a condemned building." Lily narrowed her eyes at him. "Sirius, are you sure we're in the right place?" Her tone more accusing than questioning.

"Muggles." Sirius rolled his eyes at her and then crossed the street quickly. After looking around for *actual* Muggles, he grinned and walked straight through the front window as though it were an open door, disappearing from view completely.

Mia smiled in understanding. "Modified Notice-Me-Not, like St Mungo's. I'm assuming there's an Extension Charm on the inside as well," she said thoughtfully. Taking Remus's hand tightly within her own, she crossed the street to follow after Sirius.

"Extension Charm?" Lily asked, speedily catching up. "Like your handbag?"

"Not entirely." Mia used her free hand to grip Lily's before dragging her through the glamoured front window.

The moment they crossed the threshold of the decrepit restaurant, the view from the inside opened up into something that looked to be at least twenty times the size of the small building. The spacious room was crowded with witches and wizards, most gathered at the other end where a massive stage had been erected. Instead of bright electrical lights shining down on the large platform, several brightly glowing magical orbs hovered against the ceiling, casting light downward.

Lily gasped in astonishment. "This is . . . This is amazing."

"So, a concert?" Mia asked as they caught up with Sirius, who had already handed over an unknown number of Galleons to what looked to be the head of security. The man was almost as tall as Hagrid, though looked to be more part troll than part giant. His unnaturally bulbous nose had at least five piercings. She unconsciously touched her wand, recalling Harry sticking his up the nose of a troll once. Just the thought was making her want to take hers out and run it under a tap.

Her attention was drawn to the stage where someone was doing a sound check. She turned to look at her boyfriend with concern. Remus was never fond of crowded areas and loud noises to begin with, let alone this close to the moon. "Are you going to be okay?"

"I'll be fine," he assured her. The dark look in his eyes said headaches were not the current pre-moon symptom he was suffering from. "Still a week off, and I already took my potion tonight. It should help with the noise. Besides," he said as he leant in close and breathed against her ear, "if it gets too much, you and I can leave early."

Mia shivered at the contact and grinned up at him. "We can leave early even if it *doesn't* get to be too much."

He kissed her neck. "Minx."

"Fox," she corrected with a grin.

"Public!" James snapped at the both of them, looking happy when the pair appeared put out at being parted.

"I'm going to go get us some drinks," Sirius announced, gesturing to a large bar on the left side of the room. "Firewhisky? Firewhisky? Firewhisky? Firewhisky?" he asked, pointing individually to each member of the group and smiling when they all nodded until his eyes fell on Lily.

She shook her head. "Absolutely not."

He eyed Lily with a smirk. "All right, so that's five firewhiskies and a *water* for the *Hufflepuff* who has only been *pretending* to be a Gryffindor."

Her eyes flashed with fury. "Excuse me, Black?"

"I call them like I see them, Evans."

"Potter!" She did not even look when James immediately came to her side. "Get me a firewhisky," she demanded, giving Sirius an "I'll show you" expression before dragging James toward the bar.

"Good, and get drinks for the rest of us!" Sirius called after her, pushing the chore. He laughed as he walked over to Remus and Mia. "She's so easy to provoke. I almost feel bad."

Mia shook her head at his nerve. "So you've kept it a big secret all night; who are we here to see?"

Sirius grinned brightly, bouncing on the balls of his feet like an eleven-year-old brought to Ollivander's for the first time. "Black Sabbath!"

"What?" Mia blinked in confusion. Certainly, her musical tastes varied, and though she had never been quite the type to indulge in rock music, she was well educated about

bands of the era. Especially since Sirius never shut up about them. "That's a *Muggle* band! How's that even possible?" she demanded, gesturing to the obviously magical stage.

"Firstly, Black Sabbath is *not* a Muggle band," Sirius corrected her, and the look on his face said that he was almost offended by her accusation that his favourite band was anything less than absolutely magical. "Just because they *play* for Muggles, doesn't mean they *are* Muggles. How do you and Remus know the magical status of every author and poet that ever lived, and yet you don't know that Ozzy is a wizard?"

She stared at him, waiting for him to burst into laughter at her expense. "You're taking the piss, aren't you?"

"Not even slightly. Mia, their debut album had a song called 'The Wizard.' That's clearly about Dumbledore." He left out the silent "duh" that came at the end of his statement. "The entire band went to Hogwarts. The only bloody Slytherins in the world—besides one Dorea Potter—whom I hold in the highest esteem." He shook his head disappointedly at her before directing his attention back to the stage with a grin as he saw the opening band step out.

"Here's your drink love," Remus said, taking a small cup from James as he and Lily returned.

"Did you know that Ozzy Osbourne is a wizard?" Mia asked, turning on Remus with wide eyes.

"*You* didn't?"

Two hours later, sure enough, Black Sabbath stepped onto the magically lit stage, their instruments charmed instead of plugged into amps. Lacking microphones, Ozzy Osbourne held a yew wand to his throat after casting a Sonorus Charm, allowing the sound of his voice and music to fill the room. Despite her annoyance at Sirius and Remus both knowing something that she did not, Mia was enjoying herself.

Already, three fights had broken out closer to the stage, two of which Sirius narrowly escaped—something that apparently made the night all the more enjoyable for him. Each time he came back from evading a brawl, he would grin and say, "Did you see how close to the stage I got?"

James, Lily, and Peter attempted to get closer a few times as well, but when Peter accidentally got elbowed in the face, Lily held him back to make sure he did not have a concussion.

Mia and Remus had little desire to get close to the band; they were perfectly content in the dark corner of the large room, the sound of heady rock music thrumming around them and the scent of firewhisky between them.

Dancing to the music, Mia turned and pressed her back into Remus's chest, enjoying the feel of warmth as his hands wound themselves around her waist. He buried his nose into the mess of curls at her neck, breathing her in.

She watched with amusement as James sweetly offered Lily what was very clearly a Shirley Temple. To Mia's great surprise, Lily actually laughed and accepted the glass with a nod of thanks before allowing him to sit down beside her and Peter. Mia scanned the large room for Sirius and grinned when she saw him in the middle of the crowd, his wild mess of black hair soaked with sweat as he jumped and danced in time to the music, singing along with the band.

*"I'm just a man, and I am what I am. Nobody will ever change my ways. I don't need money, and I don't need no lies. I only need to live for today!"*

Mia chuckled to herself. *Well, that's appropriate.*

She felt a vibration against her back and realised it was Remus growling. She grinned at the feel, knowing that it was his inner wolf's way of saying that he wanted her full attention. So she turned on the spot and grinned up at him, gazing into his eyes as the green began to ever so slowly shift to gold.

*"You understand me, woman,"* the band sang in the background. *"You give me time. But I don't need no sympathy. Still, I wonder what it's like to be loved. Instead of hiding in myself."*

"Would you be terribly upset if we left early?" Remus asked against the shell of her ear, nipping her lobe lightly before pulling away.

"Why? Are you okay?" Mia asked, worried as she searched his face for signs of pain, automatically assuming that the volume or crowd had become too much for him. "Is the noise making things hard for you?"

"That skirt of yours is making things hard for me," he said, staring down at her hungrily.

She felt her cheeks grow hot under the intensity of his gaze. "What's gotten into you?"

"Moon's a week away, firewhisky," he said and shrugged his shoulders as he spouted off excuses before landing on, "dozens of other males in this room, and far too many of them have been looking at you all night." He glared at a few who were currently staring.

"I find that highly unlikely." Mia scoffed, surprised when she noticed two wizards averted their gazes when Remus snarled in their direction.

Remus turned his attention back to her and tossed her a wolfish grin. "Calling me a liar, witch?"

"So what? You're eager to stake a claim on me?" She grinned, biting on her lower lip playfully and watching with anticipation as his eyes lowered to that lip between her teeth, his nose twitching and his chest moving as he breathed deep, trying to control himself.

Remus took her hand and roughly tugged her forward, pressing her against his hard body before leaning down and speaking softly against the skin of her neck, "If you don't follow me out of this club in the next few minutes, I plan on *claiming* you right up against that wall over there. Would you like that, love?" He nipped lightly at her skin and grinned when she whimpered at the touch. "I could try and be discreet about it, but the things I want to do to you . . . I doubt you'd be very quiet. I bet I could make you scream my name louder than the music."

"Lily!" Mia shrieked, grabbing Remus's hand and dragging him as quickly as possible toward the exit while simultaneously calling out to her friend. "We're leaving! Will you tell Jamie and Sirius that I'm taking Remus home? He has a headache."

Lily rolled her eyes, snorting into her third Shirley Temple. "*Clearly.*"

Remus pressed his chest into Mia's back, breathing, "Hurry."

Mia grinned and nodded, following his lead as he tugged her toward the exit. Something in the centre of the room, however, caught her attention, and she stopped moving, her body jerking a bit as she came to a halt, though Remus continued moving until he lost grip on her hand.

"Isn't that . . . ?" Her nostrils flared as she watched two familiar blondes approach Sirius. "Those bitches! Is that Marlene McKinnon and Callista Hitchins dancing by Sirius?"

Remus huffed in annoyance. "He's a big boy. He can handle himself."

"I know he is, but—"

"Do you want to stay and protect Sirius from all the wanton Ravenclaws of the world?" Remus asked her, his eyes filling with a mixture of irritation and hurt.

Mia looked back to Sirius, who had yet to notice the two witches. She frowned, feeling incredibly guilty as she turned her attention back to her boyfriend. "No. I want to leave this place with you."

"Good." Remus grinned and took her hand once more as the two darted out the glamoured window and back into the streets of London.

While neither had an actual plan of where to go once they left the concert, they were vaguely headed toward an Apparition point they both knew of. They did not make it more than a street away from the condemned Chinese restaurant before Remus had Mia pinned up against a brick wall in a dark, empty alleyway. Had she not been a Gryffindor, she might have had the sense to be afraid. Then again, her boyfriend *was* a werewolf. Voldemort himself could walk right by and order them to stop snogging, and she was pretty certain Remus would at least *attempt* to tear the Dark Lord apart piece by piece without even bothering to ask his name.

"This fucking skirt," Remus mumbled against her mouth, and she gasped against his lips as he lifted her into his arms, pressing her hard against the brick.

As he pushed the leather up her thighs, he grinned when she got enough leverage to wrap them around his waist. He eagerly ran a hand under the hem of her shirt, his chest rumbling when she moaned as the pad of his thumb brushed against her breast, feeling the tightened peak of her nipple through the soft fabric. When she took in a sharp breath, parting her lips, Remus penetrated her mouth with a tortured groan, massaging her tongue with his own.

All that existed in the moment was the sensation of him and the overwhelming need to submit that he created in her. When he broke the kiss and mouthed the side of her neck, she instinctively tilted her head, granting him better access. He trailed soft but hungry kisses along the line of her throat, and she felt him tug her blouse and bra strap to reveal the flawless skin of her bare shoulder. His hot breath washed over her flesh.

Out of the corner of her eyes, she watched him carefully as he ghosted his lips against her skin. Breathing heavily through his nose, Remus gently dragged his teeth against her shoulder, his eyes a liquid gold, almost glowing in the night.

She briefly thought back to the many other times they made love where Remus would hover his mouth and teeth against her hips—the traditional marking place for a mate—and how, when he would pull away, she felt disappointed, though she knew he was not hers to keep—not like *that*. She was not his mate, but *this* . . . the feel of his teeth against the skin of her *shoulder* made her shake with anticipation. She was not his *mate*, but she *was* his. They *all* were. Pack. A pack with an *unsealed* bond.

"Do you want to . . . ?" Mia whispered. "Do you want to mark me?" she asked, practically begged, staring at him with yearning.

Distracted by the sound of her voice, Remus turned and stared deep into her eyes, the gold quickly fading as he took control of Moony *and* the situation. He shook his head and swallowed hard.

Mia frowned, knowing that he would soon be scolding himself for even *considering* biting her, regardless of the purpose *or* her permission. Before he had a chance to ruin the moment, she angled her hips forward. Remus growled at the sensation and reached a hand beneath her skirt, his eyes rolling back as his fingers came in contact with damp knickers. He dipped two long fingers inside of her, curling them and beckoning her forward.

Unable to bring himself to bite her the way she knew his wolf wanted to, Remus sucked on her pulse point, pulling blood to the surface and leaving behind his own brand without breaking her skin—still marking her as his.

Mia threw her head back, grinding herself against his hand, pleading for more friction. Just when she was ready to tip over the edge, he removed his fingers from her knickers and she brought her attention back to his face, narrowing her eyes and panting in confusion.

"Wh-What's wrong? Why'd you stop?"

She scarcely heard the sound of a zipper being tugged down before her own gasping filled her ears as she felt him push his length into her, one hand holding her knickers to the side, having no time to pause and tear them away. Inch by throbbing inch, Remus buried himself, groaning when she clenched tightly around his swollen cock, grinning as her soft flesh melted against his unyielding body.

He thrust hard, pushing her back against the cold brick behind her. Despite still wearing her blouse, she knew she would have scratch marks on her back to heal later—

that is, if she did not want them to remember this moment by them. Feeling a sudden need to reciprocate, she wrapped her arms around Remus's shoulders, pushing her fingers beneath the fabric and digging her nails into his skin. She smiled at the way his body tightened, the way a growl lingered against his lips—low and dangerous.

Merlin, how she wanted to lick the noise off those lips.

So she did and then whispered, "Harder," watching with a sense of pride and power as his eyes darkened with lust.

He pulled out, only to plunge into her harder and deeper, causing her to cry out loudly. Her hands snaked into his hair and tugged on the strands with desperation, needing to hold onto something. He grunted in a primal way with each and every thrust, and Mia moved her hands from his hair to claw at his back. She struggled to breathe as he stole away each and every gasp and whimper with his mouth, claiming them for himself and pushing her closer and closer to that deliciously painful breaking point.

"Remus . . ." Mia said on a breath, his name falling from her lips like a prayer; not one of worship—one that pleaded for mercy, begging him, both never to stop and yet to send her spiralling at the same time. She was certain the heat of the moment would kill her.

A coil inside tightened hard and hot and then snapped violently.

He captured her mouth with his own, muffling the sounds of her screams as she fell over the rapturous precipice, her body fluttering, pulsing, *squeezing* desperately around his hardness, imploring him to let go and give her his pleasure as he had taken hers.

Remus held her tightly against him, snapping his hips hard against her once more, spilling himself inside of her with a ravenous groan.

Minutes later, she exhaled against the sweaty skin of his neck, her legs shaking from trying to stay wrapped around him. "Can . . . Can you Apparate?"

Remus let out a deep chuckle. "Love, I'm not even certain I can *walk*."

## Chapter Sixty-Five

### *An Understanding*

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*It's a quarter after one, I'm a little drunk and I need you now.  
Said I wouldn't call but I've lost all control and I need you now.  
And I don't know how I can do without.  
I just need you now*  
(Need You Now - Lady Antebellum)

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**June 26th, 1977**

After several Cleansing Charms and a few minutes relearning how to walk without her knees buckling, a blushing Mia and a smug Remus returned to Potter Manor. He walked her to her bedroom door before bending low to chastely kiss her knuckles and wish her a good night.

Mia collapsed onto her bed, blissfully reliving the entire night. She was grateful she had gone back to following her rules and was—now more than ever—living and enjoying her life.

Several hours later, she heard a small thud and felt a depression on her mattress. Reaching beneath her pillow for her wand, her eyes widened and shifted amber so she could see better in the dark as she aimed the vine wood at the foot of her bed.

"What the . . . ? Sirius?" She gaped at the pile of long black hair, lowering her wand.

"G'mornin' kitten," he mumbled into the mattress.

"Sirius—*Tempus*—Sirius, it's half four in the morning." She glared down at him, rubbing the exhaustion from her eyes. "Did you just get home? Where are Jamie, Peter, and Lily?"

"Evans 'n Wormtail App'rated home." He drunkenly stumbled through his words, and Mia flinched as she was assaulted by the stench of firewhisky as he leant up to speak to her. "Prongs passed out in the Floo. Tilly took 'im to 'is room."

"And is there a reason you're in *my* room?" she asked, her eyes darting to her now open bedroom door. A momentary worry crossed her thoughts as she imagined what would happen if James or Remus walked in.

Sirius shrugged and fell back onto the mattress. "It's better than mine."

"Why's that?"

"Not alone in here."

Mia frowned. "You could have gone to Jamie's or Remus's rooms if you were lonely, you know."

"They're not as pretty as you. Well, *Prongs* is. But *that hair* . . . Merlin."

"Remus is *plenty* pretty." Mia smirked at him and sat up straight, tugging her nightdress down so that it completely covered her legs. It was not that he hadn't seen her bare skin before, but at least this way, if someone *did* walk in, they could not be accused of anything inappropriate.

"If I crawled in Moony's bed, his girlfriend would get right jealous," Sirius muttered.

Mia laughed as she imagined how she would react if she woke up in the morning to find Sirius snuggled up against what would certainly be an uncomfortable-looking Remus. "But you think it's wise to crawl inside said girlfriend's bed in the hopes that her werewolf boyfriend isn't the jealous type?"

"Moony 'n I have an understandin' when it comes to Mia," Sirius said, and his tone made Mia stop and listen more closely, wondering if he even knew who he was talking to. "I know how *he* feels, he knows how *I* feel, she feels . . . she feels everything."

Mia frowned, her brow furrowing. *What did that mean? Everything?*

"Just 'cause *I* want her too, doesn't mean I don't want them both happy. So happy. Do you know how happy they are?" Sirius smiled, his eyes closed as he leant against the mattress, bunching her blankets into his arms and constructing a makeshift pillow as he mumbled, "Wow. Merlin, *that's* love."

"Sirius?" Mia whispered, suddenly aware that she had not breathed through his short tirade.

His eyes briefly opened, one appearing heavier than the other. When recognition hit him, Sirius smiled up at her crookedly. He beamed at her as though they hadn't just been talking. "Hi, kitten. When'd you get home? Why're you in my bed?"

"This is *my* bed," she informed him.

Sirius shook his head, his eyebrows raised. "Moony's not gonna like that."

"I thought you had an understanding with Remus?"

"Yeah." Sirius scoffed. "I understand that he's gonna scratch my face off if he smells me on you. Go back to your own room, Mia."

She huffed out a breath in frustration. "This *is* my room."

"Good." Sirius rested his head back down on his makeshift pillow. "You shouldn't be in my room. S'not appropriate."

"I'll keep that in mind," she said, rolling her eyes. "So, how was the rest of the concert?"

"Didn't stay," he mumbled. "Bloody women."

"You left with McKinnon and Hitchins?" she snapped at him in irritation and disappointment, briefly scolding herself for leaving so early with Remus—though she had little cause to complain, all things considered.

"What? No." Sirius laughed. "Fuckin' . . . had to tell 'em to shove off. For being Ravenclaws, they don't take subtlety very well. *My* cock. Not theirs."

Mia snorted. No, the Ravenclaws of this time reminded her more of Lavender Brown than they did of Luna Lovegood—save, of course, for Pandora.

"They went mental and tried in on Prongs, and for *some* reason that lit Evans's fuse." Sirius and Mia shared a knowing smirk, and she could not help but want details on what exactly Lily might have done to the blondes. "Evans said that we were all drunk an' she knew you'd be upset if me or James did somefink stupid. Bloody ginger witch pushed us out of the club. Threatened to fire-call Mum and Dad."

She smiled sweetly, affection for her fellow witch swelling in her chest. "Well, for what it's worth, I'm glad you didn't go home with those girls."

"Not like it bloody matters. They'll go an' tell everyone they did anyway," he said in an irritated tone of voice that reminded her immediately of Harry during fifth year anytime he looked at a copy of the *Daily Prophet*. She wondered if Harry picked up the habit from an older Sirius Black.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean every girl I've turned down the past year still went an' told all 'er friends we shagged," he complained, crawling his way further onto the bed, struggling to make himself comfortable. "According to the latest rumours, I've had sex with one-hundred and twenty-eight girls this year."

Her eyes widened, and she snarled in distaste. "And how many has it *actually* been?" she asked with a little more venom in her voice than she intended.

"One," Sirius replied with a yawn, his eyes closed again. "Mia."

She paled. "What did you just say?"

"Don't tell Mia, though," he mumbled as he began falling asleep. A part of her felt bad for staying, inadvertently eavesdropping on a conversation she probably should not be having with him considering he was not fully aware with whom he was speaking. "You know how she gets. Reads into every bloody thing, an' I don't want her thinkin' I'm just waitin' for her to drop Remus any second."

*Was he?*

"Are you?"

"No. She belongs with Remus," Sirius insisted. "*That's* love. Have you seen them? Wow. So bloody happy. I'm not gonna ruin that. B'sides I don't know what all this means . . . fuckin' bonds."

*Fuckin' bonds indeed*, Mia thought.

"Sirius, why haven't you been with anyone since m—since Mia?"

She had never once thought that he would stop sleeping around. He was Sirius Black, for crying out loud. He had more rumours and "legends" about him in Hogwarts than Draco Malfoy ever had. A part of her realised that she had bought into all of those rumours that were apparently untrue. Certainly, Sirius had a past, he'd as much as admitted it arrogantly throughout the years, but this past year, girls were simply taking his rejection and then lying about it to . . . to what? Plant themselves in the Sirius Black Hall of Fame? Was there a monthly newsletter? Did everyone wear secret badges? Mia growled at the thought, feeling defensive on his behalf.

"She thinks I'm a good man, you know." He smiled sadly, and Mia was pulled from her angry thoughts. "Gotta try an' be one. S'fuckin hard sometimes. Gotta do it, made a promise. *Ours* to protect. *Ours* to keep safe. *Ours* to make happy." He breathed in deep and exhaled slowly.

After several moments of silence, Mia thought he had fallen asleep. She threw her legs over the side of her bed and stood, knowing that she could not very well stay there.

Sirius's voice pulled her attention back. "Do you think she'd be happy if I was a good man?"

She frowned, her heart clenching. "You *are* a good man, Sirius."

"That's nice," he said with a dopey smile and then slowly opened his eyes, looking up at her. "Mia? You should go back to your own room." His eyes fluttered shut once

again. "I don't want Remus to think . . . that you don't love him. Don't want him . . . think I betrayed . . ."

And finally, he fell asleep.

"Goodnight, Sirius." Mia briefly ran her fingers through his long, black hair before sighing and turning on her heels to leave the room.

She walked down the long stretch of hallway, passing by Remus's room. Despite wanting to go inside, she knew better, making a beeline for James's bedroom instead. Slipping through the door, she found her brother awkwardly positioned on his bed, dressed in his pyjamas that were more than likely put on him by Tilly.

"Whappened?" Jamie muttered as Mia crawled in beside him.

She smirked at the state of his hair, which was sticking straight out to the side as though someone had run glue through it. "Scoot over," she said and shoved at him until he moved, giving her room enough to lie down on her side facing him.

"You okay?" he asked, eyes half-lidded.

"I'm fine. Sirius passed out in my bed."

James's eyes popped open comically, and he glared forward. "What? That asshole . . . Did he try anything?"

She rolled her eyes, knowing that even if Sirius *had* tried something, James was in no state to go and defend her honour against his best friend. She could only imagine the strength of their hangovers that would come the following morning. Their mother was going to enjoy herself immensely.

"No, of course not. He just babbled a bunch and then fell asleep. He thought it was *his* room." She smirked and then watched as James rubbed at his tired eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Tired."

"Still drunk?"

"Lily was really pretty tonight, wasn't she?" James grinned as he answered her.

She rolled her eyes. "Yep, still drunk. If you moan Lily's name even *once* in your sleep while I'm in this bed, Jamie, I will hex you into next year."

"Why're you in *my* bed?" he asked her with a muffled groan as he rolled over onto his back.

"Because I can't go back to my own, Sirius is there."

"So go to Remus's bed," he grumbled and then immediately added, "but just for sleep."

"I can't," she said, laughing quietly. "If I go to Remus right now, he'll smell Sirius all over me, and that's not a conversation I want to have with my territorial, werewolf boyfriend at five in the morning."

James grimaced. "You canines and your smells."

"Vulpine," she corrected him and grinned when he swatted at her. "Although, speaking of which . . ." She leant over and rubbed her cheek against her brother's with a smirk. Like Padfoot would do in the grass on a warm summer day, Mia rolled over in James's bed, rubbing her hair against the side of his face as he struggled against her.

"What the hell? Gerroff me! Go rub Sirius's scent off on someone else!" he demanded, wrapping his blankets tightly around his body before turning away from her. "That's right, I know what you were doing. The three of you are disgusting."

"I love you, Jamie," she said on the edge of a laugh.

"Love you, Mia."

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The sun broke over the horizon, and despite not getting much sleep with James snoring as well as tossing and turning in the bed—once accidentally elbowing her in the neck—Mia woke eager to start the day.

Yawning, she entered the dining room to see her mother pleasantly picking through a bowl of fruit, setting aside the blueberries and grapes for her father, despite the fact that he was not even there. Dorea had been doing it for years. Mia recalled once asking her mother why she didn't just ask Tilly to leave the berries and grapes *out* of her breakfast for the mornings that Charlus was not there to pick at her dish. Dorea's simple answer was: "Continuity, dear."

"Morning, Mum." Mia kissed her mother's cheek in greeting, taking her seat to Dorea's left and reaching for a piece of toast.

"Good morning, Mia." Dorea beamed at her daughter. "You look less than well-rested and yet positively delightful. Care to indulge an old woman with the sordid tales of youth?" She rose a brow, and Mia could immediately see a vision of a young Dorea Black,

slightly deviant and shameless. It had to be a redhead thing considering Lily and Ginny were varying levels of the same.

"You're not old, Mum."

"That's not an answer."

"Well, I suppose it all depends on whether or not you consider Remus to be like one of your own children yet?" Mia asked with a knowing smirk.

Dorea nodded and chuckled, waving at Mia dismissively. "I suppose you'll just have to rely on Miss Evans and the other little Gryffindor girls when it comes to sharing details of your romantic life."

"A burden they all *too eagerly* bear."

"Good morning, Remus, dear," Dorea greeted.

Remus slowly made his way into the room, still wearing the pair of Snitch-covered flannel pyjama bottoms she had bought him last Christmas. James and Sirius had matching ones, with Quaffles on James's and Bludgers on Sirius's. Mia had once wondered aloud why Remus was given Snitches, considering he did not even play Quidditch outside of the few matches the boys had in the back orchards. Dorea had insisted it was too difficult a thing to find pyjamas with chocolate and books printed on them, so Remus would have to deal with Quidditch-themed sleepwear.

"How did you sleep?" Dorea asked with a flickered glance toward Mia.

"Well. Thank you, Mrs Potter," Remus answered politely, reaching for the teapot in the centre of the table and fixing a small cup before taking his seat beside Mia, placing the cup in front of her.

When Remus had originally come to stay with the Potters, it had been a bit of a struggle between him and the house-elf, as Tilly had watched with annoyed interest when Remus and Mia fixed breakfast for one another. It was one thing for a witch or a wizard to serve up their *own* plates, but Tilly could not fathom why her Young Miss would let the new Young Master serve her so willingly when she fought tooth and nail to do the same.

Eventually, Tilly conceded to the young couple, but only after Mia promised never to bring up the idea of paying her wages ever again.

"James is on his way down," Remus informed them. "I don't think Sirius made it home last night. I went to wake him up, but he wasn't in his room."

"He's in mine."

Remus's eyes briefly widened, and he turned to look at her. "What?"

Mia watched with interest as his nostrils flared, and she could tell that he was unconsciously searching her for Sirius's scent. When he instead smelled James, he rose a confused brow.

She smirked, feeling proud that she had somehow thwarted him.

"Put your scowl away. I'm clearly not there with him. Nor was I last night. I slept in Jamie's room until the snoring prat drove me out at the crack of dawn."

Suddenly, a loud yell came from down the hall, drawing their attention.

"Fuck off, Potter! My head hurts!"

"So does mine, and *I* still have to bloody go to breakfast with the family!"

"Stop shoving me, asshole! I am not above biting you!"

"Go ahead and try it, Pads. Just you see what happens!"

Dorea's eyes lit up mischievously at the sound of her sons arguing with one another.

Mia sipped her tea, cheerfully muttering, "Sleeping beauties are up."

"Go sit on your own antlers, you pushy sod!"

"Stop yelling, dickhead! I have a headache!"

"How very charming," Dorea commented dryly. "It really is a wonder Miss Evans hasn't succumbed to James's many marriage proposals over the years."

Both Mia and Remus stifled their laughter. Charlus would have been beside himself over the language the boys were using, especially in the presence of their mother and Mia, but Dorea looked more than entertained by the pair who were slowly making their way toward the dining room, still shouting at one another.

"Between the two of those boys, I'm liable to never have grandchildren." Dorea sighed in disappointment before turning her attention to her daughter. "You'll be certain to carry on the Potter line for us, won't you, Mia, dear?"

Remus's eyes widened in absolute horror.

Mia did her best to hold back the plethora of emotions at his response—all negative—in understanding. While most young men would likely balk at hearing their girlfriend's mother request future grandchildren, she knew that Remus was panicking over his lycanthropy and likely over the conversation they had yet to have regarding the future of their relationship should they stay together after leaving Hogwarts.

She thought of Future Remus and how broken and terrified he had been that night at Grimmauld Place during the war, having run out on Tonks in a panic after discovering her pregnancy. Mia had felt sympathetic at the time, but now she was as irritated as Sirius had been, and she kind of wanted to hit him for it.

Holding her composure and putting a star next to *Fix Remus* on her list of things to do, she smiled at her mother. "I'm pretty sure James will eventually be more than up to the challenge of providing an heir."

"Morning, Mum," Sirius said on a groan as he walked into the dining room still wearing the clothes he had passed out in. He leant down and kissed Dorea's cheek in greeting.

She cringed at the smell of him. "Darling, firewhisky is not the only drink available to you. You're drinking nothing but water today," she ordered. "And you're to bathe immediately after breakfast. I'll not have the entire manor smelling like the Leaky Cauldron."

James laughed at Sirius before kissing his mother's cheek. "Morning, Mum."

"Oh, my sweet boy, you don't look well." She felt James's forehead as though she did not already know what was ailing him. She called for Tilly, who appeared immediately, staring disappointedly up into James's face. "Can you bring down some Hangover Potion for the boys? The clear phial in my nightstand."

"Yes, Mistress. Tilly gets it."

"Thanks, Mum." James smiled with a look of great relief. He reached across the table for the pitcher of water just as Tilly reappeared, holding out a small clear phial to Dorea.

"Tilly brings the potion for the young Masters."

"Thank you, Tilly." James reached for the phial in his mother's hands.

"No, no," Dorea said softly, pulling the potion back from her son. "Let's not be hasty. Honestly, who drinks a Hangover Potion first thing in the morning?"

"Hungover people?" Sirius offered incredulously.

"Perhaps," Dorea said thoughtfully, tapping the top of the phial against her chin as though she were thinking of what to do. "However, it's been years since I've had to take one of these myself. I don't know the protocols. Should you eat first? Does it need to be taken with a glass of pumpkin juice? Hmm . . . no," she eventually decided, shaking her

head. "I can't even bear the thought of putting my darling boys in danger by giving them a potion that I don't know the effects of. What kind of mother would that make me?"

Mia burst into laughter as she realised just how utterly cruel Dorea Potter could be. While she would have simply been as loud as possible to increase their headaches as punishment for overindulging in firewhisky, Dorea, instead, offered them sweet relief, only to pull it back at the last minute. It was pure brilliance, and Mia was growing fonder of her mother's Slytherin tactics the older she got.

"The most beautiful mother in the world?" Sirius smiled up at Dorea, using what little charm he had in him this early in the day, which was still more than the average young wizard.

"Oh, how lovely. Flattery like that will get you . . . two drops."

Sirius's smile instantly faded. They were going to have to work *hard* for this.

"Where are Lily and Peter this morning?" Dorea asked casually as she sipped her morning tea, her eyes never leaving those of her pained sons, both pouting as they looked at the phial of Hangover Potion with longing.

"Peter's helping his dad at the shop today," Remus answered, smirking across the large table at Sirius and James.

"Lily has her sister's wedding this afternoon," Mia said.

"Ah yes, she mentioned that. Strange things, *Muggle* weddings." Dorea leant over and tipped two drops into each cup for Sirius and James, watching curiously as the boys eagerly drank their water only to put their glasses back on the table and look up at her expectantly.

"Of course, the Wizarding world has adapted many of their traditions—all silly superstitions, if you ask me, but apparently traditional in their world." She waved her wand, refilling the boys' glasses and placed two more drops in each one, chuckling softly as they drank again, refilling their glasses with water once more and waiting for more potion to be delivered. She placed two more drops. "In *my* day, the bride was delivered to the ceremonial circle by her parents or a chosen guardian to be bonded. There was no overly dramatic ceremony with flowers and cake. And the dresses these days!"

"What kind of dress did *you* wear, Mum?" Mia asked, watching from the side as Sirius and James guzzled their water.

"I didn't. It's tradition that the bride be brought to the circle wearing nothing."

James choked on his water; Sirius followed him.

"Naive boys. Of *course* I wore a wedding dress." Dorea rolled her eyes. When Sirius and James breathed a sigh of relief, she turned to her daughter and slowly shook her head, causing Mia to blush and laugh softly to herself.

"Now, is the potion working?" Dorea asked James and Sirius.

James nodded. "I think so. I still feel a little sore, but it's much better."

"Me too," Sirius agreed. "Is that your own brew, Mum?" he asked her, his eyes glancing over the small clear phial. "I thought Hangover Potion was green."

"It is." Dorea smiled. "*This* is water."

Mia and Remus started laughing.

"Did I *not* just finish saying that you'll drink nothing but water today? If I let you fix all of your problems with magic, you'd be overly dependent on it, and I'll not have my children walking about like they're owed something from the world simply because nothing was denied them at home. If you're foolish enough to drink yourselves stupid, you'll deal with the consequences."

She stood from the table and smiled when Remus, James, and Sirius all stood with her. She leant in and gave them each a kiss on the cheek. "Don't get into too much trouble. I have errands at St Mungo's that will surely take up my entire day."

"Don't worry. I'm going to try and get a head start on N.E.W.T.s revisions," Mia announced, and Remus nodded his head, clearly in agreement with her plan for the day. She looked over to James and Sirius, who were conspiratorially whispering to one another. Both witches stared at them with identical suspicion.

James looked up innocently. "We're just going to take Sirius's bike for a test ride. Nothing big." He cleared his throat and avoided his mother's stern gaze only to find Mia's eyes narrowed at him.

"Keep it on the ground," Dorea ordered, her gaze boring into the side of Sirius's face.

He paled at the words and then let out a defeated sigh. "Fine, but once I get the permits," he said stubbornly, "she's going to fly smoother than a Cleansweep."

## Chapter Sixty-Six

### *Unwell*

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*I remember the days you were a hero in my eyes  
But those are just a long lost memory of mine  
I spent so many years learning how to survive  
And I'm writing just to let you know I'm still alive  
(Emotionless - Good Charlotte)*

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**June 25th, 1977**

The sun had barely set over the horizon of orchard trees behind Potter Manor. Despite it being late June, a soft summer breeze compelled Mia to cuddle into Remus's side in search of heat, and she grinned when he wrapped a large arm around her shoulders and tugged her closer. They stared out at the lush reds, pinks, and oranges painted against the sky, and for the first time in a long while, the two had relative privacy in the manor—although Tilly was always *somewhere* nearby. Besides the house-elf, though, Mia and Remus were alone. James and Sirius had taken the motorbike out for a test run after tweaking the engine. Dorea was at St Mungo's dealing with hospital board members and something she was trying to organise but had yet to give details on. And Charlus had gone to the Leaky to meet up with some old friends; Mia gathered this meant "secret meeting with Dumbledore."

"What do you want to do after Hogwarts?" Remus asked, stroking his fingers up and down her bare arm.

"I thought we agreed on no future talk?" Mia teased, watching with a curious glance as Remus's cheeks coloured a little. "I'm not sure. I've considered going to work at the Ministry. Nothing too important at first, but maybe work my way up the ladder and actually make a difference." That had been true in her original timeline as well, despite the multiple times Harry and Ron had pleaded with her to join the Aurors with them.

"I could see you doing something like that. What department?"

Mia slowly sat up, scooting a bit away from him. "Don't get angry."

"Ugh." He scowled in understanding, not needing her to say it. He straightened his posture, running a hand through his hair in frustration and staring at her incredulously.

"Don't get me wrong, there needs to be some serious reform in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, but you forget that my dad worked there for *years*, and it's full of corruption."

For all Mia knew, it was working in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures that had *caused* Lyall Lupin's corruption. Perhaps, if the Ministry had an ounce of decency, there could be education about werewolves and other creatures instead of the "control" and "regulation" that ultimately bred fear.

"The entire Ministry is corrupted," she said, thinking briefly of future Ministers for Magic, Cornelius Fudge and Rufus Scrimgeour. "It needs a complete overhaul, but I'd have to start somewhere, and where else would I get my foot in the door?"

*"Anywhere else."*

She rolled her eyes and gently pushed at his shoulder. "You're biased. I think I could bring a lot to the department. I happen to be quite an expert on a certain subject."

"Oh?" He raised a challenging eyebrow. "What subject might that be?"

She used the moment to try and talk him out of his bad mood by scooting closer and running her fingers up the centre of his chest, dancing them up the side of his neck, and using her index finger to draw a line against his bottom lip.

Remus smirked and captured her finger gently between his teeth, trapping it.

"How to wrap a werewolf around one's finger, for instance."

He chuckled and released her finger, taking her hand, instead, with his own and kissing the inside of her wrist gently. "By that logic, I'm an expert at how to wrap a witch around one's waist," he whispered seductively, reminding her of the night before, where outside the concert in a dark alley, he pinned her against a brick wall and drove her to unspeakable heights.

"You're terrible." She kissed him before pulling away to continue her point. "But don't you think I could do a lot of good there? Overturn archaic laws regarding werewolves and house-elves and centaurs?"

"What's this about centaurs?" Charlus Potter's voice broke through the back door.

At the sound, Remus tossed Mia off of him, depositing her on the ground.

She burst into laughter before turning her eyes upward and smiling innocently at her father. By the look on his face, Charlus could easily tell which of the two teenagers had been the instigator.

Remus cleared his throat. "Mia wants to work for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures."

"That would be perfect for you, sweetheart. I'm happy to hear that *one* of my children is making plans for the future."

As far as anyone was concerned, aside from a general interest in becoming an Auror, Sirius's plan was to drain the city dry of firewhisky. James's only ambition was to marry Lily. From the looks of it, only one of the boys was anywhere close to their goal, considering Charlus's personal stash of Ogden's Finest was missing.

"However, I would have thought that you'd jump at the chance to become a Healer. Madam Pomfrey has mentioned more than once how she'd like to take you on as an apprentice when you graduate."

"Really?" Mia's eyes widened at the thought. She remembered her first morning in the hospital wing following Remus's transformation when they were only eleven. Madam Pomfrey had asked if she had been a Healer in her previous time, suggesting that perhaps a future career in the field would be recommended. "I'll have to think about it. Are you going somewhere?" she asked, noticing the way he was fidgeting with the clasp on his robes.

"Yes." Charlus sighed, and his cheerful demeanour faltered. "Your mother just fire-called from St Mungo's."

Remus raised his brows. "Is everything all right?"

"Not sure yet. She's there organising a fundraiser with several other charity heads. Apparently, there's been a bit of an outbreak in the Muggle world." Both teenagers stood at the news of this, each having personal investments with Muggles and Muggle-borns. "Some sort of flu that's come over from Russia; it's put quite a few Muggles and squibs in the hospital. They've had to temporarily move the residents of the Janus Thickey Ward to another facility just to make room for a number of new patients. Your mum's trying to get some money brought in to permanently add an entire floor specific to Muggle maladies and medicines."

"That would be wonderful!" Mia beamed at the thought, though she quickly felt the hope drop out of the dream since she knew that St Mungo's had no such Muggle floor in 1998. A part of her resolved to change that should she ever be given the chance to return to her original time. "Imagine how many people could be helped."

"If she can get the hospital board to agree. Unfortunately, she's got a bit of rough patch ahead fighting off the likes of Abraxas Malfoy and her nephew, Cygnus."

"Is that why you're headed over? Going in for backup?"

Charlus simply laughed at the suggestion that Dorea would need him to help her in such a task. "As though your mother would ever need the assistance of a man. No, I'm going because your brother and Sirius were in a bit of an accident."

Mia paled and gripped Remus's hand hard in worried anticipation.

"Mum says the boys are fine," Charlus assured her, apparently seeing the distress in her eyes. "James has a bit of a bump to the head, nothing worse than he's had playing Quidditch."

"They were on Sirius's death trap, weren't they?" Mia hissed. "That stupid motorbike. Can we come with you?"

"Maybe St Mungo's isn't the best place to scold them," Remus kindly suggested.

"Are you mad? It's the *best* place," she insisted, recalling the way Dorea burst through the open doors of the magical hospital and sent each and every Healer to tears as she demanded to be let into Sirius's room after his attack. Mia had learnt then that hospital walls echoed wonderfully, and if she was going to yell at Sirius and James, she would prefer her voice to have a little extra boost.

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The three entered St Mungo's through the Floo, stepping onto the Ground Floor through the green flames. Mia stood back with Remus as Charlus approached the Welcome Witch's desk and spoke softly so as not to draw attention. A few moments later, he was leading them down a long hallway to a door guarded by two Aurors, one of them the very familiar face of Kingsley Shacklebolt, the other a scowling, older Auror who wore different coloured robes than Kingsley. Mia could understand what looked to be a bitter and permanent frown on his face. She had read more of Harry and Ron's Auror books than either of *them* had, and she recognised the variety of Auror robes and their significance. Kingsley's dark blue signified that, despite his young age, he was ranked above the man to his left.

"Why are Aurors outside the room?" Remus whispered to Charlus as they approached.

"Dorea forgot to mention that." Charlus groaned as he approached the two men, hand extended in polite greeting. "Those are my sons in there. Is everything all right?"

"Not entirely, sir," Kingsley admitted. "We've already taken a statement from them and, though they're both of age, being that they're still Hogwarts students we'll have to speak with you about the situation as they're under your care."

Charlus sighed. "Very well. Can my other children go on and see them?"

"Go ahead." Kingsley nodded to both Mia and Remus.

Mia smiled up at the familiar Auror before disappearing through the door, allowing it to close tightly shut behind Remus before she spun on her heels and hissed in Sirius's direction. "What did you do?!"

"Evening, kitten." Sirius grinned up at her from a chair perched beside the long white bed where James was. Neither looked particularly injured, though James had an expression on his face that Mia had become familiar with over many years of Quidditch. Muggles called it a concussion; she referred to it as "Bludger Head."

"Don't you 'kitten' me, Sirius Black!" She put her hands on her hips as she stared at him in disappointment. "Why is my brother in a hospital bed?"

"Because the chair was taken?"

Before she had a chance to lash out in retaliation for his cheek, James laughed, drawing her attention. "I'm fine, Mi. Just a little bump on the head."

"And the Aurors?" Remus inquired with raised brows.

"I'm sure they're fine too."

Mia scowled. "Jamie!"

Sirius sighed irritably. "It's a big misunderstanding. We got into a little accident when a couple of—" He paused as James cleared his throat loudly and shook his head, his eyes wide. "What? Like she's not going to find out from Mum and Dad? Death Eaters chased us through the back streets of London."

"What? Why?" Remus asked with wide eyes as Mia gasped and crawled into James's bed, wrapping her arms gently around her brother.

"Do I look like I have some insight into the mind of a bloody Death Eater, Moony?" Sirius growled, narrowing his eyes when Remus opened his mouth to speak. "Don't answer

that. I'm guessing they recognised me and decided to try and wrap up a pretty, Padfoot-sized gift for their dear and fluffy Dark Lord. We outran them but, unfortunately, crashed my bike in the process and got arrested by the Muggles. Aurors showed up and took over. Thanks to Prongs's big, swollen head, we were brought here instead of the Ministry."

"Are they charging you with anything?" Mia asked, concerned as she looked over James's head for any bumps and bruises.

"They haven't said." James pursed his lips in irritation, wincing when Mia's probing fingers hit a sore spot on his head. "Then again, they haven't been too happy about our story. Easier to pretend that two teenagers are liars than to admit that Death Eaters are officially daring enough to fly their brooms in the middle of a Muggle city."

Closing her eyes, Mia focused on her breathing as she slowly felt herself losing control. The two Wizarding wars truly had not been so very different. Death Eaters attacking out in the open, and the Ministry looking the other way, blaming a child—a *Potter*—for disturbing the peace, and calling him a liar.

Remus scowled. "They think you made the story up, and you're probably hiding something because of it."

"Which I don't understand," Sirius said. "I happen to think I have a very sincere-looking face."

"A face that would look much better were it not attached to the rest of you, which seems to find itself in trouble more often than I care for." Dorea walked through the now open door, a stern but affectionate look on her face as she stepped inside. She leant first to kiss Remus's cheek in greeting before doing the same with Mia.

Sighing, she turned her focus on Sirius and James. "Your father has spoken with the Aurors and explained your history with . . . *that* sort," she said, her grey eyes darkening in anger, "and they're just now trying to get hold of Professor Dumbledore for confirmation on the Carrow twins' case. I thought I heard them mention Alphard, Sirius, so they might come back to ask you about Walburga and the others."

He groaned, his head falling back. "Wonderful."

"How's your head, darling?" Dorea asked as she ran her fingers softly through James's hair, examining his head for swelling.

He smiled, leaning into the touch like a child. "Better."

"Everything's cleared up," Charlus announced as he walked into the room. "As soon as the Healer says James is good to go, we can all head home."

"You take the children—" Dorea began.

"Children?" Sirius scoffed.

"You take the . . . *little ones*," Dorea amended and smirked at Sirius before turning her attention back to her husband, "home, and I'll see you all late tonight. Malfoy is putting up a fuss. He says if the care for Muggles and squibs is so important, why don't we just ship them off to their own kind, and let them pay for the privilege." She rolled her eyes and then added, "Tosser."

Sirius grinned, looking up at Dorea with admiration. "Battle of the serpents. Watch out for his venom, Mum."

"Oh, darling," Dorea said with a sweet laugh, "he's a grass snake who merely *thinks* he's a cobra. I, however, am a viper, and my bite can take weeks to fester before it kills you." Her look of seriousness was only detectable through her cold eyes, as her tone was as sweet as honey.

"Little scary, Mum," Mia pointed out.

"I'm aware. Now go on, my lovelies. Take care of your brother," Dorea ordered, kissing Mia on the forehead. "James, no flying for at least a week. Sirius, don't you dare get on that motorbike until it's been properly fixed. And not by yourself," she added before kissing both boys and then turning to Remus in the corner of the room and sighing, the smile on her face fading only slightly. "Remus, love, I'd like to have a chat. Just the two of us later, all right?"

"Did I do something . . . ?" he began with a worried expression.

"Absolutely not, dear," Dorea promised him, taking his face into the palms of her hands before kissing his cheek. "I simply have a little gift for you."

"Okay."

"So, what did the Aurors say?" James demanded the moment the door closed behind Dorea.

"Mia and Remus, would you mind fetching something to drink for us all?" Charlus requested, scratching the back of his neck, his jaw tight.

Mia knew that look. While Dorea could sweetly scold when she wanted, Charlus would not let his wife take all the credit when it came to disciplining the children. Despite

Sirius and James being legal adults in the Wizarding world, they were about to get a long-overdue talk about responsibility.

"Are they in trouble?" Mia eagerly asked her father.

"Yes."

"And you're not going to let me watch? That seems unfair."

"Go on." Charlus playfully shoved at her shoulder, ushering her out of the room with an amused smirk on his face.

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"What do you suppose your mum wants to give me?"

Remus shoved his hands into the pockets of his second-hand robes. Dorea and Charlus had purchased him new ones, of course, but he had politely insisted on saving them for Hogwarts. He did not want anyone in Wizarding London or Diagon Alley to think that he was using the Potters for their money.

"She probably wants to give you Grandmother Black's opal ring so you can properly propose to me," Mia said casually, unaware at first that Remus had frozen in place, his eyes wide with absolutely panic. She laughed as she put her hands on his shoulders, shaking him out of his stupor. "Remus! Remus, I'm kidding!"

"It's not that . . ." He swallowed hard. "Because I . . . It's just . . . We're just so . . . I'm—"

"Incapable of forming coherent sentences?"

He laughed at the end of a nervous exhale. "You're cruel, witch."

"I happen to think I'm very funny. Don't worry, Remus, I'm not expecting you to ask me to marry you. There is absolutely no need for you to get down on one knee. *Both* knees, however . . . Remus?"

His attention, however, had been stolen from his girlfriend, turned instead to the man at the end of the long corridor, speaking with a Healer.

"Dad?"

His father turned, and Remus blanched at the sight of his own father. He had always looked a bit shabby and under the weather, much like Remus himself, but he now looked positively ill. His stringy, grey and brown hair was longer than it had been before, though

he didn't bother pulling it back away from his pale face. His jaw was more than scruffy, but the beard was entirely unkempt.

For a split second, Remus had the panicking thought that perhaps Greyback had tracked his parents down and infected his father. To verify, Remus inhaled sharply and exhaled in disgust and disappointment when he smelled not lycanthropy but firewhisky billowing off of his father like steam from a train engine.

Approaching them with a suspicious expression, Remus's father narrowed his eyes. "What're you doing here? You shouldn't be here."

"Mia's brother was in a small accident," Remus answered stiffly.

"Hello, Mr Lupin, how are you?" Mia said politely, stepping between Remus and his father as though she could either create a bridge between the two or a wall of protection. Remus figured, knowing her, that it was a bit of both.

Her movement stirred something in Remus: an overwhelming sense of love and care, followed by a strong need to protect her from Lyall. Lyall . . . his father. Remus wondered when he had started thinking of the man by his first name, much like Sirius did with his mother. Lyall had never been physically abusive the way Remus knew Walburga Black was, but the chasm between him and his father was significant, and he could not help but wish that Mia's father was with them right then.

Lyall looked at Mia with a curious expression, his emotions flickering over his face before landing on disappointed. "I see *this* is still going on." He frowned, gesturing to the way she held onto Remus's hand. "My dear girl, I'm happy to see that you're—"

"Alive?" Remus growled. "Intact? Not disfigured or infected?"

Lyall's brief expression of politeness turned cold instantly. "All of those things, yes."

"What are *you* doing here?"

Not bothering to look Remus in the eye, his gaze stuck in the space between him and Mia, he said, "Your mother is unwell."

"Mum?" Remus felt his heart drop. "What's wrong with her? What happened?"

Mia clung tighter to Remus's hand, bringing her free palm up to grip his bicep. "Did she catch that Muggle flu that's going around? My father was just telling us about that. I'm so sorry."

"It's not *your* fault, dear," Lyall stated, his gaze finally returning to Remus's face.

"Excuse me? You think . . . you think it's *my* fault that Mum's sick?" Remus asked in disbelief. It was one thing to blame his condition, but to blame *him* specifically for her catching a flu?

"She's always been a bit fragile, and the stress of . . . It's been a hindrance to her health. The constant need to move did not help in the slightest."

Remus could feel the stress flowing off of his skin in pulsing waves. With every beat, he felt Mia's grip on him tighten. He could not think clearly enough to remind her that if he lost control, she would hardly have the ability to subdue him. Instead, his focus and anger were directed entirely on his father. "And that's *my* fault?"

Reeking of liquor and shame, Lyall scowled, wiped his sleeve across his mouth and mumbled, "Well, if you hadn't gotten yourself bitten."

"I was four!" Remus shouted, drawing the attention of a few passing Healers.

"Remus . . ." Mia whispered.

"I was your son, and it was your job to protect me. That's what a father does. If it's anyone's fault it's *yours* for provoking the werewolf community!"

Lyall narrowed his eyes. "Defending *them* now? Defending the . . . *thing* that killed my son?"

"I didn't *die*! I'm right here! Don't you dare accuse me of defending that monster." Visions of a bleeding Greyback in the Forbidden Forest flooded his mind. He knew logically that he and Greyback were so different, and now that he and his pack had conquered the vicious werewolf, even if only temporarily, Remus was Alpha now!

"A monster just like—" Lyall began but suddenly found his voice missing.

Mia dropped her wand, having apparently cast a Silencing Charm, and turned to Remus. "My love, you need to calm down."

Remus wanted to pull away from her, but then he watched as she purposely shifted her eyes amber, and Moony was drawn to the colour as though briefly hypnotised. He still wanted to unleash the monster within, but lust and dominance had been thrown into the ring in order to fight against rage and bloodlust.

He used the distraction to try and push the wolf back into his mental cage, anchoring himself with Mia's touch and scent. His breath began to steady just as she looked away from him, pinning his father with a glare.

"Mr Lupin, I will remove the Silencing Charm. Please note that it is my respect for your wife and my love for your son that has you still standing here in one piece and not in a hospital bed of your very own," she said firmly, her tone a perfect mimicry of Dorea's. "*Finite!*"

"I want to see my mother," Remus insisted immediately before his father had a chance to speak.

Lyall scoffed at the notion. "Absolutely not. In fact, I plan on—"

"You can't keep me away from her! I'll just wait until you leave or pass out. You've clearly been drinking again."

"Using that wolf sense of smell, eh?"

Remus narrowed his eyes. A part of him knew that it was stress and liquor talking, and that there had been a time in his life when his father loved him unconditionally, but that had been very long ago, and Lyall Lupin let his prejudices get the better of him. Still, Remus did not try to use his lycanthropy as an excuse for poor behaviour; he would not let Lyall use drinking as an excuse for *his*. "A *Muggle* could see that you're intoxicated."

"I'm going to go tend to my wife." Lyall turned to go down the hallway, stopping for a moment to look back at Remus. "You'll keep away if you know what's good for you. She's in a delicate state, and I won't have you getting a rise out of her. If I see you near her room, I'll call the Aurors. Don't think they'll take too kindly knowing that there's a werewolf on the loose in the building."

"Come on, love." Mia tugged Remus in the opposite direction.

He struggled to focus on any single thought. His own father had threatened to call the Aurors? Was this it? Would he end up in Azkaban? Or would they just put him down like a rabid animal?

"My mum . . . Mia, what if—?"

"Come on, Remus." She pulled him tightly against her, wrapping her arms around his chest and holding him close. "We're going to see my mother. She's right there. If anyone can make the people in this hospital cower, it's her. She'll make sure you see your mum."

Remus followed her, looking up to spot a large room where Dorea Potter was standing beside a tall, pale man with long, white-blond hair and several other witches and wizards in finely-made robes.

Mia led him by the hand toward the open door of the room. As they crossed the corridor of the hospital, though, Remus caught sight of the two Aurors that had taken James and Sirius in, arguing in a corner. In his peripheral vision, he caught sight of something black, and a creeping coldness shivered up his spine.

Releasing his hand, Mia rushed forward, throwing herself in front of one of the Aurors as she yelled, "*Protego Totalum!*"

Four masked Death Eaters appeared, aimed their wands, and curses flew off Mia's large shield, protecting not only both Aurors, but herself, Remus, and the entire boardroom where her mother was, as well as the few Healers who lucked into being behind her at the time. Remus reached for his own wand to assist her, hoping that they could shield the group together, allowing the Aurors to attack.

Unfortunately, Remus was not fast enough, and the impact of one curse on the shield flung Mia backward. He yelled her name, rushing to her side just as the Aurors advanced forward. She was bleeding from her head, and Remus sucked in a breath, using his wand to cast the first Healing Spell that came to mind.

Just as Mia's eyes closed and she fell unconscious, Remus heard an explosion from several floors above them.

## Chapter Sixty-Seven

### *Well-Trained Unit*

---

*Let the sky fall  
When it crumbles  
We will stand tall  
Face it all together  
(Skyfall - Adele)*

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**June 25th, 1977**

"Mia? Mia?"

Her eyes fluttered open, vision slightly blurred as she tried to focus on the sight of her boyfriend hovering over her protectively, the look in his gold eyes showing *just* how worried he was. She cringed at the pain in the back of her head, wondering if Remus had even allowed anyone to get near her while she was unconscious.

"Wh-What . . . ? What happened?" she hoarsely asked, wincing as she tried to sit up.

"You hit your head pretty hard. You've been unconscious for about twenty minutes," Remus informed her with a heavy sigh. "I was worried you wouldn't wake up at all."

She took note that his eyes shifted back to green. One less thing to worry about.

"Death . . . Death Eaters."

Remus nodded, a sad look crossing his features as he helped her sit upright.

Footsteps sounded nearby, and she looked over to see a pair of finely made, though slightly scuffed, dragon-hide boots.

"Miss Potter?" Kingsley smiled softly down at her. When she winced at the strain it took to look up at him, he took notice and knelt down at her side. "Are you all right?"

"Kingsley?" Mia muttered.

He blinked curiously. "You know me?"

"You . . ." she began, remembering her ride with the future Minister for Magic on the back of a thestral, flinging curses and hexes to all sides as the pair were encircled by

Death Eaters in the sky. She could not tell *him* that now, not even if she tried. "You were a prefect."

"Been a few years since Hogwarts. Didn't know I was that well-known." He chuckled, a wonderfully familiar sound. "Auror Shacklebolt now. I wanted to personally thank you."

"Thank me?"

"I had my back turned when those Death Eaters walked in. Your shield saved my life from what looked like a Reductor Curse. I owe you a life debt."

"Doesn't everybody?" Mia tried not to roll her eyes because she was certain it would make her head hurt worse. She tried to stand, wincing at the pain and gripping Remus's arms as she used him to pull herself up. "What happened? Death Eaters got into the hospital?" Immediate panic set in. "My family!"

"Your dad, Sirius, and James are on the other side of the wards," Remus said in a calm voice. He nodded his head to the side, where three Aurors were waving their wands continuously at certain angles. A group of pensive-looking Healers stood nearby, conversing with one another in what looked like a heated argument.

"Wards?"

"This floor has been quarantined. At least *this* section," Kingsley informed her, gesturing around them.

"Abraxas Malfoy is dead," Remus muttered.

Mia remembered a smug-looking Draco at the Slytherin table in Professor Slughorn's class in her original sixth year.

*"Sir, I think you knew my grandfather, Abraxas Malfoy?"*

*"Yes. I was sorry to hear he had died, although of course, it wasn't unexpected, dragon pox at his age."*

"Dragon pox," Mia whispered to herself.

"What?" Remus blinked, hearing her. "How did you know that?"

*Shit. Well, apparently, I can tell the truth about the future by accident. Though I can't imagine how that'll be helpful.*

"I think I might have . . . been in and out of consciousness for a while," she lied. "Picked up on a few things." If possible, Remus suddenly looked even more concerned, which actually made her quite nervous.

"Well, you're right about that," Kingsley said. "Try and rest. I'll fetch a Healer to come and see to that head of yours." He offered a smile again in thanks before moving toward the wards to speak with the Aurors on the other side.

"They found broken phials in Malfoy's robe pockets," Remus quietly explained as he led Mia over to sit down in a nearby chair. "They're saying that he had an appointment later with a research team. Some people think he was looking for a cure, others think he was trying to turn the disease into a weapon for You-Know-Who."

"The phials contained the disease, didn't they?"

Remus nodded, clarifying, "It's not airborne, but anyone who touched him when it happened—"

"I need to get up. Need to go home." Mia tried to stand again, but Remus stopped her.

"Mia . . ." He took in a slow deep breath before speaking again, "Your mum was right next to Malfoy when he fell."

A coldness sank into her stomach. "What?"

"She's sick." Remus frowned deeply, grief settling in his eyes. "The Healers have her and a number of other people in secured beds down the hall."

Without another word, Mia leapt from her chair and made a dash for the end of the hallway, ignoring the lingering pain in her head as she searched each and every room until she found Dorea Potter. Her mother was unconscious in bed, looking worse than she had ever appeared; her skin covered in a green shimmering tint, a purple rash growing up the side of her neck as she slept.

"Mum?"

---

As the hours passed, Healers and Aurors moved cautiously around the quarantined ward in the west end of the ground floor of St Mungo's. When the quarantine ended and the wards were taken down, everyone moved with even more caution, despite Healers insisting that those infected were not contagious.

Dorea slept, even after Charlus, James, and Sirius were allowed in to see her.

Once the Healers and witnesses had given statements to several more Aurors, St Mungo's was reopened to the public. No sooner had the doors opened than Peter and Lily rushed in, demanding to know the location of the Potters.

"Mia!"

Mia let out a sob when she saw her friend and rushed to wrap her arms around the other witch.

"Oh, thank God you're all right," Lily said as she hugged her tightly. "I saw the Dark Mark above the hospital, and I tried fire-calling everyone to see if they knew anything, but Peter was the only one home. What happened?"

"The Dark Mark is above the hospital?" Mia asked, brows raised high as she pulled away to look at Lily. She took notice as Peter slipped by them to greet James, Sirius, and Remus at the end of the corridor where they sat outside of her mother's room.

"I was a few streets over at a chapel. Petunia got married today. Naturally, I needed to get the hell out of there as soon as possible." Lily offered a small smile, and Mia actually let out a short laugh at the joke. It felt good to laugh. "I was out front chatting with my mum when I saw the mark in the sky. I Apparated to Alice's house since it was the closest with a working Floo, and we tried getting hold of everyone. What happened?"

"Death Eaters attacked the hospital," Mia explained. "We were here because Jamie and Sirius were in a little accident." She noticed the way Lily gasped and looked over Mia's shoulder to take note of James and Sirius's current condition before giving a relieved exhale at seeing they were physically all right. "Mum was . . . Mum was having a meeting with the board. Malfoy's father brought in phials of dragon pox, and they broke; anyone near him was infected."

"Oh my God. Your family?" Lily whispered, horrified.

Mia nodded. "Mum."

"Can they—?"

"No. Nothing."

Late into the night, Dorea Potter's room was a crowded place. Healers had taken to working around the bodies that surrounded the bed, having already met the powerful rage that came from trying to separate the teenagers from their mother against their will.

Charlus remained by Dorea's side, her pale green hand held tenderly within his. On the other side of the bed, Mia had transfigured a table into a small sofa where she curled into the arms of her brother. She had offered to make it longer to accommodate the rest of them, but each of the remaining Marauders had reasons not to get too close.

Peter sat near the door, the furthest place from Dorea's side without actually leaving the room. For once, Mia did not take offence at his actions, knowing that he was more than likely reliving his own mother's stay at St Mungo's after her attack by Death Eaters.

Sirius, on the other hand, placed himself in the corner of the room, knees pulled to his chest, wearing a cold look on his face that Mia recognised as guilt. She wanted to comfort him, assure him that none of this was his fault, but she did not have the strength. Not yet.

Remus was the only one who stayed outside the room, though he kept a constant watch from his chair just outside the door. He divided his attention between Dorea's room and the long corridor where he had run into his father earlier that day.

Unlike James and Mia, who were worried for the one mother they had, Sirius for the one he had chosen, or Peter who reflected on his own back at home, Remus was anxiously and nervously worried both about the mother who had taken him into her home when he no longer had one of his own as well as the mother who had given him life; the one who was, to their knowledge, still alive somewhere a few floors above him.

From her place on the sofa, Mia kept an eye on him.

While Mia could not see a face, a slender hand held out a small cup toward Remus, thick steam billowing out the top of it. She relaxed when she heard Lily's voice.

"I brought you some hot chocolate."

Remus looked up, actually smiling a little as he accepted the drink. "Thanks, Lily."

She quickly pulled a chair over to sit beside him, reaching out to take his hand within her own to offer comfort and support. Mia knew that she was one of very few witches who could do so without making him uncomfortable.

"Mia told me about your mum. And your father. Do you know anything yet?"

"No. I asked right after they brought the quarantine wards down." He sighed in frustration before taking a sip from the drink. "The explosion came from a few floors up where she might be. When I inquired, her name wasn't on the list of . . . the list of casualties."

"I'm sorry about your father." Lily shook her head.

She had been thoroughly enraged when Mia had explained all the events of the day.

Mia knew that as an object of prejudice herself, Lily felt a special connection with Remus long before she ever announced that she had figured out his secret back in first year. She had seen how different he was from his friends and how many of the professors looked at him with equal parts pity and anxiety, like they were waiting for him to either hurt himself or someone else. Lily had once admitted to Mia that she felt partly to blame for the way Snape had taken an interest in Remus and his condition. Considering the way the Marauders treated her childhood friend—and many others—Lily had no business being kind to *any* of them, but she had, in fact, taken a special interest in befriending Remus long before either of them wore prefect badges. Snape had been suspicious and eventually jealous, especially when Lily had willingly confessed the small crush she had on the quiet Gryffindor bookworm. Having been best friends for so long and having always told one another everything, Lily had not thought twice before confessing her schoolgirl feelings for her Housemate. The resulting conversation had been the first time Snape turned his bitter anger toward her, and he had stormed off in a temper.

Feeling guilty for potentially being the reason that Snape targeted Remus, Lily swore Mia to secrecy.

"You know it's not your fault, right?"

"What? That my mum's sick or that my dad drinks too much and calls me a monster?"

"Both," Lily insisted and then added quickly, "and you're not a monster."

"I know." Remus ran his hand down his face. "I didn't used to know, but I do now."

Even hidden in the shadows of the hallway, Mia could see that his eyes were red-rimmed. He was also incredibly pale, and the two scars on his face stood out dramatically, silver and pink tissue stretched over washed-out skin. Cursing herself for not remembering until now, Mia wondered if he had taken his Wolfsbane Potion. She doubted it since he had been with her the entire day and normally drank it before dinner.

"As long as you remember that; that's what's important. I'm sure once everything has calmed down, they'll let you go and see—"

"Dad?" Remus stood from his chair, interrupting Lily and leaving Mia's sight.

"I'll be right back," Mia whispered to her father, standing and darting out the door to watch as Remus made his way down the stretch of hallway, followed closely by Lily, to where Lyall Lupin stood, speaking with an Auror and a Healer, a large bag in his hands.

Lyall's eyes, too, were red and glassy, and Mia thought that he strangely resembled her father in the moment, though Charlus still had something left in his sad stare: hope.

"Dad!" Remus called out again loudly as he approached his father, whose empty stare turned bitter and angry. "What happened? Where's my mum? Where're you going?" Remus tried to step forward only to be thwarted by the prejudiced Auror from earlier that day.

Lily rushed to Remus's side, reaching for his hand to pull him back.

The affectionate move was caught in Lyall's stare, and he shook his head in disgust, looking at the Auror. "That boy is a werewolf," he announced as he pointed at Remus. "Please keep him away from my wife's . . . my wife's body."

"What?!" Remus shouted, though it sounded more like a howl.

"Mia! Peter! Sirius!" Lily screamed for them. "Potter!"

Mia was already at Lily's side when the boys barrelled out of Dorea's room behind her. Once together, they took note of Remus's stance and rushed forward, wands drawn.

"She's dead? My mum's dead?" Remus cried out. He moved to go after his father, who had stepped into the Floo, but Lily jumped in his way, trying to hold him back from doing something he would certainly regret.

James and Sirius each took hold of one of Remus's arms, pulling him away from Lily before she somehow got herself hurt. The Marauders and Mia had been dealing with Remus and his wolf for years, and Lily was not at all ready for something of this magnitude. As James and Sirius held Remus back, struggling against the strength of their friend, Mia stepped in front of her boyfriend, taking his face into her hands and once again shifting her eyes to amber, hoping Moony would recognise her.

"Remus, Remus, love," she spoke softly, fully aware of the Aurors now surrounding them. "Look at me."

"Back off!" James shouted sharply, turning his wand on the Aurors. "He hasn't done anything wrong!"

At Remus's other side, Sirius kept his wand drawn as well, and Peter covered Remus's back to make sure no one got any ideas about cursing their friend with his back turned. Lily stood in front of Mia, glaring daggers at anyone who dared to cast a look of disgust toward her grieving friend.

"Easy there." Kingsley approached slowly, wand in hand held upward as a sign of surrender. "We're just doing our jobs and making sure no one gets hurt." His partner scoffed at the calm sentiment. "We understand this is an emotional time, but do you really want to raise your wands against a group of Aurors?"

At Kingsley's question, James and Sirius both looked even more daring, as though he had just issued a challenge. None of the teenagers lowered their wands.

"What're you doing just standing there, Shackbolt! Stun it!" Kingsley's partner yelled, pointing at Remus.

"*IT?*" Lily shrieked. "You've got a lot of nerve, you know that?" She aimed her wand toward him, and his eyes widened in response at being so specifically threatened by the girl. "I don't care if you *are* an Auror, my friend just found out his mother died, and if you even *think* about raising a wand at him before we have a chance to console him, I will hex your eyes right out of your head!"

"Threatening an Auror?" He took a defiant step forward, his wand gripped tightly in his hand. He looked her over, likely taking note of her clothing before sneering. "You listen here, you little Mud—" but his sentence was cut off as an eleven-inch mahogany wand pressed sharply against his throat. He stared into furious hazel eyes that were partially obstructed by black fringe.

"Wrong witch to aim your wand at, mate," James said, his voice low and dangerous.

Suddenly, the Aurors encircling the group were no longer keeping their eyes trained on the werewolf in the centre of the corridor.

"She'll hex you sideways for looking at her," James assured them all, "but that won't be *half* as bad as what *I'll* do if you finish that fucking sentence."

"Everyone, calm down!" Kingsley ordered, trying to take back control of the situation. He gripped his partner and yanked the man back. "Potter, get Lupin under control."

"If you've noticed, *he's* not the one losing it!" Sirius snapped. "Tell your mates to lower their wands. If you can't tell, we've got very little to lose here and have a bit of a short fuse when it comes to threats to our family!"

"He's a *werewolf!*" Kingsley's partner shouted, outraged. "Shouldn't have even been allowed inside the hospital!"

"Mia, get Remus into an empty room and ward the doors like you did last time," James instructed her.

She nodded, returning her focus to Remus. "Look in my eyes, love," she continued to speak as she reached for his tightly clenched fists. "Remus? Moony! Look at me. I'm here, love; we're all here for you. I need you to come with me, Moony. Follow me."

Like a well-trained unit, the Marauders and Lily formed a barricade. While James, Lily, and Peter kept wands on the Aurors, Sirius watched as Mia led Remus away into a private room. Once he felt that they were secure, he spun back on Remus's attackers. The Aurors, however, had begun turning on one another instead.

"Don't think Moody won't hear about this when we get back to the Ministry, Shackbolt."

"I plan on being the one to tell him myself!" Kingsley snapped. "Everyone lower your wands!"

"Sir?" a nervous Auror asked while the volatile one fumed, pacing back and forth glaring at the way that Lily's wand followed him. "You're really going to let them go? A werewolf in a hospital full of innocent people, and a group of children who dared to threaten Aurors?"

Sirius could hear the derision and indignance in Kingsley's voice when he asked, "Are we royalty because we wear a badge? They were doing what any of us would have done for a fellow Auror. We drew against them first, and they came to the defence of their friend."

"But he's a werewolf!" another Auror shouted.

Sirius kept his wand trained on that one, feeling the magic stir in his chest and tingle down his arms to the tip of his fingers that rested on the wood in his hand.

"I didn't see fur; did any of you?" Kingsley demanded. "No? Well, maybe I just have better vision. Perhaps that's why Moody left *me* in charge. Speaking of which, if something like this ever happens again, I'll thank you all not to question me!" He offered a brief look

of apology to the Marauders and Lily, all of whom finally lowered their wands at the sight of the retreating Aurors.

"Evans, what happened?" Sirius finally asked. "Is it true? About Remus's mum?"

Lily nodded sadly, wiping an escaped tear from her cheek. "His father told him. He also outed him as a werewolf to the Aurors, saying they weren't to let Remus see his mother."

"Thank you, Kingsley." James extended a hand to the man, showing no feelings of resentment over a situation that had been handled poorly by all parties. Sirius wished that he felt the same, but some of the Aurors were still looking a touch cagey. "I'd apologise for our reaction, but as you said . . ."

"I heard what the boy's father said," Kingsley said quietly. "Werewolf or not, I can't imagine anyone reacting differently than he did. It's a bad time, I know, but you're all very quick on the draw. When you've finished your N.E.W.T.s, come and see me at the Ministry if you're interested in a job. As you can see, the Auror department is in need of new blood."

Sirius glared angrily. "*Unprejudiced* blood, you mean."

"That's *exactly* what I mean."

"Do you know what happened to our friend's mother?" Peter asked.

"I suppose he *should* know." Kingsley said, his voice low and full of foreboding. "While *we* were being attacked on the ground floor by those Death Eaters, we weren't aware that more had broken in earlier and slipped by us without their masks. The second we were distracted by the attacks down here, someone upstairs threw a Blasting Hex and devastated the entire ward where the Muggles were being held. Only two survived, and they're not looking to last the week."

Sirius shared a look with the others as his heart dropped into his stomach. First Dorea and now Remus's mum too? "I'll go check on them."

Slowly, he approached the room, noticing that while Mia had thrown up security wards that he could feel, she had left the door open. Remus was stiff, hands clenched into fists at his side. Mia's hands cupped his cheeks again, willing the wolf to retreat.

"Come back to me, love," Sirius heard Mia whisper.

Remus collapsed to the ground, bringing her with him, hands over his face and leaning into her embrace as he wept.

## Chapter Sixty-Eight

### *The Last Enemy*

---

*A final song, a last request  
A perfect chapter laid to rest  
Now and then I try to find  
A place in my mind  
Where you can stay  
You can stay away forever  
(So Far Away - Avenged Sevenfold)*

---

**June 26th, 1977**

The rising sun broke through the open blinds and into the room where Mia had secured a grieving Remus; he had cried for hours. Simply cradling him while he mourned, Mia sat in silence, the same way she did long ago after he had been healed post-transformation. She did not know how to heal him now, though. Nor did she know how to heal her own family as her mother's condition deteriorated.

Mia wondered how Professors Dumbledore and Snape handled the drawn-out death of the former which occurred in her original sixth year. It was one thing to lose people suddenly, like when Cedric Diggory was murdered or when Sirius had fallen through the veil, but simply waiting around, unable to do a thing to stop death, was not something to which the young witch was accustomed. She did not know how to react.

"Remus?" She affectionately ran her fingers through the mess of sandy blond hair, leaning down to place a kiss on his forehead before resting her cheek against him. His head was in her lap, his long arms wrapped tightly around her waist.

"Is she really dead?" Remus choked out a hoarse whisper, and in reply, Mia simply held him tighter.

"Mia?"

She looked up, surprised to find her father in the doorway; he had apparently been able to take down the wards she placed, which was surprising. Then again, she *had* been distracted.

"Dorea wants to see Remus," Charlus said, his own tired eyes looking defeated.

She could tell he wanted to collapse and just let the sadness wash over him, but Potters pushed on; Dorea told her as much the first morning that she had woken at Potter Manor, more than six years earlier:

*"No frowning now. I know you have had some hardships lately, but we're Potters, and we push on. You take what happens, learn from it, and bravely move forward."*

"Come on, son." Charlus reached down and helped pull Remus to his feet, patting him on the back when he finally stood.

"My mother died," Remus muttered quietly.

Charlus frowned, keeping a hand on his shoulder for support as they walked down the hallway. "I know, son. I know."

"What am I going to do?"

Taking a deep breath, Charlus faced Remus directly and looked him square in the eye. "You're going to let us take care of you. Now, head on in there; I'll be right outside the door. Dorea's getting bored and needs someone to fuss over for a bit. You know how these Potter women like to dote."

Once the door to Dorea's room closed, Mia swallowed and looked around anxiously. "Where is everyone?"

Charlus cleared his throat. "Mia, the Healer came by, and . . . It doesn't look good."

She lowered her head in painful understanding. "How long?"

"They . . ." he started to say but stopped to clear his throat. "They say she won't last the night."

Mia wanted to cry. She wanted to scream, and hex, and possibly set fire to the entire building in a rage of emotions, but she was a Potter. Not just *any* Potter—she was *Dorea Potter's* daughter, and such actions were rash and reckless. Despite her House colours from both timelines, Mia had come to accept that she was a little greener than red, these days, and a little more silver than gold. She had to keep it together if she was going to be surrounded by grieving Gryffindors.

She held her head higher, shoving down the need to cry in order to try and take charge of the situation. People depended on her right now. Her family depended on her. Her pack depended on her.

"Is she in pain?"

"No."

"Where are Jamie and Sirius?"

Charlus sighed, clearly worried about all of his children. "Sirius didn't take the news well, naturally. No one did. He mentioned he was going to the roof for some fresh air, which I assume is Sirius speak for a cigarette?" Mia nodded. "I asked Lily to look in on him. Peter took your brother outside for some *actual* fresh air."

"Good. Separating them, for now, is helpful. Peter will dote on James a bit, and it's good that Sirius wasn't left alone." She was grateful her father had somehow recognised what each of the boys needed. "Are you okay, Dad?"

"No," he answered honestly. "Don't imagine I will be for some time, but I can't fall to pieces. Got three, now *four*, kids to look after. It's my job to take care of the rest of you."

Mia sighed at his words. What was it with Potter men carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders? Green or hazel eyes, it did not matter. As long as they had a mop of messy black hair that stuck up in the back, they were somehow deemed capable of taking care of everyone but themselves.

"I don't need you to," she informed him. "This isn't the first time I've had to—"

"I know you don't." Charlus smiled but it did not reach his eyes. Edged in crow's feet that made him look distinguished in age, those eyes were filled with a grief and perhaps even a small amount of pity in knowing that this would not be the first loss Mia had ever faced. He pulled her into his arms, hugging her so tightly she almost felt herself give in to the grief. "You're my strong girl. But no matter how strong you are, it's still my job to take care of you. You let me do my job, all right?"

Mia nodded but quietly thought to herself: *Our job.*

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When Remus walked into Dorea's room, he took notice that the previously unconscious and sickly-looking witch was now sitting up in bed, looking no less green but certainly more awake and alert.

"Hello, Remus." She offered him a sad smile and reached her hand out. He rushed forward to take it like it was a lifeline being extended to him in a sea in which he was drowning. "I'm so sorry about your mother, dear. Come, sit by me. It's going to be a rough

time for you. For *all* of you. I can see by that look on your face you could hear Charlus telling Mia that I'm not going to make it."

He shook his head. "Please, don't—"

"You'll look after them won't you?" she interrupted, ignoring his pleas. "Look after my girl? My boys? Look after yourself?"

He nodded quickly. "Yes, ma'am."

"I mean that, Remus Lupin." Her grey eyes hardened into a recognisable threat. "I will be very cross if you let something bad happen to yourself because you sink into grief instead of rising above it." She patted the back of his hand with her free one as he held the other tenderly in his grasp. "These are dark times, and our world needs courage like yours. Your father was a good man. A good man who let his dark times take over. You can't do that now."

Remus's jaw tightened. "He wouldn't even let me see her."

"I imagined he wouldn't. Which was why, when I saw him here yesterday morning, I slipped into your mother's room. Hope and I had a lovely chat."

He looked up at her with wide eyes. "You saw my mum?"

"I did. I had been planning on bringing you here today to visit her. Your father had a previous engagement that he couldn't get out of, so he wouldn't have known. Unfortunately, she was very ill and didn't know if she would make it in time to see you." Dorea reached for her robes, which had been folded and placed on the table beside her bed. Seeing that was what she was doing, Remus was quick to grab them for her so that she did not strain herself.

Digging a pale green hand into a pocket, Dorea withdrew a small stone on the end of a looped gold chain. "Your mother asked me to give you this."

Remus gaped at the item reverently as it was placed in his hand. "This is her necklace. My father gave it to her on their first date."

"An amethyst," Dorea affirmed with a sweet smile. "It's very beautiful. She told me the story of how they met. Do you know it?"

Remus nodded slowly, recalling the story with the hint of an amused smile. "She was living just outside Cardiff. She took a walk through a forest one day and was attacked by a man that turned out to be a boggart."

He had known the story since he was a little boy. It had been the reason he was initially excited to see a real boggart during his third year Defence class with Professor Prewett.

"Dad was doing research on—"

*Werewolf habitats.*

Remus cleared his throat awkwardly before continuing. "He heard her screaming, and he saved her; turned the boggart into a mushroom."

"Then he asked her to dinner and gave her this necklace," Dorea said with a smile. "The study of stones and crystals used to be taught at Hogwarts in depth, but not so much these days. Do you know what an amethyst is used for?"

Remus inclined his head and answered with a matter-of-fact tone, as though he were quoting from a book, "Amethysts are for meditation. They're supposed to help promote peace and tranquillity, heighten intuition, and dispel fears." He let realisation settle over him. "That's probably why he gave it to her. So that when he wasn't around to protect her, she wouldn't be afraid."

"Amethysts also protect against Dark Magic."

Suddenly hesitant to accept the necklace, Remus began looking for a place to put the necklace down as though it would begin burning his skin at any moment.

"Don't you dare," Dorea cautioned. "Werewolves are not Dark creatures; they do not all practice Dark Magic. Your mother asked me to give it to you in the case that she did not make it so that you would have strength to fight your fears and an understanding of exactly what and who you are: a beacon of goodness and light." She smiled and affectionately touched his cheek the same way that his mother used to once she conquered her fear of his lycanthropy. "She was a good mother; a good woman. Had she not been born a Muggle, she would have made a good witch, I'd say."

Remus smiled gratefully at the thought.

"Now, be a good lad, and go and fetch the others for me."

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Up on the roof, Sirius looked skyward, thinking how unfortunate it was that the sun was out and bright considering how dark it was inside the hospital. It should be grey and

cloudy, maybe even raining. He wished it *would* rain so the world could be washed clean again.

He inhaled from the lit cigarette in his mouth, blowing the smoke out through his nose. It hurt like hell the first time he had tried it years ago, but he remembered wanting to look like a dragon and the habit just stuck.

He heard the door open behind him. The smell of flowers still clung to Lily's clothes hours after she had abandoned her sister's wedding. Neither said anything as she stood at his side, glancing over the edge of the roof. Minutes passed in silence until he flicked the end of one cigarette away only to open his pack for another.

"Are you just going to stand there, or offer a girl a fag?"

He raised a brow and looked at her suspiciously. "You don't smoke, Evans."

"Shut up, Black." She snatched the cigarette he was holding in his fingers and placed it in her mouth. "We're bonding."

"Oh? I wasn't aware." Sirius pulled another from the pack and returned the box to the pocket of his robes. He silently and wandlessly cast a floating bluebell flame in the centre of his hands, lighting his own cigarette and then holding the fire out toward Lily. "Have at it."

Lily nodded at him triumphantly and leant into his hands, breathing as the end of it lit up. She immediately began choking.

Sirius smirked at her as she continued coughing. The sight was well worth the lost cigarette.

She gasped for air. "Oh God! You do this to yourself *on purpose*?"

"Is there a reason you followed me up here?" Sirius demanded irritably, his vague amusement fading.

"Mr Potter asked me to look after you," Lily replied, looking down at the cigarette still in her hand. She looked like she was mentally preparing herself to take another drag but then decided against it.

"You'd be better off looking after James."

"I left him with Peter. I think *you* need me more right now."

"Why?" He turned and stared at her incredulously. He did not need *her*. "We're not even friends. You're friends with Mia and Remus, you hate James and, by extension, me."

Though he had never been on the receiving end of one of her hexes—which were always reserved for James—Sirius knew the glare of Lily Evans better than almost anyone. He had tormented Snape for years, much worse than James ever had, and she was never one to ignore that fact.

"I don't hate either of you," Lily confessed, looking slightly hurt by his words. "I just don't like the things you do sometimes. That's hardly the point. It's not fair for anyone to lose a parent, and I feel sad for those who do, regardless of whether or not I'm friends with them."

"I told you, I'm fine," Sirius growled. "Go bother James. It's *his* mum that's dying, after all."

"She's *your* mum too. You've already lost one set of parents."

Sirius closed his eyes, fighting the memories that attacked him as though he were being drowned in a Pensieve.

*"Am I back to Mrs Potter again? Oh dear, so formal. As I've told you since you were a boy, you may call me Dorea, or even Mum if it pleases you. It's always pleased me considering how amusing the look on Walburga's face would be should she ever hear it."*

He had called her "Mum" from that moment on.

"Fuck." Sirius groaned as he felt the well of emotions rise inside of him, tears stinging his eyes as they threatened to fall. "Evans, can we . . . Can we please not do this right now?" he begged—actually *begged*—flinching when he felt a soft hand on his shoulder.

She should not be allowed to touch him like that—like she *cared*—with softness and a strange type of love that Sirius was not familiar with. She was not Mia, she was not Pack, and he certainly was not fucking her. What right did she have to care about him?

"It's okay to be sad, Sirius."

"No, it's not!" He yanked away from her touch, glaring at her. "It makes me weak! If I'm sad then they win! I don't have a *right* to be sad. This is my fault." The tears that had formed in the corners of his eyes began falling down his cheeks. "*I* brought this down on the Potters. Death follows me fucking everywhere! It's because of *me* that Mia was threatened." He thought back to Bellatrix at Narcissa's wedding. "It's because of *me* that James almost died. It's because of *me* that you were attacked. Hell, the only reason we were in the hospital today is because Death Eaters came after us, more than likely to get to *me!*"

He expected her to turn her back and leave him there, or maybe cry because he yelled at her. Most girls would.

Lily Evans, however, had never been like most girls.

"Can you possibly cease the pity party long enough to realise You-Know-Who isn't planning this entire war around your ego?" She glared at him, all softness gone from her gaze, though she still looked like she cared, which was actually quite strange. "Death Eaters attack blood-traitors, Muggles, and Muggle-borns. You and Potter are blood-traitors. The Carrows would have attacked him, even if you weren't there." She gave him a daring look when he attempted to interrupt. "I'm a Muggle-born, and one that was—up until recently—best friends with a Slytherin, who has what I'm assuming are Death Eater friends. God, Severus might be one himself these days, for all I know."

Sirius took note of her speculation, filing it away in the back of his head for later reflection.

"I was already a bloody target, you right prat!" She stepped forward and shoved him. "You had nothing to do with the accident this morning, other than buying that ridiculous motorbike in the first place, and you are not responsible for Death Eaters storming the hospital! That woman downstairs is your *mother*." She pointed to the door leading to the staircase. "You need to get it together because you will hate yourself if you don't go down there and tell her goodbye."

"I don't want to," he admitted, less like a petulant child being forced to clean his room and more like a terrified man being forced to face a dragon.

"I'm not asking," Lily held firm. "If you want my opinion—and even if you don't—I'd say that you've been quite ruined over the years."

Sirius furrowed his brow at the declaration, surprised she had the nerve to insult him, regardless of whether or not it was true.

"One family that punished you for being *anything* other than yourself, and another family that doted upon you simply because you existed. Mia's the *only* one to ever order you about, and even then, she's biased because anytime she's *not* in a relationship with Remus, she's likely to be caught staring at *your* arse." Lily glared at him when he dared to smile at the revelation.

"Your other friends follow your lead which only ever gets you lot in trouble, so the mantle falls to *me* to keep you in line. You and I are friends, Sirius Black." She left out the

"whether you like it or not," but Sirius assumed it was heavily implied. "I will *not* coddle you like the rest of the world. So you will give me a hug right this minute because it's been a very long twenty-four hours, and I spent the first half with my nightmarish new Muggle brother-in-law before coming here and needing to deal with *you*."

Sirius did not wait a single second before his long arms wrapped themselves around the witch, pulling her tight against him. He smiled at the look of utter shock on her face before he hugged her, as though she were half expecting that he might push her instead. She let out a choked sob, and he found it strange that she had been sent to comfort *him*, and yet, here he was, holding onto *her* as she cried.

An unfamiliar warmth built in his chest as he breathed in the scent of the girl in his arms. It was not like when he held Mia—or any other girl for that matter. He held no desires for Lily whatsoever, and yet, it felt right to hug her like this. He smiled, wondering if this was how James felt when he hugged Mia.

"Right." Lily pulled away and wiped her tears. "Good. Now get downstairs. You need to be with your family."

Sirius took hold of her hand and tugged her with him. "You're coming too."

"No. You need to be with—"

"Family. Like it or not, Evans—*Lily*," he corrected himself, smiling at the use of her given name, "you've been one of us for a very long time."

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Mia looked up as Lily and Sirius walked into the room. She sighed, trying to communicate to them with her eyes all that they had just walked in on. Dorea, still sick and dying, was filled with a new energy as she dictated to her family.

Everyone, with the exception of an exhausted Charlus, looked shocked and uneasy.

"And for the flowers, I don't want roses or carnations. Roses have lost all meaning these days since they're so easy to come by, and I find carnations to be cheap. I do like hydrangeas and orchids, or—Hello, Sirius and Lily." Dorea smiled at the sight of the two before continuing as a stroke of genius hit her, "Oh! Lilies. I do love lilies. The pink Japanese lilies are a particular favourite, not that I don't also like the kind that James had tattooed on his chest," she added and then gestured toward her son who turned beet red.

"What?" Lily paled and her wide eyes turned on James, gaping at his chest where she knew he had a tattoo but had never been told what it was.

"Mum . . ." James cleared his throat, avoiding Lily's gaze as he tried to bring himself back to why they had even been talking about flowers, to begin with. "Can we not plan your bloody funeral right now?"

"Should I be waiting for something?"

"You should be *resting*," Mia insisted.

"I can rest tomorrow, dear."

Everyone stared at her incredulously, knowing she had been told she was not going to see tomorrow.

"Now, don't look at me like that. Have I ever been the kind of witch to sit idly by and let things happen around me? Can I do anything about my fate?" Dorea asked and then proceeded to answer herself. "No, therefore I will make the most of what time I have left; and frankly, you all have such abysmal taste in decorum, I worry my tomb will be covered in *daisies*."

"What's wrong with daisies, dear?" Charlus asked, placating his wife.

"They're *simple*." She scoffed, looking offended by the flower. As if Dorea Potter née Black were *simple*! "Fine, if you all *can't* allow an old woman a few moments of party planning bliss, I'll make a list for you later. In the meantime, I want you all to buck up and act like the children I've raised." Her tone was reproachful as her grey eyes lingered on each of the teenagers in the room. "That includes *all* of you, considering how often you're at my house. I have things to say, and I expect not be interrupted. Is that clear?"

Each person in the room nodded.

"James."

James took Dorea's hand delicately, treating her as though she were glass, despite the fact his gentle actions would undoubtedly earn him a glare from the independent witch.

"I expect you to go to Gringotts with your father and begin the process of claiming your inheritance." She was a Slytherin to the core, and plans needed to be put into action. Mia smiled slightly; she and James *knew* that their mother loved them, so it was unnecessary to waste her last moments reminding them of the fact that she would always be with them. They *knew*.

"While you're there, you will set up separate accounts for your sister and Sirius—" She glared at Sirius when he attempted to argue. "Do not interrupt me, young man. I'm well aware of the grand sum of your vault, but you are *my* son, and you will not deny me the opportunity to give you what I want."

Sirius wiped his hand angrily across his eyes and muttered, "Yes, Mum."

"James, I want you to work hard on your N.E.W.T.s this year, and do your best not to harass this lovely young witch." Dorea gestured to Lily, who flushed pink under the stare of the intimidating woman. "I know it's difficult because she is so very pretty. It's time for childish behaviours to be put to bed."

"Yes, Mum." James nodded, looking reluctant to let go of her hand when Dorea beckoned Sirius forward.

"Sirius, you will stop blaming yourself for everything that happens. Whatever guilt weighs on your heart is putting you in danger. You're a Gryffindor and one that is far too emotional and reckless. You are the heir to the House of Black, and one day, I expect you to take control of it, cleanse it properly, and rebuild it. Even if that is by marrying a good woman, giving her your name, and letting her do the cleansing *for* you." She squeezed his hand tight and smiled when he leant down to hug her.

"You take care of my children," Dorea whispered in his ear, likely unaware that most of the teenagers in the room could hear her thanks to their Animagus traits. "Promise me."

"I'll keep them safe," Sirius swore. "I promise." He bolted from her side quickly before he started crying again.

Mia noted that he returned to Lily's side without a pause, leaning against her, shoulder to shoulder.

"Mia." Dorea held her hand out to her daughter.

Mia shook her head, refusing to stand. "No."

"Stubborn little witch," Dorea said affectionately. "You're to become the Lady of the House, representing both Potter and Black. I expect you to follow the rules that come with the life you've been given."

Mia's eyes rose up in shock to meet her mother's stare.

"Follow the rules—to the *letter*."

Frowning, Mia understood perfectly. Dorea was asking her to not change the past, regardless of what it meant for the future.

"Remember, it is the *content* of a life, not the length of a life." Dorea smiled when Mia finally reached out and took her hand. "I want you to fill many lives with joy and love. Nothing more can be expected of you. Death cannot be avoided, so live. All of you."

Dorea looked around the room and met each set of teary eyes.

"We don't want you to die," Mia confessed. "We want you to fight."

"Am I not fighting? Do I look to be defeated?" Dorea sat up straight, her head held proudly. "I am Dorea Black Potter, and *nothing* is done without my consent. Things happen because I will them to happen. I *will* myself to fight, but I accept the inevitable. This is not my end, my lovelies." She smiled sweetly, her grey eyes sparkling. "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is Death."

## Chapter Sixty-Nine

### *Safe Space*

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*Is it over yet  
Can I open my eyes  
Is this as hard as it gets  
Is this what it feels like to really cry  
(Cry - Kelly Clarkson)*

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**June 27th, 1977**

Dorea Potter stubbornly proved the Healers wrong by lasting the night and the entire day that followed. She took her final breath just as the sun set against the London skyline, surrounded by her husband and a multitude of children she claimed as her own. The family was given a long while to sit in silence and say their goodbyes if they wanted, but eventually, Healers came in to speak with Charlus about what would need to happen next.

Sirius led everyone else up to the roof, parting with the last few cigarettes he had. They all took one, save for Lily, who claimed to have had her fill. Instead, she linked arms with Mia and Sirius. Remus stood on Mia's other side with his arm around her waist, a smoke in his free hand. To Sirius's left stood James, staring out at the lights of the city as he took the cigarette between his lips. Peter stood next to James, a hand on his friend's shoulder, the cigarette between his fingers slowly burning out.

They all stared off silently into the distance.

Slowly, Lily separated from the group, and Sirius and Mia immediately closed the gap that her absence created. Remus kissed Mia's temple and pulled away, flicking his cigarette over the edge of the building before quietly urging Peter away as well to leave James, Sirius, and Mia—Dorea's children—to grieve together in this one moment.

While Peter left to use the loo, Remus followed Lily down the stairs. Eventually finding his way back toward Dorea's room. He turned the corner and saw Lily and Charlus standing outside. Remus realised in that moment how much Charlus looked like his own father the day before. But Charlus Potter looked strangely calm. Sad and broken, but not angry or vengeful. He just looked . . . lost.

"Mr Potter, is there anything I can do for you?" Lily quietly asked.

Charlus looked down and smiled sadly at her, clearly grateful for the offer. "Thank you, Lily, no. I'm just going to spend a little more time here to collect my thoughts and begin preparations. If you wouldn't mind seeing that my children make it home safely, though?"

"I'll do that. I owled my parents earlier and told them what happened. I'll stay at the manor for a while and help you all where I can, even if it's just making sure Sirius doesn't snap and do something stupid. If that's all right with you, of course."

"I would be very much indebted to you, Miss Evans."

Remus leant against the wall, watching Lily do what she did best: take care of people. As much as he prided himself on being a good prefect, he knew that Lily was leaps and bounds better than him. He performed his duties admirably, of course, but it was Lily who made sure that the first years were tucked away for the night at appropriate times, that none of the younger children were too homesick, that all the Muggle-borns—not just Gryffindors—knew how to use the owlery and other things that often confused children who had not grown up in a magical household. Remus took care of his friends and Mia. Lily took care of everyone.

He wondered if it helped her, considering her own family had all but shut her out of their lives. Having heard about her sister's new husband, he assumed that Lily might have been eager to stay at the manor if only to avoid her own home. Apparently, her sister and new brother-in-law had chosen to forgo the honeymoon due to financial matters; both had guilted Lily and their parents into gifting them more money than any of them could afford in order to help secure a new house the couple had found over in Little Whinging.

"If you'll allow it, I'd like to send Tilly to take care of you until you return home," Lily said.

"That would be appreciated." Charlus nodded but then frowned. "I imagine she'll have already been alerted to Dorea's passing and will be very determined to try and make herself busy."

Remus wondered if Tilly's magic had been connected to Dorea. He felt a pull on his heart telling him to get to the manor now and send Tilly to St Mungo's to be with Charlus; that way neither would have to grieve alone.

After leaving Charlus to his grief, Lily smiled softly up at Remus as they met at the end of the hallway. "Ready?" he asked her.

She nodded. "Let's get everyone home."

Once they were able to get James, Sirius, and Mia down from the roof, Lily ushered everyone through the Floo, saying goodbye to Peter in the process, who had a sudden urge to go home and check on his own mother.

That was something they all completely understood.

"Right, the lot of you off to bed," Lily ordered the moment they stepped from the fireplace into the large circular drawing room of Potter Manor. "It's been a long couple of days. I'll bring up some tea if anyone wants some."

James ascended the staircase without speaking to anyone.

"Firewhisky's in the glass cabinet just there," Sirius said, weakly gesturing to Charlus's recently refurbished stash of Ogden's Finest.

"I'll put some in your cup," Lily conceded, squeezing his shoulder gently.

Mia watched as Sirius and Remus followed after James, leaving her alone in the drawing room with Lily. She wandered around the room as though it were all new to her—some strange place she had never before been. She ran her fingers over a soft green ribbon bookmark hanging out of a novel on the table next to the sofa. There was a silver serpent embroidered on the end, and Mia closed her eyes as she touched it.

"Tilly?" Lily quietly called, drawing Mia's attention.

Tilly appeared, looking worse for wear. Her large, blue eyes were wet with tears, and in her hand, she held a small handkerchief that she wiped her nose with. "Miss Lily called for Tilly?"

When the house-elf noticed Lily with her hand in the cabinet—her fingers wrapped around the bottle of firewhisky—Tilly snapped her fingers, causing a tray to appear out of thin air with several cups on it. She gestured to one in the middle of the tray that appeared darker than the others. "Tilly makes tea. Firewhisky already in Young Master Sirius's cup."

"Thank you, Tilly." Lily smiled sweetly at the little elf. "Mr Potter would be very pleased if you'd go to St Mungo's and attend to him for a while. I promise I'll take good care of everyone else while you're away, and I will call for you if we need anything."

Tilly looked uneasy. Her gaze shifted to Mia, who had finally put the book down and walked over. "Tilly will leave . . . if . . ." she began to say, but she hesitated for a long moment before finally speaking clearly, fixing her eyes on Mia, "if Mistress needs her to."

"What?" Mia paled at the word, a vision of Kreachter in the future calling her "Mistress" as though he had no control over it when the word left his lips. She stared down at the house-elf who had fixed her meals, sewn her clothes, and brushed her hair for the past six years.

"Does Mistress want Tilly to go to St Mungo's?"

A strange new magic pricked inside of her, and Mia tried desperately to fight it. "Tilly, I'm not your—"

"Mia, you have to," Lily pleaded with her.

Clenching her eyes shut tightly, Mia shook her head. It was one thing to allow a house-elf to take care of her, especially since Tilly was so stubborn and manipulative, but to have one bonded to her, passed down to her, from mother to daughter, simply because that was the way things worked . . . it was horrifying. She had spent so much effort defining a part of her character and integrity by the fact that she would never willingly enslave another creature.

However, the look in Tilly's eyes was not just grief. It was fear. Tilly was afraid of being cast out or given away to another family, possibly given back to the Black family, Walburga even, and Mia could not allow that.

"Yes, Tilly." She reluctantly nodded, swallowing back the bile in her throat. "Mistress insists that you please go and take care of my father." She frowned when Tilly let out a loud sigh of relief.

"Tilly does as Mistress wishes." Tilly bowed her head respectfully to Mia and then vanished with a soft pop.

"It's going to be okay, Mia," Lily whispered.

"No, it's not." Mia shook her head, feeling dirty and disgusted with herself. "I *own* a house-elf now. The world is fucking upside-down." She reached for the silver tray and picked up Sirius's cup of tea purposely, draining it and letting the warm firewhisky in it sear the wounds she felt she had created.

"It'll eventually right itself."

"Not without worse things happening." Mia sighed, thinking of the next few years and how awful things were about to get. "Thank you, Lily, for taking care of my family."

She looked into her friend's eyes and momentarily got lost in them. *So green, just like . . . just like Harry's.*

"I'm . . . Merlin, I'm so tired. I'm going to go to bed."

"I'll walk with you." Lily reached for the firewhisky in the glass cabinet and refilled the empty cup with it. She levitated the tray behind her as she followed Mia up the stairs, down the long corridor, and through the double doors at the end into Mia's room.

When they walked through the doors, Mia heard Lily let out a tiny gasp at the sight in front of them.

Three grown wizards had crawled into Mia's overly large, four-poster bed, each of them already claimed by sleep.

Lily's focus turned to Mia, who was not surprised at all by the scene as she moved forward, crawling into the space between James and Remus, knowing that they had purposely left it available to her.

She leant back against Remus's chest, and his arm instinctively wrapped around her waist. James's body moved as well, resting his head against her shoulder just as Sirius's mop of dark black hair adjusted on the bed, eventually resting in her lap. Mia let out a soft sigh as she placed her hand on top of Sirius's head, letting her fingers loosely run through his hair.

Lily blinked curiously as she watched the scene, likely realising this was not new or unusual.

They were all content in the exact space they occupied next to, between, and on top of one another—almost in the way that animals curled up with one another for warmth, protection, and comfort.

Mia watched Lily place the silver tea tray on a table next to the bed, retrieving her wand from her robes and casting a Stasis Charm over it. She walked to the opposite side of the bed, pulled the black frames delicately from James's face and set them next to the tea tray before turning to a large chaise lounge chair in the corner where she decided to sleep.

Mia closed her eyes eventually, letting dreams and memories take her.

*Hermione collapsed in the entrance hall of Grimmauld Place, holding her stomach and trying to focus so she would not throw up. She hated travelling by Portkey, and International Portkeys were just awful. Her mess of wild brown curls held a little more frizz than usual, and her eyes were sore. The moment that she realised she was not going to vomit, she burst into tears.*

*The noise roused everyone inside the house. Soon, she was descended upon by wizards on every side, but it was Remus who pulled her into his arms and let her sob against his chest as he carried her up the staircase, moving toward her room. He placed her on her bed, sitting back against the wall and pulling her close to him in a hug, a large arm wrapped protectively around her.*

*"What happened?" he asked. "Were you able to see them?"*

*"They'll never know me again," Hermione sobbed. "I . . . I went all that way to Australia. I knew they wouldn't remember me, but seeing them . . . Remus, my parents are . . . They might as well be dead."*

*"In a way you're right, and I am so sorry for that."*

*Hermione looked up, spotting Sirius, Harry, and Ron standing in the doorway. The two younger wizards looked worried and uncomfortable at the sight of her sobbing. Sirius, however, stepped forward quickly, pulling her from Remus's arms and holding her against him, letting her cry on his shoulder. Being between the two had somehow taken the emptiness of her grief and filled it with something that made her feel safe. Heartbroken but safe.*

*"It's okay if you need to grieve, kitten." Sirius stroked his fingers up and down her back consolingly, kissing the side of her head. "You don't always have to be the strong one."*

*She nodded and looked up as she felt Remus leave the bed, moving toward the door where he put a hand on Harry's shoulder and shoved him forward a bit.*

*As brown eyes met bright green, Hermione cried out and Harry flew forward. He hugged her and sighed, likely grateful he could provide her with something, considering that she knew he blamed himself for the fact that she'd had to Oblivate her parents in the first place.*

*She clung tightly to Harry like he was her lifeline, not knowing how to deal with the fact that Ron lingered in the doorway looking awkward as though he was intruding on a private moment.*

*"Wotcher, Ron." Tonks appeared beside him. She peeked into the room and looked at her husband with concern, silently asking what happened.*

*"Hermione saw her parents," Remus said.*

*Tonks sighed, looking at Hermione with sympathy. No one walked out of the war without losing something, it seemed. Hermione knew that Tonks had lost her own father, so she was aware at least a little bit of what Hermione was going through.*

*"It's good she has you lot. Take good care of her, yeah?" Tonks gave her husband a pointed look just as he shook his head to argue. "Don't you dare. All three of you," she said, gesturing to Sirius, Remus, and Harry, "have lost your parents. You know what it's like and what she needs. So, do it, and don't question me."*

*"What am I supposed to do?" Ron asked awkwardly, watching as Hermione clung to Harry while Sirius rubbed her back as she cried.*

*"You go home and visit your mum and dad."*

*Ron nodded in understanding. He cast a look back at Hermione once more, offering her a smile that she returned.*

*Once he was gone, Tonks looked up at Remus and sadly smiled. "There, just family now. Just Pack."*

Mia opened her eyes in the middle of the night, feeling Remus's hot breath on her neck. She tilted her head to look at him, wondering if he was holding her so protectively to help her grieve through Dorea's death, or because he needed someone to hold as he grieved for his own mother. She frowned down at Sirius, his head still in her lap, and ran her hands briefly through his hair, worried he would wake any second and potentially fall off the deep end after losing the only mother who had ever shown him affection. The grief felt familiar and, yet, different at the same time. She had lost her biological parents to an Obliviation years ago, and though it was not to death, it was just as unchangeable. This felt worse. Dorea had been her mother in every way but blood, and it was painful to think about waking up in the morning and not seeing her there, picking grapes and blueberries out of her usual bowl of fruit.

As the pain in her chest deepened, Mia pried herself from Remus and Sirius and reached out for James, clinging to him tightly, snuggling her face into the mess of black hair. A small part of her wished he was Harry; wished Harry was here, because then maybe the family wouldn't feel so broken with the sudden missing piece. She looked across the room where she spotted Lily sleeping soundly in the large chair.

Mia smiled as she remembered something Tonks had said long ago:

*Just family now. Just Pack.*

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**July 31st, 1977**

Dorea's funeral had been one of celebration. Charlus insisted she would be incredibly cross if she knew they were mourning her passing rather than shouting her accomplishments.

Somehow, after the funeral, things began to go back to normal; the lingering sadness in the air lessened day by day.

Lily stayed at the manor for a few weeks to help before she felt she needed to return home. She had not been there for more than two days before Petunia's new husband was informed about having a witch in the family, and he proceeded to burst at the seams with disgust. Lily's parents had uncomfortably suggested that perhaps it was time for Petunia and Vernon to leave, but Lily insisted that she would depart Cokeworth, opting for Potter Manor—of all places—to find refuge away from her torn family.

Everyone fell into a comfortable routine leading up to the second full moon in July.

Charlus and James spent a lot of their time dealing with official things at Gringotts, where father began teaching son the family trusts and holdings. They set up an individual account for Mia, put money aside for Sirius—despite his refusal—and James was also given access to the vault the Potters had previously set up in Remus's name, to which they secretly continued adding an allowance without telling him. Knowing Remus's pride, James promised Mia that he would not overflow it with Galleons, but instead, add just enough to ensure Remus got through school without everything he owned being hand-me-downs.

Sirius spent most of his time restoring the motorbike he wrecked, usually denying the help offered by James, Remus, and Peter. Instead, he opted either for time alone or conversation with Lily, and he happily absorbed her knowledge of the Muggle world while he tried—and failed—to introduce her to the pleasures of good firewhisky and motorbikes. She did, however, admit to a slight preference for his musical tastes, and the two would often spend late afternoons debating over the best Muggle and Wizarding bands.

Mia spent her days and nights taking care of Remus. In addition to the second full moon that month, Remus had been denied entry to his own mother's funeral. Not only

that, but Lyall Lupin had placed specific wards around the family plot, preventing the entrance of any creature, dark or otherwise. Remus had politely accepted the fact that he could not be there for his mother's burial, but days later, when he attempted to visit her grave, he had been violently thrown twenty feet from the site, breaking his arm upon landing. It required a return trip to St Mungo's much sooner than anyone at Potter Manor would have liked.

Mia requested that Tilly tend to both Charlus and Remus as often as possible, knowing they were presently suffering the most of everyone both emotionally and—in Remus's case—physically. That allowed her and Lily access to the kitchen, where they enjoyed preparing breakfast for everyone. Lily said that it was the least she could do to contribute to the family seeing as they had taken her in without thought or question.

Mia and James met in the kitchen the morning following the full moon, having both thought to bring some food out to Remus to give him a little boost of energy for the walk back to his room. While Mia was digging through the various meats they had in the cooling cabinet, she heard a loud squeak from behind the door. Peeking, she smirked at the sight of Lily and James, stuck in the doorway, trying awkwardly to manoeuvre around one another.

"Sorry. I didn't think anyone was up yet."

"Yeah." James yawned, pinning himself against the door frame to allow her through. "Sirius and Remus are still sleeping."

Lily raised a brow. "Where?"

"What?" James blinked, bleary-eyed.

"Where are they sleeping? I checked Mia's room this morning, and no one had slept in it, and I know the four of you are still staying there."

He looked defensive, as though he were waiting for her to attack him or make fun of him for sharing a bed with his sister and friends. "We need to enlarge her bed before tonight," he finally said. "It's too small for the four of us."

"Or maybe you're too big to be sleeping in a bed with your sister and best friends," Lily innocently teased.

"Done it since we were eleven." James shrugged his shoulders and turned away from her toward a counter, where he began preparing a tray filled with four cups and a small collection of potion phials. Mia paid attention to her brother, making sure that he did

not accidentally put Remus's potions in any of the other cups. When he emptied the phials, she returned her attention to Lily, who had yet to see her. Lily also did not notice when James pulled out an extra cup and began pouring tea into it along with the others.

"It was always to take care of *her*, though," James explained. "Never thought Mia's bed would just become—"

"A safe space for all of you?"

James nodded thoughtfully and then looked down at the extra teacup, taking it in his hands and holding it out for her. "Oh, here."

"Is this for me?" Lily carefully examined the drink as though he had slipped something awful into it or charmed the cup to turn her hands blue.

"Sorry." James frowned as she inspected the liquid. "Do you not take lemon in your morning tea anymore?" he asked as if recording the moment to his memory was of great importance. He used the same tone of voice when verifying details in preparation for school exams.

"You know how I take my tea?"

Mia wondered why Lily was surprised. They had sat at the same breakfast table for six years now; eventually, James was bound to notice how she took her tea—especially considering how often he stared at her.

"Yeah, you like it really hot. Though sometimes, you don't touch it until it's room temperature—"

Lily blinked, her eyes suddenly wide.

"—and you take it with one slice of lemon and two sugars, but if you're reading a book at breakfast, sometimes you forget to stir it and the sugar just sits at the bottom." James smiled wistfully, his eyes suddenly lighting up all over something so silly as tea. "You still drink it, though. Then, when you get to the bottom and it's all sweet, you make this really cute face and—" He stopped as he clearly realised he had been speaking out loud, mildly embarrassed over his words. He cleared his throat. "I just . . . umm . . . yeah. Sorry; not supposed to harass you anymore, and that came off a bit . . . stalker."

Lily stood there, her eyes still wide. Hesitantly, she took a sip. "It's . . . adequate." She hid a smile when James beamed at her words. "It would be better room temperature, though."

"I'm sure you've got patience for it." He grinned at her and levitated the tray behind him.

"Bringing that to the others?"

James answered her with a quick nod.

"Do you need help?"

He shook his head. "Sorry. No offence, Lily, it's just that we've been taking care of Remus for years now, and he . . . It's hard to explain. One day we will. But not the day after the full moon. Especially not *this* moon."

"Potter?" Lily called after him.

He turned. "Yeah?"

"Thank you." She offered a timid smile. "For the tea."

"You're welcome, Lily." James gave her a crooked grin before leaving the kitchen, silver tray following behind him.

Lily let out a wistful sigh as he vanished from sight.

"Maybe a Cooling Charm could help," Mia said, slamming the cooling cabinet door shut.

Lily jumped a foot in the air, tossing her cup and tea forward as she shrieked. "Jesus Christ!"

Laughing, Mia flicked her wand to prevent the cup from hitting the floor, moving it to catch as much of the liquid as possible before floating it back toward Lily, who was glaring at her. "Tea? I hear you're very specific about it. Perhaps I should get Jamie to make you another?"

Grabbing the cup harshly, causing the content to spill over the sides a bit, Lily narrowed her eyes and pointed a finger at Mia. "You're just as bad as the rest of them."

Mia grinned. "And yet you love us."

"I love *you*," Lily clarified. "I tolerate your brother, at best."

"Methinks the lady doth—"

"Shut it."

## Chapter Seventy

### *Primum Osculum*

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*She's in love with the boy.  
She's in love with the boy  
She's in love with the boy  
What's meant to be will always find a way  
She's gonna marry that boy someday*  
(She's in Love With the Boy - Trisha Yearwood)

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**September 1st, 1977**

"Right, so last year, we had some trouble with points being taken away needlessly. Please, try to remember that, as prefects, not only are you representing your own respective Houses but the school as a whole. Bias should not be brought into this," Lily informed the gathered prefects in the large cabin at the front of the train.

"I know the previous Head Boy and Girl were a little . . . relaxed in the organisation of meetings, but I fully plan on keeping up on each and every one of you to make sure all Houses are being treated fairly. Yes, even Slytherin." She eyed Snape, his black eyes possibly even darker than they had ever been as he glared at James.

"Even though Gryffindor has not won the House Cup in the entirety of my time at Hogwarts, I don't intend to cheat during my last year just so my own House can throw a little party. Potter?" Lily turned to James, who stood beside her in loose-fitting robes, looking more relaxed than ever; the only thing polished about him was the Head Boy badge pinned to his robes. "As Head Boy, do you have anything you'd like to add?"

James smiled. "No. You've covered everything meticulously, as usual, Miss Evans."  
Several prefects laughed.

When Lily flushed a bit at the noise, James turned and raised a brow at the crowd. "That wasn't a joke." He sighed and ran his hand down his face.

Mia felt only slightly bad for him. Being Head Boy was not something he had asked for.

*"Mia! Mia! Remus!" Lily shrieked loudly as she ran through the corridors of Potter Manor, a large envelope in one hand, shiny gold badge in the other, and a look of pure rapture on her face. Her eyes sparkled like emeralds. "I got it! I got it!"*

*"You got it?" Mia sat up from the drawing room sofa where she had been snuggled up beside Remus. She was delighted for her friend, though a slight glint of jealousy dug under her skin.*

*Sirius walked into the room, a half-eaten apple in his engine-grease-covered hands. His long black hair was pulled back into a loose knot at the back of his head, and oil stains covered his white t-shirt. "Got what? What'd I miss?"*

*"Here!" Lily grinned and thrust several other letters she had been carrying out to each of them, handing the last to James without so much as a glance as he followed Sirius into the room. "Hogwarts letters just arrived, and I'm Head Girl!"*

*"Congratulations, Lily. No one deserves it more than you," Remus said, ignoring the teasing glare Mia was throwing at him.*

*"Open yours, Remus!" Lily squealed. "Let's see your Head Boy badge."*

*Remus suddenly frowned. "You don't know that I got it; in fact, I'd prefer I didn't. I even asked Dumbledore to take my name out of consideration. Between N.E.W.T.s and . . . everything else, I doubt I'll be able to keep up with the responsibilities of a prefect, let alone Head Boy."*

*Mia squeezed his hand in understanding. She knew that he had set up a meeting before term ended in June to discuss his future with the headmaster. Remus had been the top pick for Head Boy, but knowing that his future could depend on his N.E.W.T scores, he was determined not to let anything get in the way of getting top marks.*

*Lily frowned, her shoulders slumping forward a bit at the news. "I'm sorry you feel that way, Remus, but honestly, who else would they pick?"*

*"Oh, fuck."*

*Mia, Lily, and Remus turned to look across the room, where James stood looking pale and wide-eyed as he held his Hogwarts letter in one hand and something shiny in the other.*

*Sirius laughed as he read over James's shoulder. "This is the best day ever."*

*"You got Head Boy?" Mia yelled excitedly. She should not have been surprised, having known Harry's parents had been Head Boy and Girl; still, it was quite different thinking of them as Harry's parents and not "Lily and Jamie."*

*"You got Head Boy?" Lily echoed Mia's statement with an incredulous tone, looking slightly horrified and maybe even a little offended considering how hard she had worked for her badge and title.*

*Remus laughed in disbelief. "You've got to be kidding me."*

*"I don't understand." James looked up, confused.*

*Lily folded her arms across her chest. "That makes two of us."*

*"Oh, Merlin." Sirius guffawed, holding his side. "I needed that today. Prongs is Head Boy! What the bloody hell was Dumbledore thinking?"*

*"I got prefect again," Remus noted as he opened his own letter.*

*"I'm apparently Lily's prefect replacement." Mia pulled out a familiar-looking badge, remembering how excited she had been the first time she got it at the beginning of her original fifth year.*

*"Well, look at you four with matching badges," Sirius cooed at them as though they were babies. "Want me to take a picture?"*

*Lily rolled her eyes at Sirius and moved to leave the room, angrily muttering, "I have to owl my parents."*

*Sirius called after her, "I'm sure they'll be fine with you sharing quarters with Prongs."*

*She spun in shock, nearly tripping over her own feet in the process. "What?"*

*"Lily . . . the umm . . ." Mia tried to stifle her laughter, but Sirius was not having that problem in the slightest as he was leaning against the wall to keep himself from falling over. "Head Boy and Head Girl share a common room. Each with their own bedroom, of course, but it's not in Gryffindor Tower with the rest of us."*

*"I have to live with him?"*

*"Lily, you've been after the Head Girl position for years. You know the dormitory arrangements," Remus pointed out with a smirk. "Also, to be fair, you've been living with him for the last two months."*

*"Yes, but . . . that's different . . . it's . . ." Lily stammered.*

*Sirius grinned. "Not private?"*

The prefects began filing out of the meeting, one by one, leaving behind James, Lily, Remus, Mia, and a sneering Severus Snape. He ignored Lily entirely, putting his entire focus on his hatred for James.

"It's absurd that after everything you've done over the last six years, Potter, the old coot made you, of all students, Head Boy."

"Thought it would be *you*, Snivellus?" Sirius challenged as he poked his head into the cabin, having waited for his friends only to find them being verbally attacked by a Slytherin. He made his way in, hovering near Lily protectively. "Right, like anyone would let you live in the same dorm as Lily after what you called her."

Snape clenched his jaw, his eyes narrowed on the limited space between Sirius and Lily. "I've apologised for what I said repeatedly. An *apology*, Black, is something said when

you've accidentally or intentionally caused any form of *injury* to a person and regret the decision. Putting their life at risk, for instance."

"I'm only sorry that I didn't try anything sooner, you son of a—"

"All right, Sirius, thank you for waiting for us to finish our meeting!" Remus said loudly, taking hold of Sirius's arms and dragging him from the room by force. He threw a look of apology over his shoulder to his friends on Sirius's behalf. "Let's go back to the compartment now."

"Wonderful sheepdog you've got there," Snape quipped. "Does he shed?"

Mia narrowed her eyes, her hands shaking as she stared at Snape. Even Lily was looking angry on Remus's behalf, considering the summer he'd had. The summer they'd *all* had.

James, strangely, was the mature one who kept calm and cleared his throat. "If you'll excuse us, Snape. We've got patrols to get through."

Snape rolled his eyes. "Acting the part now?"

"No," James insisted calmly. "I'm just doing my job and trying to get through it without causing a problem."

Snape turned toward his former friend. "Lily, you can't *seriously* think he's changed."

Lily looked positively offended that, after everything, he had finally turned to speak to her, addressing her by her name, and acting as though they were still friends.

"Lily . . ." Mia reached for her.

"I'm fine. Please excuse us, Severus; we have patrols to get through," Lily said, echoing James with a tone of indifference.

"He doesn't deserve that badge, and you know it!" Snape spat. "The only reason Dumbledore gave the position to him is because Lupin can't be trusted. Dumbledore just feels sorry for Potter."

"Why exactly would he feel sorry for me?" James asked, his temper finally rising.

"Because your mother died," Severus said heartlessly. "As if *that's* some sort of accomplishment—"

He might have had something more to say, but whatever it was, he would be saying it from the floor, tasting blood through the words, if he dared. Mia stood over the Slytherin, her hand balled into a tight fist, glaring down as Snape clutched his jaw in pain after she clocked him.

"Mia!" Lily yelled in shock.

"You horrid, greasy, little bat!" Mia screamed.

"You bitch!" he yelled back up at her, rising to his feet and drawing his wand.

"*Expelliarmus!*" James shouted, and Snape's wand flew into his hand. "Ten points from Slytherin for pulling a wand on a fellow prefect." He glared with righteous anger at the boy, looking like he needed to take a moment to control himself considering Snape had pulled a wand on Mia.

"*She punched me!*"

Mia was fuming, a large part of her wanting to hit him again. All her anger and grief over the summer had reached a boiling point, and Snape had put a target on his face for daring to speak about her mother's death so flippantly. "To be fair, it's been a few years since I last punched your face; you were due for another!"

"Ten points from Gryffindor for assaulting another student," James said.

Mia turned and stared openly at her brother in absolute shock. "Wait, what? Jamie, you heard what he said about Mum!"

"Yes, I did," James affirmed with a stern expression. "Just because he said it doesn't make it true. Mum would be ashamed to see you resort to violence instead of taking the high road, or at the very least first planning out something a little more . . . *Slytherin*. Not to mention, you're *both* prefects and should be setting an example. What if the first years saw this? In fact, detention for the both of you," he ordered, looking irritated. "Meet with your Heads of House before the start-of-term feast to schedule it."

"You can't—" Snape began.

James cut him off quickly. "I'm Head Boy, and I can. Mia, get back to the compartment. Lily and I have patrols to take care of."

"You'll regret this, Potter," Snape growled before storming out of the room.

"I'm sure I will," James muttered quietly.

Mia left the compartment to make sure Snape went directly back to his own. She would not put it past him to follow after Sirius and Remus to retaliate for what she and James had done. She kept her Animagus hearing trained on the compartment, listening to her brother and Lily.

"Potter. Umm, thank you. For . . . For being fair."

James let out a long sigh of frustration. "Can I get extra credit if I tell you how incredibly difficult that was?"

Lily actually laughed. "Because she's your sister? Or because he's Severus Snape?"

"Honestly? Both. I'm not afraid of him. I *am*, however, a little afraid of Mia." He chuckled nervously. "She's violent toward Slytherins, but she can be downright *Slytherin* to the rest of us when she wants to be."

"I wouldn't worry too much. She loves you. But maybe have Peter taste-test all of your food for a while."

They shared a laugh.

Outside of the compartment, Mia tried to ignore the flutter of happiness she felt for her brother and friend. It was cutting through her anger, and that was just annoying.

---

Mia scowled at James from across the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall as they sat down to enjoy the start-of-term feast. She tried to convince herself that, had she been in his position, she would have issued detention as well. How many times over the years had she scolded James and Sirius for picking on Snape? She had lost count. Then again, Snape was cruel, and it had been a few years since Mia had punched him. *Merlin, it felt as good as it did the first time.*

"Oh, it won't be that bad, kitten." Sirius smirked at her from beside James, reaching over and pretending to check James's goblet to make sure that Mia had not slipped anything in there yet. "You've served detention *before* for punching Snivellus in the face. I should be the one who's upset. You've hit that greasy git *twice*, and I've missed it both times."

Mia pouted, folding her arms across her chest. "I've had detention before, but never issued to me by *my own brother*."

"Mia, I can't believe *I'm* the one to say it," Lily said with a heavy sigh, "but the Head Boy acted accordingly. I would have issued you detention as well, regardless of who started it."

Sirius snorted into his own goblet. "Head Boy."

"If you'd like, I could pick a fight with someone and spend detention with you," Remus offered with a mischievous look as he slipped a consoling arm around Mia, who finally let a smile break through her scowling exterior.

"Don't you dare," Lily snapped at Remus, her eyes blazing. "I've been Head Girl for less than twenty-four hours and already *two* of my prefects have been issued detention for fighting. I will *not* have a third go down, especially from my own House!"

"Can I spend detention with her?" Sirius asked with a grin.

Lily sighed in defeat. "As if I could stop you."

"I'm really sorry, Mia, but you know I had to do it." James frowned at her, and she finally looked up at him and smiled, offering silent forgiveness. Had most of their antics not been a life or death situation, she figured that she might have given Harry and Ron detention once or twice back in her original time. "At least your punishment isn't until next Friday; you can still come to the party tonight."

"What party?" Lily looked up anxiously. "I don't recall giving permission for any party."

Sirius grinned. "Head Boy gave permission."

Lily narrowed her eyes at James, who smiled innocently at her. "What's this about?"

"It's nothing big, Lily," Remus promised her. "Since James is Head Boy now and will be officially leaving Gryffindor Tower, we wanted to give him a proper send-off."

"It's more of a celebration for us, though, now that we don't have to put up with his snoring," Sirius admitted as he patted James on the back.

James turned and glared at him. "I don't snore."

Lily scoffed. "Yes, you do." Suddenly, all eyes turned on her with interest. She flushed, apparently realising the implications of what she had said aloud.

"What was that?" Mary smirked and scooted down the table to sit on the other side of the red-haired witch. "Lily, dear, how would *you* know if James snores? Did the two of you get a head start sharing living space?"

"For your information, I did actually spend quite a bit of time at Potter Manor this summer," Lily freely admitted. "I've spent time there over the holidays before and . . . and I happened to witness him . . . napping. That's all. Nothing as sordid as you're making it out to be."

So caught up in their conversations, they all failed to notice the plates disappearing—nor did they hear Professor Dumbledore's send off—but, suddenly, all the students in the Great Hall were rising from the tables.

"All right, fifth year prefects," Lily spoke loudly without shouting. "Please escort the first years to the common rooms. Make sure they all know the passwords and try not to let any of them fall through the vanishing step. Sixth year prefects head out on rounds, and—" Her gaze landed on Remus and Mia. "Seventh years just . . . try not to get into any more trouble?"

Mia opened her mouth to object, but Lily was already turning away, followed by James.

"Ouch," Remus said, wincing. "I'm going to assume that she was directing that entirely to you."

"Shut it. Go on up to the tower and make sure Sirius and Peter don't get into trouble. I'm going to talk to Lily."

"Good luck."

Lily and James walked to the front of the Great Hall where Professor McGonagall was waiting for them, and Mia followed, lingering within earshot of their conversation—waiting for Lily in order to apologise.

"Miss Evans, Mr Potter. I wanted to first congratulate you both on your new position. I trust they will be treated with the utmost respect and seriousness."

Lily nodded firmly. "Yes, ma'am."

McGonagall turned to James, and her gaze briefly softened. "Potter, I was so sorry to hear about your mother. She was a good witch. Please, pass along my condolences to your father, if you would."

Mia watched as familiar grief flashed over James's features before he swallowed hard and pulled in back in. She wondered if she wore the same expression. What Slytherin there was in her—thanks to Dorea—wanted to hide that expression as it left her vulnerable to onlookers, but there was something to be said about the way that same vulnerability softened her brother. Lily's proximity to him was evidence enough of his change.

"Thank you, ma'am. Should I pass along your condolences to my sister and Sirius as well?" James asked, letting a small smirk slip through and watching with interest as McGonagall narrowed her gaze, her lips forming a tight line.

"I imagine I'll be seeing them *both* next Friday," she said with a stern expression. "Fighting on the train; honestly. Please see to it that you keep your prefects in line this year, Miss Evans. I should hope the Head Boy will have no problem attending to his duties as well with an ounce of maturity."

James offered her a crooked grin. "I'll *try*, Professor."

"I won't catch the two of you hexing one another in the halls?"

"To be fair," James insisted, "I've never *hexed* Lily."

"And I've never been *caught* hexing Potter," Lily admitted smugly.

"All right, off with you both." McGonagall began shooing them toward the exit, and Mia ducked behind the doors of the Great Hall, watching as they all stepped out. "There are patrol schedules for the two of you to write up, and I'll be busy ignoring the rumours of a party happening in Gryffindor Tower. I'm certain neither of you is aware of such a thing."

"Of course not, Professor," James declared. "If there *is* a party, you can be certain that I'll put a firm stop to it. No parties in Gryffindor Tower after midnight."

"Eleven," McGonagall countered after a moment of contemplation.

"Deal."

The professor then turned and addressed Lily. "Miss Evans, can you show the Head Boy to your new quarters? I assume you're already aware of them since you've been pining for the position of Head Girl for six years?"

Lily frowned, looking momentarily offended. "I wouldn't call it *pinning* exactly, but yes, ma'am, I know where our rooms are."

"Then I shall bid you both good night." McGonagall left them by the stairs, turning back toward the Great Hall where she made eye contact with Mia. Sending a particularly censoring glare in her direction, Mia bowed her head with a smile and held her hands up in a "Sirius" gesture of defeat before she side-stepped the professor and walked toward the stairs.

James and Lily were hovered close together, looking over some parchments in Lily's hands, unaware of Mia's nearness. Curious—and before they could spot her—Mia disillusioned herself and silently slipped up behind them.

"Are you going to the party, then?" James asked as he walked with Lily toward the staircase.

"No, there's too much to do," Lily said, examining what appeared to be a colour-coded timetable for N.E.W.T. revisions. "I have to write up all the new prefect patrolling schedules, especially with Mia and Sev—er . . . *Snape* in detention next Friday. I'll have to figure out who to pair with their previous partners since they'll be unavailable. Also, with you being Quidditch Captain, I imagine I'll have to work around that schedule as well, not to mention planning for N.E.W.T.s."

"You could just take a night off, you know," James suggested with a laugh.

"That's your problem, Potter." Lily put her hands on her hips and sighed irritably. "You treat every night like it's a night off. You have to grow up sometime and actually take responsibility for things."

"Fair enough. I'll think about it, yeah?" He smiled and turned his attention back toward the staircase where they saw a small girl in green and silver robes sitting on the bottom step looking positively devastated.

Mia was half-tempted to cancel her disillusionment to help the girl, but Lily stepped up before she had a chance to even raise her wand.

"Excuse me? Are you lost?" Lily asked sweetly.

"No . . ." The eleven-year-old scowled up at her and then frowned, looking back down at the floor, embarrassed. "Er . . . well yes, but . . . I don't want to go to my common room."

"Why's that?" James inquired as he took a seat directly beside the girl.

"I'm a *Slytherin*," the tiny witch said, as though James were stupid and did not understand.

"I can see that." He gestured to her robes and then, with a teasing smirk, asked, "What's the problem, you don't like green?"

The girl looked like she almost laughed but caught herself before she did so. "I'm half-blood," she admitted very quietly with a frown. "Slytherins are supposed to only be pureblood. If I go in there, they'll just kick me out."

"They won't do that," Lily insisted, looking horrified that the girl had been led to believe such awful rumours.

While she had never been friends with the girl in her original timeline, Mia remembered hearing that Tracey Davis was a half-blood Slytherin. She never saw the girl

outcast from her peers, which made her assume that even if Slytherin House was that discriminatory in this decade, that they had learnt acceptance with time.

"She's right." James gestured to Lily with a smile. "And she knows everything. So I'm going to walk you down to the dungeons myself. When you go inside, you're going to go and find the seventh year prefect, all right? His name's Snape. You tell him that you're half-blood, and he'll take care of you. Now, he's a bit of a tosser—"

Mia covered her mouth and nose to stop the snort that threatened to leap out of her just as Lily reproachfully snapped, "Potter!"

"—but Slytherins happen to be pretty good at looking after their own." James looked up at Lily with a tiny grin. "Plus, he's a half-blood himself, I hear. And if anyone *does* cause problems for you, you come and tell us, and the Head Girl will hex them silly, right?"

The girl actually smirked at that, though she eyed Lily questioningly.

"You don't think she could do it, do you?" James asked the tiny witch. He pulled up the robes on his left leg, showing a small scar on his shin. "See that? That was in third year when this lovely witch set my trousers on fire."

"Which you should never do," Lily insisted to the small Slytherin, eyes wide. "It's a very bad thing. I was awfully regretful."

The tiny witch finally laughed out loud. "Okay."

"Wait for me just there," James told the girl, pointing to a set of armour propped up against the wall as though it were guarding the entrance to the dungeons. When the first year followed his instructions, he turned back to Lily. "I'll come and find the Head rooms when I'm done with the party. That all right?"

"Fine," Lily said with a smile. "Thank you for . . . for taking care of her. I know how you feel about Slytherins and . . . and Snape."

He winked at her. "Well, I've been told recently that I've got to grow up and start taking responsibility for things."

She chuckled. "Prat."

"Oh, here." He pulled a folded piece of parchment from his robes and handed it to her. "Will you take this with you to our common room and pin it to the wall? Just a reminder for me to take care of something later. I don't want to lose it."

Mia tried to get a peek at the parchment, but Lily tucked it in with her other papers before she had a chance.

"Quidditch schedule?"

James smiled. "Something like that."

"All right. Goodnight, Potter," Lily said and then turned around, walking away.

Mia watched in affectionate amusement as her brother stared after Lily with a hopeless little smile on his face for a good twenty seconds before he spun around and skipped toward the first year Slytherin, who stared at him as though he had lost his mind.

"Ready?"

"I guess."

James held out his hand, and Mia smiled when the little girl hesitantly took it. Following her brother and the girl down into the dungeons, Mia waited until the first year was comfortably tucked away into her common room—James, knowing where he was not wanted, waited in the corridor until the entrance closed behind her. The moment he turned around to leave, Mia cancelled her disillusionment.

"Boo!"

"Ahh!" James shrieked, jumping a foot in the air. Scowling as Mia fell into laughter, he darted forward and grabbed her. His reflexes were nowhere near as fast as Harry's, but athleticism definitely ran in the Potter blood, and Mia's gracefulness and stealth ended with her wand work. Unable to avoid him, she found herself flung over his shoulder, still laughing.

"You're a prat."

"And you've put on a stone since I've last picked you up," James said, chuckling even as Mia tried to kick him for the comment. "How long were you eavesdropping?"

"Enough to watch you play nice with the baby Slytherin to impress Lily."

"I was playing nice to play nice. Inter-House unity and all that rot, you know. I'm Head Boy, if you haven't heard."

Mia smirked, cringing when James refused to put her down even as he reached the stairs—his shoulder jutting into her ribs with every step. "Head Boy, you say? I'd just heard that you had a big head."

He set her down after only one flight of stairs. When Mia teased him that he was getting old and out of shape, James chased her the rest of the way up to Gryffindor Tower.

When they reached the portrait laughing and out of breath, the Fat Lady looked at them with disapproval in her gaze, but she let them into the common room without much more than a murmur. Mia crawled through the entrance ahead of James, and the moment they reached the other side, the gathered Gryffindors burst into song.

Mia laughed as she mis-stepped and tumbled into Remus's arms. The Quidditch team lifted James onto their shoulders, singing what sounded like a Wizarding version of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow." In the corner, Sirius and Peter were popping the caps off of butterbeer bottles and handing out drinks to everyone.

"Already got one for you," Remus said, placing a bottle in her hand.

"Cheers." Mia grinned and took a long sip, smiling at the look of pure joy on James's face. It was good to see him happy after the summer they had experienced. It made her think of her father, and she wondered how he and Tilly were doing on their own back home.

"I hope the younger years got up to bed before the drinks started being passed around," she said, spotting two fourth years being ushered up the stairs, pouting.

"Sirius suggested putting firewhisky in sippy cups, but we took a vote against it."

Mia snorted, half-certain that Remus was not joking. "There better not be any firewhisky in here. Lily will flip her—"

"JAMES!"

The room fell into complete silence, and everyone turned their focus to the entrance where Lily stood looking as though she had run all the way from the Head rooms to the top of the tower. She was panting, her hair was a mess, and she had a crumpled bit of parchment clenched tightly in her hand.

"Did Lily just say—?" Remus blinked in shock at Lily using James's given name. Sirius and Peter had actually gasped at the name falling from Lily's mouth, and Mia was suddenly gripping Remus's arm tightly, her eyes alight with anticipated joy.

James looked up toward the entrance and smiled. Not his egotistical, smug, "Look at me, I'm James bloody Potter" smile, but a smile that said he was genuinely happy that Lily had shown up.

Mia watched as Lily's gaze connected with James's, and she squeezed Remus's arm tighter.

Lily held up the parchment in her hand. "You made the perfect schedule."

James's face turned a soft shade of pink. "Er . . . yeah?"

"It's organised. It's colour-coded by day and by House. You even took into account detentions and Quidditch try-outs."

Swallowing and looking around the room as all eyes fell on him, James looked uncomfortable with the attention—which was a dramatic shift in his character considering he acted as though he had been born in the spotlight. "I mean . . . you like that sort of stuff," he said, shrugging his shoulders.

"How did you—?" Lily began, looking gobsmacked. "You didn't even know the patrol routes. You'd never been a prefect or—"

"Well, I was given a handbook, Evans," James said, his tone one of feigned offence. "I can read, despite what you may . . . What?"

Suddenly, Lily was running toward him through a small path in the crowded room, a hard, blazing look on her face.

James quickly thrust his bottle of butterbeer into Sirius's hand as he turned to nervously meet Lily halfway just as she jumped into his open arms, wrapping hers around his neck.

And, despite the fact that fifty people were watching, Lily kissed him.

## Chapter Seventy-One

### *In Love*

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*And for the boy who's given me the sweetest love I know  
I wish for him another love so he won't be alone  
But I am bound to walk among the wounded and the slain  
And when the storm comes crashing on the plain  
I will dance before the lightning to music sacred and profane  
(Stranger to the Rain - Children of Eden)*

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**September 3rd, 1977**

Mia snuggled into the warm chest beneath her, a sleepy grin crossing her face as she felt long arms wrap around her body. She thought that James's farewell party had gone perfectly on their first night back to Hogwarts, starting with Lily kissing her brother in the middle of the Gryffindor common room. Mia's heart had swelled at the sight of the head of black, messy hair attached to the long, auburn locks; it reminded her of Harry and Ginny's first kiss in the very same spot.

Sirius and Remus had eagerly stepped forward to tease the pair, but Mia stood firmly in their way, allowing her brother and the love of his life a quick escape. James and Lily did not surface for breakfast, so when they turned up in Charms class holding hands, it was the perfect opportunity for the entire male population of Gryffindor House to whistle and hoot at them, and gain a unified "Aww!" from the witches.

James never looked so happy, and Lily looked like a brand new witch, cleansed of all the sadness that came from ending her friendship with Snape, the memories of being treated poorly because of her blood status, and thoughts of her home life and scornful sister. Somehow, this new love was fixing them both and, by extension, had offered healing to those in their tight-knit circle of friends and family.

Lily—and therefore James—insisted they had Head Boy and Girl business to attend to Friday night. Despite the couple not even being there for it, Sirius insisted on throwing yet *another* party to celebrate the fact that, though it had taken him six years to do it, James finally won over his witch.

The Gryffindors celebrated well into the early morning, and Mia had fallen asleep on the sofa, using a hard body as a pillow. For the first time in a long while, her dreams of memories past were not nightmares.

*Hermione slowly opened her eyes and found herself on a large bed that smelled like cats. She looked around and noticed she was inside the tent they had used during the Quidditch World Cup; it was the same tent she packed when they had decided to go on the run in search of Horcruxes. But why was she in it? Weren't they staying at Grimmauld Place? Hermione tried to remember what happened and how she had gotten there. She remembered going to the Ministry, finding the locket with Ron and Harry, catching sight of Sirius as Death Eaters and Ministry officials chased them, and then . . . and then . . .*

*She tried to sit up, wincing when she felt a distinct, skin-pinching sensation on her back. She let out a hiss of pain and felt something shift beside her. Turning slowly to prevent more pinching, she looked down into the pale grey eyes of Padfoot, who whimpered next to her. Hermione frowned and tried to turn and face Padfoot completely to assure him that she was fine, only to realise that she was not wearing a blouse. Her eyes widened, and she turned back over and groaned.*

*"Sirius! Where's my top? Why are you in bed with me? What happened? Where are Harry and Ron?" The questions tumbled from her mouth as she fought through the strange, completely unfamiliar pain in her back: a tightness as though her skin was being stretched. Padfoot moved on the bed behind her, and suddenly, a human hand pressed against her bare back. She flinched away from it.*

*"Calm down, kitten. I'm just checking the wound."*

*Hermione blanched. "Wound?"*

*"You don't remember? You got splinched trying to get away from the Ministry. Tore your back open pretty badly. I tried to heal it as best I could, but I wasn't ever the one to take care of Remus post full moon. All we had on us was Dittany. There's going to be a scar."*

*"Is it ugly?" Hermione asked with tears in her eyes, upset over how vain she felt.*

*"Nothing about you could . . ." Sirius began with a catch in his throat. "It looks all right. I've seen a similar one before. It'll heal up nicely. You lost a lot of blood, though, so you need to rest as much as possible. We ran out of Blood-Replenishing Potion."*

*"And umm . . . my shirt?" she timidly asked.*

*"Oh. You probably shouldn't be lifting your arms much. I can keep you covered, and . . . I'll leave and sit outside if you need," he offered, sounding nervous.*

*The change in tone was almost amusing to Hermione. She, of all people in the world, had apparently made Sirius Black nervous.*

*"Just, erm, don't let Harry or Ron see me like this."*

*She rested for days. Eventually, her back healed well enough to be bandaged and dressed, but still Hermione slept because Sirius told her to.*

*While Padfoot dozed soundly beside her, she would sit up and read, research, and think about where the next Horcrux could be. Sirius would wake and feed her, check her wound, and tell her that the scar was not ugly, once even comparing it to a beautiful river that spread its way down the back of her shoulder.*

*Hermione had blushed at the compliment and graciously accepted the little food he was able to bring her. It was strangely domestic and comfortable, especially considering they were in the middle of a war.*

Mia dreamt of the past and of an older Sirius. She could almost still feel him beside her as she slowly began to wake. If she concentrated hard enough, she could hear his husky voice speaking to her, see him looking at her in such a way that made her feel as though she were melting from the inside out. He had the confidence that a younger Sirius had, but was refined and almost controlled. He had faced his issues, while the younger Sirius was still bearing the heavy weight of guilt with which his family had burdened him. Younger Sirius feared the bond; older Sirius embraced it.

*"You . . . You know? You knew? This whole time?"*

*"About the bond?"*

She had blushed at him, and he had smiled.

*"One day, you won't do that anymore."*

*"Do what?" Hermione asked quietly as Sirius made his way to the tent door.*

*"Be embarrassed about how I make you feel."*

She was not embarrassed. Not anymore. Mia breathed in deep and smelled him. "Mmm . . . Sirius," she moaned as she breathed in the scent. Parchment and grass and . . . and . . . *chocolate?*

*Fuck.*

Her eyes opened wide in embarrassed horror, hoping to Merlin that she had not actually spoken out loud, though she knew she had. She leant upward against the chest she was sleeping against to come face to face with not grey but *green* eyes looking down at her curiously.

Remus slowly raised a questioning brow as Mia held her breath and swallowed hard.

"I think it's time we talked."

She sat up quickly, her heart pounding in her chest. How could she have done that? It was not her fault that she had dreamt of another man, especially when it was really more memory than dream, but she had sunk into the *feel* of the memories, yearned to relive them, yearned for . . . for *him*. For Sirius. And she had apparently been stupid enough to say his bloody name while sleeping on top of her boyfriend!

"Remus, I am *so* sorry—"

He held up a hand and sat up straight.

She watched carefully, biting her lower lip as he rubbed his face with his hands, elbows resting on his knee. While Remus sat in silence, Mia looked around the common room and noticed that several blankets had been tossed casually over armchairs and sofas where other seventh year Gryffindors slept soundly. They clearly had not been the only ones to fall asleep outside of their dorm rooms, but—so far—they were the only ones awake.

"Let's go for a walk," he said, standing up and holding his hand out to her.

She stared at his palm for several seconds, her gaze lingering on the small scar that crossed over his wrist from the first moon after their mothers died. Moony had been difficult to control, and it had taken both Padfoot and Prongs to secure the werewolf behind the wards erected in the Potter Manor orchards. Remus bore a scar from a fox bite Moony had received when he attempted to attack Padfoot in a rage. Thankfully, the following moon had come with an entire week of a strictly enforced schedule of Wolfsbane Potion as well as strengthened wards.

After grabbing their winter cloaks, the pair left Gryffindor Tower and made their way toward the Black Lake, where Remus transfigured his House scarf into a blanket. The couple sat down together, looking out over the water as the sunrise reflected off of it.

"I need you to be honest with me," Remus broke the silence, his eyes pleading. "I have several questions I'd like answered so I can try and come out of this with some dignity intact. Please, don't take offence or think that I don't trust you, but I just need . . . verbal confirmation."

Mia felt her chest tighten as she nodded. "I understand."

"Have you been with Sirius since we started courting exclusively?"

Mia gasped loudly, surprised by the question despite his lead up. "No! I've *only* been with you. I would never—"

"I know, I know." Remus let out a long sigh of relief. "I just . . . needed to hear it, I guess." He ran a hand through his hair and frowned. "When you're with *me*, do you think about *him*?"

"Merlin, no!" Mia answered almost immediately.

She recalled a few times, years earlier, that she had compared their kissing, and she had even gone into slight detail with Lily over what it was like to be with each of them, but never once had she thought about Sirius while she was with Remus.

"Do you wish I were him?"

She frowned and reached over to kiss him chastely, trying desperately to get him to understand her. "No. Remus, you're perfect, and I love you."

"I love you too, and we've always known that," Remus said after returning her kiss, closing his eyes and pressing his forehead against hers before speaking again, "but you dream about him?"

"Sometimes," Mia whispered sadly.

"You dream about . . ." he started to say but then hesitated a moment. "You dream about when you were *with* him?"

"Sometimes." Mia sighed, knowing that Remus could not understand that it was not the Sirius he knew that she dreamt of. "I don't do it on purpose, and there doesn't seem to be a trigger of any kind. It's more . . . *future* him."

"You see Sirius in your future?"

"Of *course* I do. You're there as well. We've known about this for years. You have a *mate* out there somewhere, and Sirius is—"

"I know," Remus interrupted her. "We've had this conversation before, but we also promised him we'd find out on our own. That we wouldn't let fate trick us into anything we didn't want, and we've been doing that pretty well, I thought, but . . . maybe we've just been avoiding the inevitable."

He took her hand, tugging her up against his side and wrapping his arm around her shoulder. It made her feel safe with him despite the horrid conversation they were having. She suspected he did it purposely for that exact reason.

After a few minutes of silence, Remus kissed the top of her head and whispered into her hair, "Are we in love?"

"Of *course* I love you," Mia replied, pulling back to look deep into his eyes.

"Are you *in* love with me?" Remus clarified. When she did not answer right away, he fell into another series of questions: "Are we going to end up together? Do you want to marry me, Mia? Do you want children?" he asked with a resigned tone. "Because I can't give them to you."

Mia growled, pushing at his chest in irritation. "That's rubbish. I've told you for years that you can't pass lycanthropy through conception."

She thought of little Teddy Lupin, whose hair was bright blue unless she was holding him—and then it turned honey brown. Teddy had always felt like . . . a part of her. She had been attached to the infant from the first moment, which was surprising as Hermione had not ever thought much of children, but Remus's son had been different. It did not matter what colour hair or eyes the boy mimicked; he was precious to her. Mia could not imagine a future without the little Metamorphmagus, and she felt a serious annoyance with Remus for unknowingly thinking about preventing the boy's creation.

"We're not talking about my lycanthropy," Remus said, interrupting her thoughts. "We're talking about *our* future. Now, answer the question: are you *in* love with me?"

"I don't know." She shook her head. "Are *you* in love with *me*?"

"I don't know. I'm terrified of losing you. You're not just my *love*, you're my best friend, my Beta; you're my *home*, Mia. You're my safe space, and I don't want to lose that." He sighed sadly, and his jaw tightened. "Frankly, it pisses me off, because I don't think Sirius understands how . . . how fucking *important* you are to me—or to *him*. I wish he was just another bloke so that I could hex or punch him in the face and tell him to get away from my witch."

Mia searched his eyes for the hints of gold but found only green. No Moony present; he was all Remus.

"I can't, though, because he's Sirius and my friend and Pack, and I actually *understand* on some level whatever it is between the two of you. I need you, but Merlin . . . Mia, I think Sirius would just die without you," Remus said without a hint of exaggeration.

She paled at the words, terrified of the implications. What would happen if and when she, Mia, ever disappeared? If the future could not be changed, that meant Sirius would go to Azkaban. If so, where would *she* be? A part of her began worrying about future Sirius. He had clearly known she was being sent back to the past; their kiss in the library

had practically been a farewell kiss. Was she ever going to see him again? Would he be there waiting for her, the day after her nineteenth birthday? Or would he, like Remus declared, die without her?

"Do you love Sirius?"

Mia's throat tightened, and she felt tears stinging her eyes. "I don't think I can say it."

"Why not?"

"Because he's not ready to hear it," she explained, and the tears finally spilt over onto her cheeks. She wiped them away as though they had betrayed her emotional resolve. "Plus, I'm not ready to see him walk away from me. Not again. He's done it twice now, and I've tried to be strong, but it hurt like hell. I don't think I could handle it a third time." Moments after their first kiss, he had turned her away. Minutes after the first time they made love, he had asked her to leave his room. "Besides . . . if I *am* in love with Sirius, I feel like the first time I say it should be to *him*."

"You really think he'd walk away from you again?"

Mia shrugged honestly. Sirius was a constant conundrum. It was an everlasting battle between his heart and his conscience, and his conscience was lying to him.

"The night of the concert, when he came into my room, drunk, he didn't really know I was there. He kept saying how he knew how he felt about me, that he didn't want to ruin you and me because we were in love, and he couldn't do that to his friends. Then he went on and on about how he needed to be a good man."

"He *really* needs to get over that issue."

"I know. He . . . He said he hasn't been with anyone since . . . since me."

Remus raised a sceptical brow. "Really?"

"You didn't know?"

"No, I mean . . ." He paused, looking deep in thought for a moment or two. "We haven't *seen* him with anyone, and he hasn't been bragging like he used to, but, well . . . you've heard the way Ravenclaws gossip. He really *said* that?"

"You think he was telling the truth?" she hesitantly asked.

"What do I think?" Remus sighed, pondering the situation. This had not been his plans for this morning. He had *planned* on waking up with a witch on his chest, but hearing her moaning another bloke's name and then discussing her relationship with said bloke, ad

nauseam, had not been on Remus's timetable. "I think Sirius is incapable of lying when drunk."

There had been some very awkward nights following a bottle of firewhisky, when Sirius had let loose knowledge none of them could ever unhear—including a few confessions such as how he had once had a dream about sharing Mia with Remus, and that, if well plied with firewhisky, he could probably do it for real. That had earned Sirius an awkward silent treatment from Remus, and a black eye from James, who was then informed that Sirius could never sleep with James and Lily, but only because Lily was more like a sister to him. Sirius was uncomfortably honest when properly pissed.

Shaking Sirius's drunken confessions from his mind, Remus said, "Not only that, but if he were sleeping with a girl, he'd be *bragging* about it. Hell, it had been less than a week after sleeping with *you* that he'd told *me*."

"He *bragged* about me?" Mia snapped.

Remus searched for the correct wording, hoping to calm her down. "Less bragged and more . . . *confessed*. He might have wanted my forgiveness or something even though it was completely unnecessary at the time. I think he was already trying to get us back together and didn't want there to be any secrets."

Mia nervously bit her lip. "I don't want your friendship with him ruined over this."

Remus raked his hands back through his hair and sighed. "He's one of my best friends, and I don't take that lightly. Not only that, but you're both Pack, and that means more to me than anything. Family."

He frowned, watching as she stifled a sob. They had all lost too much family over the summer. They needed one another, especially Remus who had no family left to return to.

"I'm just having trouble trying to figure out if what I'm currently feeling is how I actually feel, or how I think I'm *supposed* to feel."

"How do you *think* you should feel?" she asked.

"I'm supposed to feel pissed off that my girlfriend moaned another wizard's name in her sleep. Then again, I suppose it could be worse. You could have said Sirius's name while we were having sex." He smirked until he realised something, and a disappointed frown fell across his face. "Oh."

"No more sex."

Remus grumbled under his breath. Friends with benefits had worked well the first time around, but that was before Sirius had gotten involved. "Well, now I'm pissed off for *another* reason."

Mia laughed a little, which lifted his heart some. But then her smile was gone again, and she wiped the back of her hand against her eye. "I'm sorry, Remus."

"I know; it's not your fault." He sighed and pulled her back into his arms. "We tried. Honestly, I'm feeling a little relieved. You know I love you, and I want to give you everything, but I know I can't. You've always been right about the whole mate thing. I've been having nightmares lately that you and I leave Hogwarts and get married, then my mate shows up at the wedding, and Moony takes over, and I end up leaving you . . . I don't want that to happen."

"You'll find her," Mia promised.

Remus brushed her off. "We're not talking about that right now. Come on, let's get to breakfast." He stood up and pulled her to her feet in one swift motion. "Before we do anything, though, you need to go and find that Letter of Intent." He winced at the thought of it. "Bloody hell . . . why'd I have to do something so public?"

She smiled sweetly at him. "Because you're a romantic at heart."

"I hope you know that you'll not be getting poetry from Sirius," Remus stated firmly as they made their way back toward the castle, still hand-in-hand. "He might quote you some Sex Pistol lyrics at best. You're going to miss me."

Mia laughed and squeezed his hand. "I won't need to miss you. You're not going anywhere."

"Can you at least tell him I'm better at sex than he is?" Remus pleaded.

Mia laughed again.

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The former couple made it through breakfast without any problems. Afterward, Mia returned to Gryffindor Tower to shower and change, only to look in the mirror and see the suddenly reappeared splinching scar across her back. *Well, that explains the dream*, she thought to herself, immediately worrying about what would happen when her "Mudblood" scar reappeared later that year.

After James suggested the boys take a fly around the pitch, all the seventh year Gryffindor girls decided to make a day of it as well and followed the wizards outside. It was a bit chilly out, but nothing that their robes or a good Warming Charm could not handle. As the young men took to the sky on their brooms—Remus, Frank, and Peter included—all of the girls sat down on a transfigured blanket and watched.

"I love Quidditch," Mary said with an interested sigh.

"I hope you're staring at Peter or Sirius, because the rest of those wizards are spoken for," Lily said emphatically as she looked over a parchment in her hand.

Mia took a glance and figured that it was the weekly prefect schedule. James had clearly made it considering the nearly illegible penmanship. Lily began rewriting it in her own hand, likely knowing the prefects would have to be able to read it in order to comply.

"So, you and Potter are official then?" Alice asked with a happy smile.

Lily looked up and blushed when the rest of the witches grinned at her.

"I say it's about time," Mia declared.

Mary smirked, poking Lily teasingly in the ribs. "I completely agree, but, for the record, I was looking at almost all of them. It's like art; just because I didn't paint it and it doesn't hang in my house, doesn't mean I can't enjoy it."

"Not like any of our wizards would stray as it is," Alice pointed out. "James has been in love with Lily for years, Frank would never betray me, and Remus is head over heels for Mia."

Looking at her friends, Mia sighed. She reached into her school bag, retrieving the Letter of Intent Remus had sent to James a year earlier, and called up to the fliers. "Remus! Get everyone else down here!"

Mia avoided the looks on each of the faces surrounding her as they eyed the envelope in her hands. Lily, naturally, was the only one who looked curious as opposed to sitting on the edge of her figurative seat.

When all the wizards had landed, Remus nodded knowingly to Mia and made his way over to her, setting his broom down gently on the grass. Sirius and James followed suit, watching with interest, though Sirius looked more nervous than anyone else there at the sight of the letter in Mia's hands. Frank and Peter joined the girls on the grass, eagerly surveying the couple standing in front of them.

"Miss Mia Potter," Remus began, placing his hands formally behind his back and standing tall. "I have sent you a Letter of Intent, have properly courted you for one year's time, and I come now seeking your answer to my intentions."

Lily gasped and covered her mouth. Mary and Alice clutched hands tightly. Everyone was ignoring the paling faces of James and Sirius, who were staring in anticipation at Mia and Remus.

"Thank you, Mr Lupin, for your letter. I have an answer to your intentions. Here, before the representative of the House of Potter, and my mother's family, the House of Black," Mia said, gesturing to James and Sirius, "I give you my answer."

She gave him a sad little smile, and Remus nodded, smiling back at her.

"No."

"It's all right, love," Remus whispered, chastely brushing his lips against her cheek before tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. "Go ahead."

"*Incendio.*" The envelope in her hand burst into flames.

"No!" Alice and Lily shrieked, reaching their hands out as though they could take the burning letter away from Mia and stomp out the fire.

"Mia! You can't take that back!" Mary screamed.

Mia smiled at her friends. "I know. Remus and I discussed it all this morning, and we're ending our courtship. Ending our *romantic* relationship," she added, slowly taking in a deep breath before she took Remus's hand, "but not our *friendship*."

"But . . . what happened?" Lily questioned, frowning. "You're perfect together."

"Almost." Remus smiled. "*Almost* perfect, but not quite."

James walked over the blanket, stepping in between Mia and Remus to put his hands on her shoulders. His stern expression told her that he was looking for any hint of resentment between the two, likely trying to figure out if he needed to console his friend or defend his sister.

"You're happy with this?"

"It was the right thing to do, Jamie. We got back together to figure things out, make choices, and now we've made them," Mia insisted. She looked over her brother's shoulder, where she made eye contact with pale grey as Sirius stared at her, mouth open, looking mildly panicked.

Mia opened her mouth before she even had any idea of what she might say to him, but her words never left as someone else intruded on the moment.

"Hey there, Black."

Everyone turned to see Elora Zabini walking over to them, wearing expensive-looking green and black robes. The Slytherin ignored everyone, save for Sirius, who winced at the very sight of her.

"You're looking good this year. Summer treat you well?"

Sirius scowled at her, nothing but loathing in his eyes. "Treated me like shit, actually."

"Shame. Want to ditch these . . ." Elora trailed off, looking down her nose in distaste at the gathered Gryffindors, "*people* and take a walk with me?"

"No. Just like every other time you've asked. And I'll thank you to stop telling the Ravenclaws that you shagged me. I wouldn't be caught dead with my cock in a *snake*. All that venom would make it rot off."

Elora laughed, unphased by his insult. "Oh, sweetie. I'll do and say whatever I like."

"Hey, Zabini," Mia said, her own venom coursing like fire through her veins as she glared at the Slytherin witch. Without another thought, she reached into the pocket of her robes, fishing around until she felt metal against the tips of her fingers. "Can you swim?"

Elora glared at Mia as though she were an idiot. "Of *course* I can, you stupid little blood-trait—"

"Good. Catch." Mia tossed a shiny Sickie toward Elora.

Instinctively, Elora caught the coin and then looked up at Mia, confused, before a bright blue light encompassed her and vanished her away with a startled scream.

Everyone stared at Mia with wide, terrified eyes.

"What the fuck?" Sirius shouted.

"Remember that Portkey modification I was making?" Mia asked conversationally, as though she hadn't just vanished a girl. "I figured out how to do it."

James took in a deep breath, moving to Lily's side to rub her shoulders as she began hyperventilating. "Ignoring the fact that you basically just attacked another student in front of the Head Boy and Girl *and* another prefect . . . *again*," he said, looking concerned and exasperated—which Mia felt was just a smidge hypocritical of him. "You linked the Portkey to . . . ?"

"I'm calling it a *Tele-Portkey*," Mia announced with a bright smile, earning a laugh from Sirius, who was clearly the least worried out of the group.

James frowned, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Fine . . . the *Tele-Portkey* has a twin, doesn't it? That's the whole point, right? So where'd you put the other one?"

Pretending that she only just *then* understood his meaning, Mia's mouth fell open and she nodded, smiling as innocently as possible when she told him, "I fed it to the giant squid."

## Chapter Seventy-Two

### *Intervention*

---

*And I keep waiting for you to take me  
You keep waiting to save what we have  
So I'll make sure to keep my distance  
Say, "I love you," when you're not listening  
And how long can we keep this up, up, up?  
(Distance - Christina Perri)*

---

**September 3rd, 1977**

Mia, in fact, had *not* fed the twin Tele-Portkey to the giant squid. She did, however, enjoy the few moments of hysteria her statement caused as Lily went into Head Girl mode. She ordered James and the other boys to get on their brooms and rush toward the lake to save the potentially-digested Slytherin Princess.

Only Remus and Sirius stood behind with Mia.

"You'd think after knowing you for six years they could tell when you're lying through your teeth," Remus said, shaking his head as Mia looked on proudly at the chaos she had created, arms delicately folded across her chest and a satisfied smile on her face.

"Zabini had it coming. Besides, Jamie gave me detention; he can squirm a little, thinking that his sister fed a Slytherin to the squid."

"Where'd you *actually* leave the twin Tele-Portkey?" Sirius asked with a smirk.

"In the lake," Mia admitted with a grin. "The shallow end. Not very deep. The water will ruin those robes of hers before she has a chance to react and save them."

When James, Lily, and the others caught back up with Mia—after spotting a drenched and fuming Elora Zabini storming back from the other side of the lake—Lily regretfully issued Mia two *more* detentions with McGonagall and took away twenty points from Gryffindor.

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**November 5th, 1977**

Despite her quick dip in the water, Elora turned the tale of her humiliation into something much more sordid that involved Sirius, the Black Lake, and a distinct lack of clothing. Soon, everyone in the school was under the impression that Sirius had a heart-shaped birthmark on his arse cheek. All of those who actually lived in Gryffindor Tower knew better, considering how often Sirius was willing to bare himself to show off his precious tattoo.

It took four days before the rest of the Hogwarts female population were all gossiping over when and how they, too, had been privy to the now infamous, and non-existent, birthmark.

For the first time in his life, Sirius hated the spotlight.

"Drink this," Mia ordered him as she approached the breakfast table one morning.

She slid a small phial across to a frustrated Sirius, who had his hands buried in the depths of his hair, covering his ears as the Ravenclaws at the next table stared and giggled in his direction. It was one thing to be praised for his *actual* prowess, but a heart-shaped birthmark and skinny dipping in the Black Lake? Soon they would all be insisting he had proposed to them, and there would be a school-wide war over who would take the title of the future Lady Black.

"What colour will my hair turn?" Sirius asked suspiciously, looking at the phial. When it came to potions, Mia was brilliant, which only made her that much more dangerous.

"It won't."

"Will my hair fall out?"

"No."

"It's not a Shrinking Solution is it?" He hoped that she would never be *that* cruel.

"It's a temporary fix for your current problem," she offered, tossing a scathing look at the giggling girls at the next table.

Sirius glanced down at the bubbling, crimson liquid, pulled the cork and threw the potion back quickly, coughing a bit at the taste.

"Now go around the room and touch every single girl. Shake their hands, give them a hug, even brush up against their shoulder. *Any* form of contact."

With a raised brow, Sirius stood and slowly made his way through the tables, stopping to say hello and smile at the groups of witches who grinned up at him as if they really knew him. Some had, years earlier, and it was those who tended to avoid his gaze, save for a few who had lied about recent encounters when Sirius rejected their requests for a repeat of a one night stand.

It took him a full forty minutes to get through each table, considering most of the young witches wanted him to stop and sit down—some physically forcing him to join them for a few moments' time.

"Attending to your fan club?" James inquired as he and Lily walked into the Great Hall. They took their new seats next to one another across from Mia and Remus. Still ever the doting pair, he fixed her morning breakfast while she poured his pumpkin juice.

Sirius rolled his eyes at them and sat down beside Lily. "Don't ask *me*. Mia gave me a potion and made me go say hello to every girl in the school."

Forks and knives dropped with a loud clank all the way down the table as wide, worried eyes looked upward into the innocently concealed face of the brunette. Mia turned her gaze up toward Lily, who looked to be on the verge of a complete panic attack. Sirius wondered if Mia would be able to get Lily to the same level of frustration James used to.

"Calm down," Mia said, appearing unconcerned. "They deserve it. It's not dangerous or permanent."

"Am I going to have to give you more detention?" Lily asked, looking burdened. "Mia, I cannot afford to lose a prefect right now."

Mia turned to Sirius. "Have you complained about the problems the girls have been giving you?"

He slowly nodded and rolled his eyes. "McGonagall said I was causing a disturbance, and when I denied doing anything and told her the girls were all lying, she said that, unfortunately, there was no way to prove it without using Veritaserum." He sighed, recalling the look in the professor's eyes. The woman had a way of making him feel both scolded and protected all at once, which was a bit disconcerting. "At least she believed that I was telling the truth."

"See?" Mia said. "All we need is proof."

"Uh-oh," James muttered as Mia stood from her seat and moved to stand on top of the long bench. The only professor in attendance in the Great Hall was Dumbledore, who always displayed a strange indifference to Mia's pranks.

Mia cleared her throat loudly, drawing the attention of everyone at the table and a few eavesdroppers. She cast a *Sonus Charm* on her wand and cleared her throat again to get the attention of the entire Great Hall. "I'm just curious. Who here has had sex with Sirius Black within the past year?"

Suddenly, the hall broke out into whispers. Gryffindors were all blushing nervously, save for Sirius, who no longer minded the attention, considering his curiosity was definitely piqued. He looked around the room and noted several girls he had never been with laughing with their friends and looking smug. Most of the girls he *had* been with in the past were glaring at every other witch in sight.

Sirius cringed, seeing the fruits of his amorous labours set out in front of him.

No one openly spoke in the affirmative, and Sirius glanced at Mia, wondering what her next move would be.

Mia smiled, held her wand in the air, and spoke loudly, "*Coccinus Mendax!*"

A bright red light emerged from her wand and covered the Great Hall in a strange mist.

At the Head Table, Dumbledore watched on with great interest, his eyes twinkling at the scene.

It took all of five seconds for the screaming to begin.

Dark red splotches began appearing on no less than fifty witches, tainting the skin around the mouths. It looked like something between a birthmark and a contagious disease and was incredibly unappealing.

"Roughly translates to 'Crimson Liar,'" Mia stated, her voice as sweet as honey. "The more you've lied about the question you were just asked, the more this particular charm will have spread."

While a few girls only had a small patch covering their lips, others had their entire faces encased in dark red.

Wands broke out, aimed at the Gryffindor table, and that was when Dumbledore sought to intervene on Mia's behalf. He cast a rather large protective shield, his blue eyes fixed upon the little witch. Sirius watched in awe as she stared right back at the headmaster

in a challenging type of way, as though there was a silent understanding between the two. He had never seen *anyone* look at Albus Dumbledore that way—except maybe McGonagall.

Mia looked like she was a breath away from *daring* Dumbledore to scold her for her actions. Something about that look in her eyes sent a vibration through Sirius's chest. A warmth built out from his sternum, reaching to the tips of his fingers. He rubbed his thumb and index fingers together unconsciously, wondering if it was his Animagus instincts that made him want to touch her over the dominant display. He licked his lips and let out a slow exhale, doing his best not to draw James's attention; he really was not in the mood to be punched for salivating over his best friend's sister this morning.

"Miss Potter," Dumbledore said loudly, and the noise in the Great Hall began to die down, save for the lying witches who now sobbed openly. "Lovely demonstration. However, I would be remiss in my duties as headmaster if I were to leave so many lovely young women disfigured as such. May I request that you demonstrate the counter-curse?"

*Clever*, Sirius thought.

"Certainly, Professor. Though, it's up to each individual witch to remove it herself. The charm showcases a *liar*," Mia explained. "To remove it, they simply have to tell the truth." Her tone of voice was simple and soft, as though she could not believe that everyone did not know this particular spell that she had created.

"I did not have sex with Sirius Black."

Everyone turned to see a bitter-looking, teary-eyed, and crimson-faced Callista Hitchins stand. No sooner than the words left her mouth, the splotches vanished, leaving behind only the scathing burn of embarrassment and lines from where tears of horror had streaked through her makeup.

An enraged Elora Zabini stood, glaring more at Sirius than Mia.

He glared right back at the bitch.

"I did not have sex with Sirius Black."

Elora hissed when her fellow Slytherins laughed openly at her, none more than Regulus, who actually looked more amused than anyone over the declaration. It made something old and familiar bloom in Sirius's chest, but when their eyes met across the room, Regulus turned away from him, and Sirius buried the brotherly affection back down.

Echoes of "I did not have sex with Sirius Black" rang through the Great Hall until awkward silence blanketed the room. When every girl had confessed her lies, Mia returned

to her seat to finish her breakfast in peace, ignoring the fact that everyone was now staring at her.

"Thanks, Mia," Sirius muttered, the emptiness in his chest left behind by Regulus's disregard filled with warm affection for the witch.

Mia smiled at him from across the table. They gazed at one another, and Sirius was tempted to reach out and take her hand. But everyone was staring, and they both averted their eyes, tucking their hands beneath the table.

"I should get to Arithmancy." Mia cleared her throat and stood up quickly from the table, casting a sad glance in Sirius's direction before nodding to each of her friends and then leaving the Great Hall quickly.

Sirius frowned and looked down at his plate of food, still full. Nothing looked appealing, and his stomach ached with hunger and anxious nausea brought on by stress and worry. His jaw briefly twitched, and he stood from his seat muttering, "I need a cigarette." He left the table.

Remus shook his head once Sirius and Mia were both gone. "This is getting ridiculous."

Lily nodded in agreement. "We have to do something about the two of them."

"Or, and just hear me out," James offered, "we do *not* try to play matchmaker between my sister and my best friend. I vote for *that* idea, simply because it's the only idea that doesn't make me want to pull my hair out."

"It'd grow back," Lily said, running her fingers through James's hair and watching with amusement as he melted at her touch. Remus chuckled at the sight of the pair who had, not one year ago, been at odds. "Don't you want Mia and Sirius to be happy?"

"Yes," James groaned with a pout.

"And don't you think they'd be happy together?"

"If they didn't *Avada* one another first," James muttered, catching a gaze from Lily that had him sighing loudly. "Fine, yes, it's been an awkward six years watching them dance around each other and flirt shamelessly. At least when she was with *you*," he said looking at Remus, "Padfoot tried restraining himself."

"Now, it's as if they're trying to avoid each other," Remus acknowledged aloud. "I honestly thought the moment Mia and I officially split, Sirius would be right there, but he hasn't so much as made a move."

"He's afraid," Lily said. "So is she."

"What're *we* supposed to do about it?" Peter chimed in.

Lily smirked.

Remus winced at the sight. "How many rules are we going to break?"

"None," Lily promised, turning to look at Peter. "Not *all of us* are going to get caught."

Peter shifted nervously under her gaze.

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Later that night, Mia walked through the dark corridors of the large castle. She slipped casually down the staircase from Gryffindor Tower, making her way to the third floor—down the long stretch of hallway that lead to the portrait of a knight sitting outside of the Heads' Rooms.

Removing a large book from her bag, she casually muttered the password to the knight, barely taking notice as the door opened in front of her and she stepped through.

"Lily, I brought the old Arithmancy book." She threw her bag down on the floor, eyes still glued to the textbook in her hands as she made her way into the shared common room. "I know you don't think it'll be on the N.E.W.T., but I don't see why we shouldn't—"

A clearing throat stopped her in the middle of her sentence, and she looked up. She blinked, her gaze meeting those of her friends and brother sitting around a large table. Sirius was trapped between Remus and James; both had their hands holding him in place, and the latter had a hand covering his mouth.

She raised a suspicious eyebrow. "What's going on in here?"

"Run! It's a trap!" Sirius shouted after breaking away from James's grip for a moment, only to be silenced by Lily's wand a split second later.

Lily smirked at him as he fixed her with narrowed eyes. "Shut up, Sirius. Sit down, Mia."

Mia shook her head and took a step backward. "No. You've got the same look in your eyes you usually reserve for hexing Jamie."

"Sit down, love," Remus insisted, moving from his place beside Sirius, taking her gently by the arm and leading her toward the large armchair that faced the sofa. He sat beside her while Lily took his empty place next to Sirius.

"Is this an intervention?" Mia asked irritably. "Because I'll have you know, I've barely even begun revising, and I've been eating all my meals and getting eight hours of sleep each night—all right, *six* most nights," she corrected with a roll of her eyes, "but I am perfectly capable of handling my timetable this year, and I don't need any of you to—" Her gaze fell on a large bottle in the centre of the table. "Is that firewhisky? Lily, you let Sirius bring firewhisky into your room?"

"I *asked* him to, actually. Now, keep your little Gryffindor tail right there. Don't bother running for it; I've locked your only escape." She pointed at the chair and smiled proudly when Mia obeyed her commands.

"Why do I feel like I'm being set up?" Mia nervously questioned, setting down the large Arithmancy book on the side of the table.

"Because this *is* a setup," Sirius growled when Lily broke the Silencing Charm, his grey eyes narrowed. "And don't look at *me*; I fell for her innocent load of shit, too. Evans may look sweet, but she's a devious harpy. Surprised she didn't end up in Slytherin."

"Watch it, mate," James cautioned. "That's my girl."

"Your girl is a Slytherin-ish *harpy*, who told me to bring firewhisky because it was the ingredient in some Potions project she was working on!" Sirius snapped at him. "I only agreed because she said she'd found out our *secret*, and considering how many we bloody have, and how *you've* probably whispered all our deepest and darkest tales during your pillow talk, I came prepared to cave under her blackmail," he admitted, folding his arms across his chest.

Lily blushed. "Yes, well, James and I have no pillow talk, thank you. He's a gentleman. Although, I would like to eventually know all these deep, dark secrets you're all keeping from me."

James swallowed at her stare and then promised, "One day."

"Fine," Mia interrupted the couple. "So, it's a trap with firewhisky," she conceded and then looked around the room curiously. "Where's Peter, by the way?"

"Serving detention with Filch," Remus replied.

"What did he do this time?"

Lily smiled. "Only what we asked him to."

"We?" Mia's brows rose. "*You're* in on this?" She turned to James and then to Remus. "*Both* of you?"

"I recruited," Lily stated with a smirk.

"Do you really think I had a choice?" James asked, looking miserable.

Mia scoffed in response. He was already too whipped for his own good. She mentally wondered how she could possibly use Lily's power over her brother for her own benefit. "So, what, pray tell . . ." Mia began, glaring ahead at Lily, "did you convince Peter to do?"

"He distracted Slughorn while James nicked this," Remus replied, holding up a familiar phial in his hands.

Mia's eyes went wide at the sight. She turned immediately and stared at Sirius, who wore a mirrored expression of her sudden horror. "I thought we'd all agreed that 'Veritaserum or Dare' was a bad idea and we'd never play it again."

She watched carefully as Remus brought it toward the bottle of firewhisky, removing the top and pouring more than the necessary amount into the liquor.

"Just Veritaserum," Lily explained. "No dare."

"Remus?" Mia turned to her best friend with pleading eyes, ignoring the glass of amber liquid he placed in her hands—the traitor.

He smiled softly at her, reminding her that he was a devious little wolf whom she would bite the second she had a chance. "Just drink up, Mia. Lily warded the room, and we're all stuck here until she feels we've accomplished her goal."

Sirius scowled at the redhead as James placed a glass of tainted firewhisky in his hand, pouring one for himself right after. "And what exactly is her goal?"

"The truth. Now, James, drink," Lily instructed and watched with a smile as he downed the liquid. "James, have we ever been sexually intimate?"

James blushed profusely. Then, before he had a chance to even consider his answer, blurted out, "No. We've snogged a bunch. One time you let me put my hand up your blouse." Lily's eyes widened, clearly having not expected him to relay the details. "I mean . . . I mean . . . Why'd you do that, Lils?"

"To prove the potion works," she explained, clearing her throat and nervously tucking a strand of long, red hair behind her ear. "And to also make sure everyone was aware that you and I have not engaged in intimate matters."

Sirius smirked. "Tell that to Prongs's hand up your blouse."

She glared at him threateningly. "Sirius, drink up."

After at least thirty seconds of absolute silence, he threw back the glass of firewhisky defiantly.

"Is it true you haven't slept with any girl since Mia?" Lily asked.

"Yes, it's true," Sirius confessed.

"Why haven't you?"

Sirius tried to struggle, but there was no use. "Because . . . I d-don't want her to think I'm some disgusting rake who just beds any witch who asks. I w-wanted to make sure she knew that she was s-special. Fuck!" He stood up and kicked the side of the sofa.

"Sit back down, Padfoot," Remus instructed him.

Mia gaped, looking across the table at her friend accusingly. "What the hell is this?"

"I'm happy James and I came together naturally." Lily smiled, reaching across the sofa to hold James's hand. "But now that we've found . . . *this*, I regret the time wasted. Watching the two of you dance around each other for the past few years—with Remus caught up in the middle—has been awkward and painful." Mia and Sirius both frowned as they looked at James and Remus, who were nodding in agreement. "You're both unbelievably stubborn, but you're my friends, and I love you, and I want—*we* want—you to be happy."

Remus nodded his head in agreement. "Lily's right. You're both holding back for one reason or another, just waiting for the other person to make a move first."

"I really hate to agree with them because you're my sister, and you're my best friend, and the idea of you together makes me physically ill," James said, "but, Mia, you've been lonely ever since you split with Remus; we can all see it. And Pads, you're going to drink yourself to death if you don't figure things out." He eyed the way that Sirius was already looking at the bottle of firewhisky. "Mia's a big part of it, I know because anytime you drink, all you do is talk about her."

"This is so manipulative," Mia mumbled bitterly.

"Shut up and drink," Lily demanded, gesturing to Mia's filled glass.

She did not wait as long as Sirius had, knowing that none of them would let up until this was all done and over with. A part of her wondered if Veritaserum would counteract Dumbledore's spell, and that part of her was just too eager to find out, so she drank quickly.

"Now, Mia, why haven't you told Sirius that you want to be with him?"

"Because he'll just leave me again when it becomes too much for him!" She flushed at the unexpected volume of her own voice and quickly buried her face in her hands.

"What?" Sirius asked. "Is *that* what you think?"

"It's what I *know*," she said, refusing to look at him. "It's what you *did*!"

"I just wanted something *better* for you."

"No." Mia looked up and scowled at him. "You wanted me to tell you all my secrets, secrets that I can't tell you; not yet."

"Remus, drink," Lily instructed, interrupting their argument. "Why did you and Mia start dating again?"

"Because Sirius told us to. He said we gave up on our relationship, and we owed it to ourselves *and* him to find out if we really wanted to be together or if we thought it was just fate keeping us apart."

"Mia, drink." Lily pointed, not giving a moment for anyone involved to get distracted enough for the truth serum to wear off. "What did you find out when you and Remus were dating?"

"That I love Remus, but I'm not *in* love with him," Mia answered immediately. "That we *did* have a choice in the end, and we chose *not* to be with one another."

Sirius shook his head firmly. "That doesn't make sense. If you love him then why not choose to be with him?"

"Because he's not *you*, stupid!"

The room fell into complete silence.

"Sirius, drink," Lily ordered quietly after refilling the glass in his hands. "Why don't you want to be with Mia?"

Sirius frowned, shaking his head sadly. "I *do* . . . m-more than—Fuck—more than anything, but I'm not g-good for her. I'm not good enough."

"I believe it's *my* job to decide that," James interjected.

Mia stared at her brother. "Excuse me?"

"Shut up, Mia," James snapped and turned to Sirius. "That's my little sister, and I love her more than anything else in the entire world. Lily is a very close second, and the rest of you are right up there. Believe me when I say, that if I didn't think you were good enough for my sister, we would *not* be having this drunken intervention, Pads. I think you're good enough." He hesitated before speaking again. "*Mum* thought you were good enough."

Sirius turned his gaze to the ground, clenching his fists tightly into balls.

"You two are meant to be," Remus added.

"I don't want to be meant to be! I want her to have a fucking choice, so she's not forced into a shit life because fate thought it would be hilarious to have her bound to the Black blood-traitor!" Sirius stood up and stormed across the room, only to find the doors still locked. He snarled and turned, pacing around the common room for a few moments before leaning his forehead against the stone wall in defeat.

"What do you mean by bound?" James asked pointedly.

"Sirius . . ." Mia cautioned, her eyes widening in a panic.

"Mia and I have a Soul Bond!"

## Chapter Seventy-Three

### *Mine*

---

*Oh you're in my veins  
And I cannot get you out  
Oh you're all I taste  
At night inside of my mouth  
(In My Veins - Andrew Belle)*

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**November 5th, 1977**

Remus was the first to rise from his chair, suddenly pale and looking unbelievably guilty. His green gaze seemed to track Mia, but anytime they made eye contact, he would look away as though he had done something horribly, horribly wrong.

"Sirius!" Mia hissed.

"I don't understand; what's happened?" Lily asked.

"How do you know?" James finally brought himself out of his stupor to ask.

"Mum . . ." Sirius replied, looking properly reprimanded for blurting out the secret. He refused to make eye contact with Mia. "Mum told me last summer." He turned and briefly looked at Remus, frowning. "It wasn't just *your* future mate I was worried about."

"Tilly can see the Soul Bond," Mia explained to her brother, who nodded before removing his glasses and rubbing the palms of his hands into his eyes, groaning.

"It doesn't make sense, though," Remus said, still refusing to look at Mia, and only speaking directly to Sirius. "If the two of you are bonded, then Mia shouldn't have been able to . . . to have been with me." He turned back to look at James and Lily. "Sirius would have never allowed it."

"The bond isn't sealed," Mia replied.

"Wait." James looked up. "I thought bonds are sealed by having sex."

Mia shook her head. "Those are just werewolf bonds."

"Are you bonded to *Remus*, then?"

Remus paled and went wide-eyed. "No!"

"No," Mia answered much more calmly. "I'm not his mate."

"But you had sex with him," James bluntly pointed out, thankfully avoiding using the word *maidenhead* in his statement.

"Yes."

"And the Pack Bond?" James asked.

"Is still unsealed," Mia answered.

"You told me werewolves seal the bonds through mating," he continued, ignoring the uncomfortable look Remus was giving him and the irritated huffing that Lily was doing in the corner as she likely tried to grasp the conversation that was over her head.

"Yes, but then they have to bite you!" Mia snapped.

"While having sex with you?" James asked.

"I am so uncomfortable right now," Remus groaned, sitting down and putting his head in his hands.

"Yes, Jamie!" Mia shrieked.

"And you never . . . ?" He turned to Remus and raised an eyebrow. When Remus just stared at him, James dramatically chopped his teeth together and said, "Grr."

"No!" Remus gaped wide-eyed at his friend. "And can we not openly discuss mine and Mia's previous sex life and the implied werewolf complications of it?"

"No biting during sex? That sounds boring," Sirius said with a short chuckle to try and diffuse the tension in the room. Only Mia joined him in quiet laughter.

"Does someone want to clue me in on anything that's happening right now?" Lily finally broke, her voice reaching new octaves. "What the hell is a Soul Bond? Why would Remus bite Mia? What's with the pack talk?"

Reluctantly, and with Lily needling them and making threats, they confessed everything.

They told Lily all about discovering Remus's lycanthropy and how they were desperate to help him. How Sirius had figured out that if they all became Animagi, Remus would not have to be alone. When Lily refused to believe them, James shifted into his stag form, and Lily sat back on the sofa for several minutes in shock, shushing anyone who tried to speak until she had grasped the situation entirely. When Sirius and Mia offered to show her *their* forms, she politely declined. She insisted that baby steps might be necessary, considering she just found out her boyfriend was "Bambi's dad." James took offence until Mia explained the Muggle reference.

Once Lily had time to comprehend, Mia told her everything that happened during fifth year with Fenrir Greyback. She explained how, when Remus mentioned his *pack*, he was not being facetious but was instead referencing a magical bond shared between himself, Sirius, Mia, and James. Sirius then did his best to reiterate what Dorea had told him the previous summer about the bond he shared with Mia.

Lily paled once they had all finished speaking. "You fought Fenrir Greyback?"

"They *tried* to fight. I was the one who actually kicked his arse," James insisted smugly.

"And you're all animals," Lily mumbled, more to herself than anyone else.

"Some more than others." Sirius winked and received a punch to the shoulder from James in response.

"And Sirius and Mia have a bond, but so do the four of you?" Lily asked, pointing at each of the others as she spoke.

Remus nodded. "Werewolves tend to form packs under an Alpha. By defeating Greyback, an established Alpha, I was able to stand as my own and create a pack." A glow of pride enveloped him, and Mia smiled at the sight. "Members of a pack share a bond."

Lily raised a brow. "What about Peter?"

Mia did her best not to audibly growl.

"Peter wasn't there when we formed the Pack; the bond doesn't affect him," Remus explained.

"But it's not finished? The bond?" Lily asked, turning to look at Mia.

Mia shook her head. "No."

"Because . . ." Lily began, her green eyes blinking rapidly. "Because you have to have sex and then bite each other?"

Sirius burst into laughter. Remus also smiled a little at the blunt and simple way that Lily put it. Mia was smirking, nearing laughter herself. Only James looked uncomfortable.

"Technically, it just has to be one of us," Mia explained. "If Remus marks one of us, it'll essentially mark all of us, because we're linked."

"While having sex," Lily clarified with wide eyes. She turned to stare at Remus, as though suddenly the main character of the werewolf-centered romance novels she had long ago borrowed from Mary burst forth from the pages and was now sitting in the middle of

her common room, appearing far more uncomfortable than she had ever pictured him to be, and staring at her as though he could read her thoughts.

"Don't look at me like that, Lily." Remus scowled, embarrassed. "I didn't write the werewolf rules; I barely know them myself. Mia only figured it out because she reads so fucking much. Weren't we here in the first place to deal with Mia and Sirius?"

"Oh, we'll get back to *that*," Lily insisted, turning to look back at Sirius, Mia, and James. "So, when exactly are you going to seal the Pack Bond?"

"Never!" James shouted.

"But won't it strengthen the bond and your magic? That could be really helpful considering there's a war going on. Not to mention how it could keep you safe, even heal you if necessary."

None of them could deny her logic, save for Remus, who stated firmly, "I'm not going to bite anyone!"

"I mean, it seems like it would be a good idea, and if all of you are linked, then really only *Mia* has to—See?" Lily smiled at Remus, pointing her finger at the irritable look Sirius was giving her accompanied by a territorial growl. "And *now* we're back to Sirius and Mia's problems. So, you two, get over it. It's not magic bringing you together. If it was, you'd be together. You're not," she said in a tone of voice she usually reserved for ignorant third years. "You're both miserable prats when you're not together, but you've clearly chosen to avoid each other. So make a different choice, and just be together."

"How romantic, Lily," Mia said sarcastically. "You should write poetry."

Sirius snorted.

"Drink." Lily shoved a recently refilled glass toward Sirius, who had long since given up the fight and did as she asked. "Sirius, do you want to be with Mia?"

"Yes," Sirius replied, the word heavy on his breath.

"Why?"

"Because she completes me," he answered, relinquishing his control to the truth serum that coursed through his veins. "She was the first person in my life to ever show me affection without manipulating me at the same time. She never hesitates to run her fingers through my hair, because she knows it comforts me." He smiled to himself. "She makes me feel wanted, makes me feel . . . good and not damaged." He finally looked up at the witch in question, who was struggling to breathe as her eyes met his. "Besides, she's the

most beautiful girl in the world. Who wouldn't want to be with her? Look at her. She's everything."

Beaming at Sirius's words, Lily pushed the glass of firewhisky toward Mia, silently instructing her to drink.

Mia hesitated before swallowing the amber liquid down, no longer wincing at the burn that had scorched her throat years ago. Sirius was right, she had gotten used to it.

"Do you want to be with Sirius?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because . . ." Mia paused before she spoke, realising the Veritaserum was not as strong against her as it was before. She wondered if Sirius had been as compelled or if his words were as honest as she hoped they had been. She wondered if *she* could lie, considering it was not forcing her to speak, but she did not *want* to lie. Not anymore. So she told the truth: "Because he's my future."

She stared into grey eyes and imagined away the youth in them. She could see the beautiful lines of age around those eyes, the tattooed skin and marks of a hard life—undeserved as it may have been—and it was all beautiful. *He* was beautiful.

"Because when I close my eyes, I can see the end of this war, and he's there." She thought of her Sirius—older Sirius—but then wasn't *this* her Sirius, too? "Firewhisky in one hand, cigarette in the other, rolling his eyes while I nag at him to quit." She smirked and felt a flutter of elation when Sirius smiled at her. "I want to be with him because I trust him to always put my safety and happiness first, even if he thinks I wouldn't be safe and happy *with* him. Because when I think about the future, the first thing I always think of is . . ."

Mia closed her eyes and felt the sting of tears as she envisioned the library of Grimmauld Place.

"*Before we dig into old magics and awkward adult conversations, will you allow an old dog one last moment of recklessness?*" an older Sirius had asked her, his eyes pleading and anxious before he had brushed his lips so softly against hers that she had long since wondered if it had all been a dream.

"When I think about the past *and* the future, the first thing I always think is: I miss Sirius Black."

She stifled a sob as she thought of her older wizard, the man who had healed her splinched back. The man who had saved her from Bellatrix Lestrange. The man who had brought her back to life with his own breath in the caved-in passage on the fourth floor. The man who had invited her into his home and stayed with her through the nightmares, cared for Harry like a father, grieved with her for her lost Muggle parents, and forced Draco Malfoy—of all people—to become her friend and help her through the aftermath of war.

Mia's eyes met those of the younger Sirius Black. The boy who had extended a hand of friendship when she was shoved to the ground. The boy who had grown up alongside her, smiled at her, and brought light into her life. The boy who looked at James and Remus—the other two most important people in her life—like brothers. The boy who had fought so courageously against the expectations of a prejudiced family, who had been knocked down so often—just because of who he was, and yet always stood back up to fight for his friends. For her.

He had grown up. He was a man now. He was still *her* Sirius.

And it was all too overwhelming because she could not imagine losing him to grief or Azkaban or resentment or time. Mia leapt from her chair and rushed to the door, waving her wand and breaking through Lily's wards like they were tissue paper before she darted out the portrait hole, letting it slam behind her.

Sirius stood when Mia ran toward the door, breathing heavily as he watched her leave his sight, swallowing down the rush of emotions her words had pulled from him.

"You're seriously just going to stand there?" Lily shrieked at him.

He turned back and looked at her incredulously. "No."

"Then what the hell are you waiting for?" Remus snapped, jerking his chin toward the door with wide eyes.

"I'm giving her a dramatic head start!" Sirius yelled. "It's hardly going to be memorable if I follow her right out the fucking door with you sods listening in, is it?" He rushed over to James, reaching into his best friend's robe pockets and searching for the Marauder's Map. Once found, he turned on the heels of his dragonhide boots and rushed out the door.

Sirius sneaked along the dark corridors as best as he could, using the Marauder's Map not only to track Mia but to dodge roaming prefects and Filch. As he followed the little dot on the map that read *Mia Potter*, he noticed she was headed up the stairs to what

he assumed would be the Room of Requirement. Immediately, he doubled his efforts to catch up with her, knowing if she made it into the room, there was a chance she would request it to forbid entrance to anyone else.

When he got to the seventh floor, Sirius ran down the long stretch of hallway and turned the corner to see an empty corridor.

"Shit!" What was he supposed to do now? Try and get into the room? Sit and wait for her outside? How long would that take?

Sighing in defeat, he pulled out the map once again to see if Remus had left James and Lily's quarters. His gaze flickered over the roaming dots on the large parchment, and one a couple of floors down surprised him. There, in the back of a familiar corridor on the fifth floor, was Mia. Confused, Sirius folded the map and slipped it back into his robes before making his way back down the staircase, taking a turn off onto the fifth floor when, suddenly, his memory triggered.

*"Merlin, your eyes are the colour of chocolate, but I bet they look like firewhisky when you come."*

He took a sharp inhale as he realised that when she had left Lily and James's common room in order to run away from them all—himself included—she had somehow ended up in the same place he had cornered her after Remus's sixteenth birthday. Was it a coincidence, or was this fate trying to meddle in his life again? If it *was*, there were far worse ways it could interfere.

Sirius started walking again until in the shadows of a secluded, familiar alcove he saw Mia sitting on the ground, her arms wrapped around knees that had been pulled to her chest.

"Hey, kitten," he whispered, kneeling down in front of her. "If you wanted privacy, you sure picked a good spot. From what I remember, prefects don't even bother coming around this corner."

Mia looked up at him and blushed. Likely, too, remembering their brief moment of passionate insanity, pressing against each other in the darkness, fuelled by firewhisky and tension. She took in a slow, calculated breath and let it out even slower.

"Why is everything so complicated?"

Sirius snorted. "Because we're both stubborn and stupid; or so I've been told."

"We're not stupid."

"You make me a little stupid. To be honest, I think it's right stupid of *you* to even consider wanting to be with someone like me." He frowned and met her disapproving glower without fear. He was not intimidated by her anger; he was turned on by it—always had been. "I am not good, Mia."

For once, instead of arguing the point, trying to convince him that yes, yes he was, Mia shook her head and met his stare before declaring, "I don't care."

Sirius barked a laugh and stood up, reaching down and pulling Mia to her feet in one rough tug. He shoved her hard against the wall like he had done that first night after Remus's sixteenth birthday. She squealed at the movement, then gasped as she found herself against the wall once more.

"You don't care that I'm not good?"

"You're not bad," Mia finally said, staring up at him. "Why do you think you have to be some bloody hero in order to be acceptable to me?"

"Because you're good, and you deserve it," he answered immediately. "I'm more than likely one blink away from mentally snapping, considering my family. I'm constantly being chased by Death Eaters, who also have it out for my friends. I've got a nasty reputation and an even worse temper. Need I remind you that I *willingly* tried to trap Snape with a werewolf?"

"Need I remind *you* that you felt remorse for what you did?" Mia narrowed her eyes at him. "And why on earth do you think I'm so above you? Blood or not, Dorea Black was my mother, same family as yours. Never mind that I'm also Muggle-born, and Death Eaters will come after me no matter what. I also have a bad habit of cursing any girl that dares to mess with you, and one I even Portkeyed into the Black Lake."

"*Tele-Portkeyed*," he corrected. "Besides, it was the shallow end."

She smirked at him.

"Mia, I am not Remus," Sirius said with a heavy sigh. "I am not sweet and doting. I won't read you poetry because that shit bores me to tears. I am fucking selfish, and greedy, and when I look at you . . ." He groaned and firmly gripped her hips, grinding his pelvis against her, his hardness pressing against her belly. Mia gasped, and Sirius groaned at the sound. "When I *touch* you . . . I don't know if I can control myself."

"I don't want you to," she said on a breath. "You are selfish and greedy, and I'm well aware that you'll never read me poetry, nor would I ask you to. I didn't choose Remus,"

she reminded him, threading her fingers through his hair and holding tight. "I chose *you*. I love—" she began, but before she could say the words, Sirius crushed his lips against hers.

When he pulled away from the bruising kiss, his eyes were shut tight. "Don't say it. Don't . . . Don't say it; not yet," he pleaded and pressed his forehead against hers, breathing hot against her lips as he rolled his hips toward her again, needing the friction to ease the throbbing discomfort. "Mia, if this is it, if . . . if we do this . . . I won't let go. I'm not strong enough."

"I've already said—"

He cut her off. "No, Mia, I have never had a girlfriend before," he cautioned her, trying to explain. "I am incredibly fucked up, and there's no doubt in my mind that I will be a shit boyfriend. Because I honestly don't know what the fuck I'm doing."

"The scar on my ribs is from an old curse. The person who did it was punished, and you don't need to know any more than that. I have another scar on my arm because I got in the way of a Slytherin. And . . . and there's a large scar on my back because I splinched myself."

Sirius swallowed, listening to the truth spill from her lips. He was not shocked to learn she had been duelling Slytherins, but the splinching? That surprised him.

"Not even Remus has seen it," Mia whispered.

Something in the way she said the words triggered Sirius's primal instincts.

Something in the way he looked into her eyes made Mia terrified and excited all at once.

All too quickly, he turned her around, pressing his firm chest hard against her back. She felt his fingers slipping around her to slowly unbutton her cardigan. With the fabric parted on either side of her breasts, Sirius pulled the cloth down over her back. He delicately peeled the bra strap down and placed an open-mouth kiss to the healed track in her flesh caused by her splinching.

Mia shivered at the contact, then moaned in pleasure when she heard him whisper from behind her, "Mine."

Suddenly, he put his hands back on her hips and spun her again. Before she had a chance to say another word, his tongue was in her mouth, and she was moaning at the pleasurable invasion. He was not sweet or gentle, nor loving and passionate. He was rough, and hard, and possessive in a way that burned hot.

She heard him growl, and the sound created a ripple effect in her body, starting out as a shiver that spanned her shoulders and moved south across her chest, her nipples tightening in response. A warmth flooded her belly, and a deep ache began building inside of her as moisture pooled in her knickers.

Before he had the chance to move her, Mia hitched her thigh up around his hip, and Sirius grinned against her mouth, taking her bottom lip lightly between his teeth and nipping it, before showing the same consideration to her neck, ear lobe, and shoulder. One hand left her waist and she felt him pushing her skirt up around her thighs before his fingers tucked beneath the wet, black lace covering her folds.

"Do you see what you do to me?" Mia breathed against his parted lips, gasping when he smugly slipped two fingers inside of her, curling and rubbing against a spot she had not known existed, but *Merlin* was she thankful that *Sirius* did.

He watched as she began to break apart with an incredibly arrogant look on his face that made her want to fall to pieces in his arms and slap him at the same time. His fingers were doing delicious things to her, but he didn't have to be so smug about it.

As a mild reprimand for his ego, Mia tugged on his hair—hard. The action only seemed to provoke him, and suddenly, the pad of his thumb teasingly brushed against her clit. She let out a shaky whimper.

"Remember a year ago," Sirius whispered into her ear, ignoring the way her body trembled and pleaded for more, "when you were in my bed, writhing beneath me? I remember it *vividly*. You're still just as tight and wet as you were then."

Mia felt a flutter deep inside of her as his strokes became longer, deeper, and the pad of his thumb pressed against her harder.

"You're *mine* now," Sirius proclaimed as her breath quickened, his voice the only thing she could hear other than her own heartbeat, which was a pounding drum in her ears.

She did not hear the soft chuckle in his throat as she began to pulse around his fingers—though she knew he was laughing because she could tell by the way his chest shook. She did not hear the sound of his trouser buckle being undone—though she felt the way he adjusted his stance, moving his hands accordingly.

There was only her heartbeat, the echoing whisper of his claim, and her own whimpers that now came out like soft cries as the tight, hot coil inside of her snapped, and she shattered.

Her body eventually went slack, but she had little time to recover before Sirius lifted her against the wall, wrapping her legs around his waist. She could feel him positioning himself against her entrance, which continued to thrum inside.

"Say you're mine."

*Forever.*

Mia looked into an endless grey sea of want, and she saw the desperation in his gaze—the pain and the longing, and the pure and complete need. He was so beautifully broken, and so was she. Neither entirely qualified to fix the splintered pieces of the other but they were still going to try.

"I'm yours," she whispered, cupping his face in her hands and kissing him. "All yours. Forever yours."

*Forever, Sirius thought. She said forever . . . just for me.*

The sound of her voice, the taste of her lips, and that devoted look in her eyes was all the confirmation Sirius needed, and he thrust his hard length inside of her. Burying his face into her bared shoulder, without thinking, he bit down on the skin beneath his lips. Mia hissed at the pain that all too quickly gave way to a throbbing, aching pleasure, at least it sounded like pleasure from the way she started purring. Sirius knew, thanks to an open friendship and a good amount of firewhisky that she had offered such a privilege to Remus on multiple occasions, her neck and shoulder bared to the werewolf, but he had always been too controlled, too afraid.

Sirius, on the other hand, took her, claimed her without her ever needing to offer or plead for it. He was certain that he wanted it more than she ever could.

Sirius had wanted this time to be perfect and last forever, but *Merlin* it had been a *year* since he had been inside of her, and he had not touched another girl since the moment Mia had left his bedroom. Too long. Much too long, and Sirius knew it. He could feel himself pressing hard against a dangerous edge, could feel his body tightening, but he would be damned if he was going to leave her wanting. Slipping a hand between their bodies, he stroked her swollen clit, grinning at the way her walls clamped down on his cock in response.

"Mine," he whispered again, reverently. "Your *body* is mine, your *pleasure* is mine—"

"My *heart* is yours," Mia added, staring deep into his eyes.

Sirius realised the fragile moment he held in his hands and felt the smugness wash away from his face, replaced by something . . . terrifying. Swallowing back his own emotions, he nodded, giving her a silent promise. Not a promise that he would be perfect, or that he would not do something incredibly stupid with the gift she was giving him. It was a promise that he would *try*, which was the best anyone could get from Sirius Black.

Mia moaned, and he found himself staring deep into the suddenly amber eyes of the beautiful witch in his arms, her body fluttering around his length, signalling how close she was to falling apart. He leant in and kissed her lips softly.

When they parted, she whispered sweetly while staring into his eyes, "I love you."

Something broke inside of him. He closed his eyes and pulled her close to him, moulding her soft curves against his hard frame as he thrust deep and hard inside of her, stifling a sob as her words of love split him into pieces and put him back together.

The golden bonding string between them strengthened with every touch, mingling their magic as it had the first time they kissed, and the last time they had touched each other so intimately.

They came together, Sirius spilling himself inside of her with a groan as her walls held him deep. He crumbled to the ground in the aftermath, gently keeping her in his arms, still inside of her and desperate to never leave.

It was absolute, utter, infinite, complete, and outright *perfection*.

## Chapter Seventy-Four

### *Muffliato*

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*You don't know that I know you watch me every night  
And I just can't resist the urge to stand here in the light  
Your greedy eyes upon me, and then I come undone  
I could close the curtain but this is too much fun  
(I Get Off - Halestorm)*

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**November 5th, 1977**

"I take it you found Mia?"

Sirius looked up to find Remus stretched out on his bed, ankles crossed, a book in his hand, looking over the picture of introverted contentment. It was still a bit of a shock not to have James in the dorm, and Sirius started to look for Peter before he remembered that he had detention.

Not even bothering to hiding his grin, Sirius closed the door behind him and walked toward Remus, almost skipping with each step. "Do I look *that* dishevelled?"

Remus nodded and turned his attention back to his book before speaking again. "That and the fact that I would recognise her scent a mile away." His nostrils flared, and he grimaced. "It smells different on you. I'm not jealous or anything, but I don't think I like it."

"I love it!" Sirius smiled and then fell onto his bed with a bounce, staring across the room at Remus, who looked like he was holding back a smirk. "I also love that Prongs no longer sleeps in this room so there's absolutely zero chance of me getting antlered in the shoulder. He really needs to rein in that protective brother thing."

Remus closed his book and set it on the side table. "Sirius?"

"Yeah, mate?"

"Just because it needs to be said . . . if you hurt her again—" Remus slowly took in a controlled breath before speaking once more. "You're my friend, and I love you like a brother—you're Pack—but if I see that witch crying, and it's because you've turned your back on her again, I won't be able to stop myself."

Sirius's smile briefly faded in order to give the now golden-eyed Alpha wolf his genuine attention. He was well aware that this was not Remus being a jealous ex-boyfriend. Pack meant as much to Sirius as it did to Remus. Or at least he hoped so.

"She's the line. Don't cross it."

"Understood." Sirius nodded firmly and relaxed a bit when Remus's eyes shifted back to green. It was a tell-tale sign as to whom he was dealing with: Remus his friend, or Moony the wolf—regardless of the fact that they used the names interchangeably. "And you're really okay with me dating her?"

"Do you love her?"

Sirius must have appeared to have a poor reaction to the word as his shoulders stiffened.

"*That's* a yes." Remus chuckled and reached again for his book. "In which case, yes, I am okay with you dating her."

"She told me she loves me," Sirius blurted out.

Remus's eyes widened at the declaration. He closed his book once more, setting it to the side.

Sirius wondered if their conversation was more entertaining than the book. He glanced at the cover—*The Dark Arts Outsmarted*—and sighed. The conversation was decidedly more interesting.

"Really? Wow. I mean *I* knew she did, she almost said as much. Told me she wouldn't say it out loud unless it was to you, though. Said you deserved to be the first to hear it," Remus confessed.

His words surprised Sirius, who had not known that he had been a topic of discussion between Mia and Remus while the two were still dating. "I didn't say it back."

"Do you *feel* it back?"

Sirius exhaled sharply and ran a hand through his hair. "That girl terrifies me, Moony. Do you know I've only heard those words spoken to me maybe a handful of times?"

Sirius knew that Remus understood to a certain extent. The Lupins, Remus's father specifically, did not say the words as often as they should have. Even when they *did*, it was almost as though they were being forced to, or so Remus had once mentioned. Sirius

understood. The Blacks felt hate. The Lupins felt fear. Neither properly knew how to love their sons.

"Mum and Dad, of course," Sirius said, referring to Dorea and Charlus. "Then casually by you, Prongs, and Wormtail, once by Lily even though she hexed me right after. Six years with the Potters, and I'm still not used to it. When *Mia* said it . . . I don't know what happened. It . . . It fucking hurt. Why would it hurt?" he asked, looking up at his friend, hoping Remus's previous experience with Mia would grant him some sort of insight into the girl, relationships as a whole, and love in general.

"Because you finally have something good that's just yours," Remus suggested. "She loved me, but not like she loves *you*. That part of her is yours and yours alone, and I think you're scared of losing it."

"I can't fuck this up, Moony," Sirius mumbled desperately. "I don't want to fuck this up. How do I not fuck this up?"

Remus slowly rose an eyebrow as he eyed him. "You're asking me for advice on how to date Mia?" He burst into laughter. "Do you have any idea how pissed off she'd be about that?"

"Don't care; need help."

When the laughter died away, Remus sighed happily, looking like he was enjoying this brief interlude of time where *Sirius Black* did not know how to do something that his ego could not compensate for. Sirius might have thrown something at him for it, but he wanted answers.

"Don't treat her like any other girl," Remus advised. "If you start buying her flowers and stuff, she's likely to use them in a potion and then poison you with it. Also, *she* comes first." Remus paused and stared directly at Sirius, smirking. "And I mean that in *every* sense of the word."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "I don't have a problem in that area, thanks," he retorted snappishly, though a grin slipped back across his jaw as he remembered the fifth-floor corridor and the way she had desperately clung to him, fluttering around his cock and panting out each syllable of his name between breaths.

"I mean it, though," Remus said, interrupting Sirius's brief recollection. "You treat her like Prongs treats Lily. Just . . . be less embarrassing about it." They both laughed at

this. "Also, don't lie to her, and don't hold back," Remus said pointedly and nodded when Sirius raised a brow.

"Physically?"

"It's one thing for me to hold back because of what I—" Remus paused at the glare Sirius sent him. Sighing, he amended, "Of what I'm infected with. But . . . Mia doesn't like it when you hold back. She wants to know who you are . . . even at your worst. Speaking of worst, stop talking about yourself like you're not worthy of her. If you can make her happy, that proves your worth."

"*You* made her happy," Sirius pointed out as though it was an argument in his favour. If Remus made Mia happy and she was not with Remus anymore, what chance did *he* really have?

"Yes, I did. I also made her content. She doesn't need contentment. She needs to be challenged."

"Well, *that* I can definitely do." Sirius scoffed and then immediately silenced himself when the bedroom door opened. He peeked his head around one of his bedposts and grinned when he spotted Peter walking through looking thoroughly exhausted.

"Did it work?" Peter asked, his watery eyes turning to look at the grin on Sirius's face. "I spent four hours polishing trophies with Filch. Please tell me that I didn't go through all that for nothing," he complained, looking between his friends.

"Wormtail." Sirius stood and walked over, taking Peter's face in his hands. "I could kiss you," he declared, and Peter quickly tried to break away as though he expected him to follow through.

Sirius only laughed and patted his friend gratefully on the cheeks. "I owe you a thousand butterbeers, my fine, furry friend! Your sacrifice for my love life will not go unnoticed, Pete. I promise you."

Awkwardly blushing from the attention, Peter laughed and shoved Sirius away. "You'd do the same for me, Pads."

"Still," Sirius insisted, pointing at Peter as he crossed the room. "Butterbeer you shall have! Mark my words, Wormtail, I'll pay you back."

## November 8th, 1977

The weekend following Sirius's eighteenth birthday was spent without thought of war or Death Eaters, or the worries of adulthood that waited for them upon graduation. Sirius had taken to the sky, Beater bat in hand, as he, James, and the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team faced off against Ravenclaw in the first match of the year. Neither had ever flown better, and it had little to do with the new brooms they had purchased before returning to Hogwarts in September.

Though Mia and Lily claimed they could not tell the difference from one broom to the next, Sirius and James had spent a great deal of effort trying to educate their witches about the obvious superiority that the Nimbus 1500 had over their previous Cleansweeps.

Ravenclaw was defeated in an epic showdown that put Gryffindor in the lead for the Quidditch Cup by over four hundred points. In a show of support, both Mia and Lily had run onto the field the moment their wizards landed, throwing themselves into the open arms of their boyfriends, both of whom would be hard-pressed to find a happier moment in their entire lives.

The usual butterbeer-fuelled celebration took place after the game, which included a birthday cake for Sirius and presents from his friends. Buckets of sweets and things for both his broom and bike were exuberantly appreciated, but he had stared in awe as he opened Mia's gift: a black leather jacket.

It was the most beautifully Muggle thing he had ever owned, and it took less than five seconds for him to cast aside his robes and slip into it.

James, Remus, and Peter all grinned at the sight while Lily rolled her eyes. Mia, however, was staring openly, and Sirius was not at all shy about noticing the way her brown eyes shifted to amber at the sight of him.

When Lily and James left Gryffindor Tower to return to their private rooms, Sirius and Mia properly celebrated his birthday by slipping up to the boys' dorm, where Sirius let her in on a Marauder secret that had begun years earlier. Each wizard was given a one-time pass that allowed him to kick the others out for any reason. So far, none of the boys had taken the opportunity, so Sirius gave himself a birthday gift by kicking Remus and Peter to the common room for the night. Surprisingly, Remus was amused by the gesture; Peter, of course, was a little put out.

When Sirius met Mia up in his room, he found the devious little witch perched at the foot of his bed, her hair in a wild halo around her face, curls slipping down past her shoulders. The only scrap of her *own* clothing she had on was a pair of lacy scarlet knickers that matched perfectly with the open red and gold Quidditch robes she was wearing. When she tilted her shoulder forward—offering him a decent view of her breasts—he could see the beginning of his name embroidered on the back of the robes.

Sirius stopped dead at the sight and briefly wondered if his lungs collapsed in the moment when his eyes connected with the view in front of him.

*Merlin, Godric, and Circe . . . she was wearing his robes, and his name, and his colours, and sitting on his bed.*

His mouth watered as his eyes moved south to take immediate notice that the robes were not buttoned, so between the slip of soft red fabric was a pale valley of supple flesh, showcasing the soft curves of her breasts all the way down to her navel. Teasingly, the fabric covered both nipples, and Sirius felt briefly irritable over the fact but all too quickly got over it when he realised she was not a photograph from one of his Muggle magazines but a *real* woman whom he could touch, taste, undress, and devour.

"If you don't get over here in the next five seconds, Sirius Black," Mia threatened with a daring smirk, her amber eyes dark and blazing, "I will charm these robes green and silver, and the BLACK on the back of them might as well reference Regulus."

No longer in control of his human sensibilities, his inner Padfoot growled audibly—possessively—and Mia grinned at him. Sirius was on top of her faster than she had time to react, and Mia shrieked and laughed as he pinned her back down against the mattress. He pushed aside the scarlet fabric to reveal her left breast, eagerly taking the peak of it between his teeth—sucking, licking, and swirling it teasingly before gently biting down, eliciting the most wonderful noises from her mouth.

Her back arched off of the bed, but Sirius growled once more, and a firm hand on her hip shoved her right back down before it returned to her right breast, rolling the pebbled tip between his fingers while he devoured its twin with his mouth.

Inch by ruthless inch, Sirius descended her body, kissing and nipping his way down to the apex of her thighs where he breathed in deep and chuckled before nuzzling the scarlet lace that wrapped his favourite birthday gift. Mia whimpered when he lightly bit against the fabric before leaning back on his heels to remove his new leather jacket,

following it by pulling his white shirt over his head before finally tucking his fingers into the band of red lace and sliding her knickers delicately over her thighs, down her calves, and then tearing them away from her ankles before pocketing them in his jeans.

"You are *not* keeping those," Mia insisted when she caught sight of his attempt at sleight of hand.

"It's my birthday," Sirius argued. "I get whatever I want. You should know this by now."

He grinned and then leant forward, pulling his long hair back behind his shoulders, securing it in a loose knot to keep it out of his face before placing an open-mouthed kiss to her centre.

Mia's hips bucked at the sensation. "This is supposed to be *your* birthday. Doesn't that mean *you* get the gifts?"

"I'm indulging in my favourite gift right now," Sirius insisted, parting her folds with two fingers before darting his tongue out to taste his present. She let out a soft cry, and he grinned in response before feasting on her with enthusiasm. Licking, sucking, nibbling on her flesh as she chanted his name above him, moaning it in between encouragements of, "Don't stop," "Please!" and "Oh yes!"

Sirius delighted in each and every sound she made as it went from his ears straight down to his cock, which was currently pressed into the mattress, thrusting on occasion to relieve some of the pressure. The noise she made when he slipped his tongue inside of her caused his hardness to throb almost painfully, but he grinned through it, thanking Merlin for the invention of birthdays. Wrapping his lips around her swollen clit, Sirius pushed two fingers inside of her, stroking her just the way he knew she liked. Her body tightened like a bowstring as he sucked, and licked, and stroked, beckoning her screams and climax out of her with determination.

When she finally began to break, gasping and crying out, he remembered Remus's words of advice on a relationship with Mia: "She comes first."

*No mate*, Sirius thought to himself smugly, *she comes twice*.

It was not even dawn when Mia's eyes slowly opened, and she found herself in a bed that was not her own. She breathed in deeply, letting the surrounding scents wash over her: parchment, grass, and leather. *Sirius*. She looked down at the handsome, pale frame beside her. *Merlin, but he is beautiful*, she thought to herself as she raked her gaze over the lines of Sirius's body, following the planes of his chest down the trail of coarse, black hair under his navel that vanished beneath a white bed-sheet where their legs tangled together.

Mia smiled admiringly as she softly ran the tips of her fingers over his skin, wondering what other tattoos would eventually be inked there. Between his long, raven hair, the promise of future tattoos, and the black leather jacket that was now hanging over his trunk at the foot of his bed, she could not imagine a more devilishly handsome man. Struck by the beauty of him, she silently prayed he would not open his eyes. If she were to face the various shades of grey and silver in her current state, she might actually blush.

As it was, Sirius did *not* open his eyes. He did, however, moan at the feel of her fingers toying with the ends of his hair. The hand that was still firmly wrapped around her waist, tucked into the red and gold Quidditch robes that he insisted remain on her body for as long as possible, tugged her closer to him. She could feel his morning hardness pressed against her thigh.

Without ever opening his eyes to face the daylight, Sirius groaned as he ground himself against her leg before slowly, lazily parting her thighs and resting one on top of his hip.

Mia smiled with interest, watching him closely as he sleepily slid into her. Hot, wet, and still sore from the previous night, she whimpered at the completely welcome intrusion, tilting her hips forward when he refused to move faster.

He groaned and slapped her hand away when she moved a second time, causing her to grin.

"Sirius," Mia whispered, "I know you're awake."

"No, I'm not," he mumbled quietly as he continued to move, pushing and pulling, in and out and in and out, tortuously slow and teasing. His hand moved from her waist to cup the curve of her arse and pull her tight against him as he finally quickened his pace.

Still, she watched his face closely, doing her best not to roll her eyes into the back of her head despite the delicious new angle his cock found purely by instinct. Eyes closed and his lower lip caught between his teeth in focus, Sirius concentrated on each thrust,

every movement of his hips and hands, and she watched with delight at the way the different moans and whimpers she made caused the corners of his mouth to turn up into a grin.

Mia bit her lip to prevent herself from leaning forward and kissing him, nibbling on him. Her toes curled when, unexpectedly, he pushed into her hard and deep. She parted her lips, gasping to catch the breath that escaped her, heavy-lidded eyes still watching Sirius Black do what he did best. Not make love, not even fucking . . . although *Merlin* how she loved when he fucked her. No, this was . . . this was pure *magic*.

He withdrew himself completely from her and then thrust back in with abandon, and the sound of his accompanying groan was all it took to send her over the edge. Tightening around him, her overly sensitive nerves could feel him tense and swell inside of her, and she watched in awe when, after two more thrusts, he came undone, eyes still closed and panting. He came with a grunt, and the most perfect look of relaxed bliss fell over his features when he eased back into the pillows and slowly began to soften inside of her.

When his eyes finally did open and she saw the silver-outlined grey irises staring back at her with such devotion, she could have very well cried if it were not for the accompanying grin he wore.

"Good morning, kitten." Sirius leant in and pulled her bottom lip into his mouth, nipping it lightly instead of a typical kiss. "I've made a decision."

She smirked at him, brushing his black hair away from his face. "And what's that?"

"We're never leaving this bed."

Remus, apparently, had other ideas. "Are you two awake yet?"

Sirius groaned. "No." Rather than shoving his head into his pillow as he was prone to do when woken up earlier than he liked, he buried his face between her breasts causing Mia to laugh.

"That's interesting," Remus said from behind the curtains. "I don't remember her ever finding anything funny in *my* bed."

"Oh, what an asshole," Sirius growled and rolled over, reaching one hand down to pull the sheets up around a still-laughing and half-naked Mia before he threw open the curtains and glared up into the green eyes of a gloating best friend.

"Oh Merlin, you couldn't put on pants?" Remus grimaced and turned away from a shameless Sirius in his day-after-birthday suit. Mia laughed harder.

"Moony, it's the morning after my birthday, and I have a naked witch in my bed. Why the fuck would I be wearing pants?" Sirius asked. "What do you want?"

"If you want me to leave, fine," Remus said and turned back toward the door. "I just naturally assumed that when the chance came to get back at James for trying to skewer us last year, you'd want to take it."

Sirius and Mia both widened their eyes in anticipation and excitement before shouting, "What?"

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An hour later, Remus, Sirius, Peter, and Mia found themselves sitting on the sofa in James and Lily's common room.

"I feel weird just sitting here," Peter mumbled. "Do you really think that they're . . . ?"

Sirius laughed. "Oh, yeah."

"And we know this again because . . . ?" Mia prompted, looking over to Remus, who was smirking.

"Because I went down to the kitchens this morning to get some coffee, and overheard the house-elves saying a tray needed to be put together for the Head Boy and Girl, who requested breakfast be delivered to their room." He grinned wolfishly. "*One* tray, *one* room."

Mia looked at the similar expressions on Sirius and Remus's faces, and could not ever imagine how she had thought Sirius and James were the *true* troublemakers; Remus could clearly hold his own. Though the shortened post-coital bliss between her and Sirius was irritating, even *Mia* could not resist the plan Remus had come up with to get back at James for the drunken "big brother talk" that he had given the three of them the year prior, shortly after attacking both Sirius and Remus in Animagus form.

"Oh gross," Mia groaned when her vulpine hearing took over; the noises from beyond the Head Boy's door were much clearer and louder than expected.

"What?" Peter asked, looking at the horrified look on Mia's face and the equally amused expressions worn by the other two. "What happened?"

"*I'm* not that loud am I?" Sirius asked with a chuckle.

"No," Mia insisted at the exact same time Remus said, "Yes."

"Out of all of us, how is it that Prongs and Lily don't know how to cast Silencing Charms?" Sirius inquired, shaking his head in amusement as another moan came from behind the door.

Mia grimaced at the sound as she was forced to remember that Harry, apparently just like his father, also had trouble remembering Silencing Charms in the heat of the moment with Ginny.

Remus chuckled in evident amusement, wiping tears from the corners of his eyes. "To be fair, they probably weren't expecting us to be waiting for them in their common room."

"Then they shouldn't have given us the password," Sirius insisted. "This is *their* fault."

"Are you sure you were able to slip it in their pumpkin juice?" Mia looked at Sirius, who turned and gaped at her, offended.

"Who are you talking to? Of *course* I was able to get the job done. House-elves didn't even question me."

"Do you think he's going to be mad?" Peter asked, nervously swallowing.

"He has it coming," Mia said as the door to the Head Boy's room clicked open and a Quidditch jersey-wrapped ginger witch stepped out onto the small staircase with a glass of pumpkin juice in one hand and a muffin in the other, humming to herself pleasantly.

"Good morning, Lily!" Sirius shouted at her.

Lily jumped, causing pumpkin juice to slosh over the side of her cup. She turned to stare down at the sofa, her green eyes wide, her cheeks flushed. "Oh! Umm . . . good morning." She nervously looked back to James's door and bit her lip before turning her attention back to her friends. "I didn't think anyone would be stopping by."

"Well, when you and Prongsie didn't make it to breakfast, we got worried." Sirius frowned and stood up, followed close behind by Remus and Mia. Peter remained in his seat, not at all willing to participate in this and what would sure be an epic consequence.

Lily smiled innocently. "We were up late revising, so I just thought I'd have the elves bring something by for us."

Mia smirked as she watched her friend take a drink of her pumpkin juice just as James's door opened again, and her brother walked out, shirtless.

"Morning," James muttered suspiciously. "We were umm . . . having a bit of a lie in."

"In your room?" Mia asked.

"We were going over the prefect schedule," James answered, taking the glass of juice from Lily and finishing it off himself, oblivious to the looks of success that crossed the features of the pranksters at the foot of the stairs.

"That so?" Remus asked.

"Yes."

"*Just* working on the prefect schedule?" Mia inquired.

"Yes," Lily insisted, eyes narrowing.

Sirius grinned and gestured at their heads. "You should tell that to your hair then."

At once, Lily and James turned to face each other, and two sets of eyes widened at the sight of one another sporting an all-too-familiar shade of bright *satisfied* blue. Lily looked scandalised as she gasped, gripping James's locks. James, on the other hand, looked a little smug at Lily's hair.

"Mia!" Lily shrieked.

"Now, now, calm down, Lily." Mia smiled teasingly at her friend. "We understand that when a witch and wizard are in love, they like to express that love in a very *special* way."

"A very *loud* special way," Sirius added with a chuckle and looked to James. "Muffliato, mate; it's not hard."

"All right, very funny." James scowled. "You've successfully embarrassed us, now sold off, the lot of you, so I can finish my breakfast."

"Not going to happen." Sirius shook his head and cracked his knuckles. "See, Lily here is like a sister to me."

"And me," Remus added.

"And me," Mia agreed.

"I'm sitting this one out," Peter insisted from the sofa.

"And we feel the need to defend sweet Lily's honour after we discovered that some horrid wretch had come along and stolen her . . ." Sirius took a deep breath and stared into James's eyes before continuing, "*maidenhead*."

James paled. "Oh bugger."

"What?" Lily jumped back when suddenly, Mia and Sirius shifted into Animagus form, forcing her to finally come face-to-face with a little fox and a bear-like black dog that looked eerily like a Grim. Her eyes widened further when the two started snarling at James.

"Now wait just a bloody—Lily, where's my wand?" James demanded.

"How should I know?!"

"Remus," James said warningly. "Call them off; this isn't funny."

"I happen to think it's a *little* funny." Remus chuckled, his arms folded casually across his broad chest. "They're not going to bite hard, just enough to draw a little blood and leave a few scars."

"Scars?" Lily yelled.

"Yeah, like *this* one," Remus said as he pulled up his shirt to reveal a small circular scar that looked to be placed between two of his ribs. "That's an antler, by the way," he clarified to Lily, who gaped at the sight and immediately turned on her boyfriend, narrowing her eyes in anger.

"James Potter!"

"They had *sex* with my *sister*!" James pointed at Remus and the growling Grim, who was slowly moving closer toward the staircase. "How was I *supposed* to react?"

Lily ignored James's excuses as she turned back to Remus. "Are they going to hurt him very badly?"

Remus grinned. "He'll live."

## Chapter Seventy-Five

### *Elf Wine and Ink*

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*So I'm gonna love you like I'm gonna lose you  
And I'm gonna hold you like I'm saying goodbye  
Wherever we're standing, I won't take you for granted  
'Cause we'll never know when, when we'll run out of time  
(Like I'm Going to Lose You - Meghan Trainor)*

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**December 18th, 1977**

Remus smiled, trunk in hand, at a joke that Peter said. Looking back, he rolled his eyes at the sight of James and Lily. He assumed the couple thought they were being subtle and proper, but everyone on the platform was looking at the pair as though they were ready to climb back onto the train and into a private compartment. Remus wondered if they should.

He spotted Charlus Potter standing at the end of platform nine and three-quarters, smiling as the group began to approach. It was good to see the man smile. Remus had worried that when they all returned for Christmas, Potter Manor would just feel empty and lifeless without Dorea there. It was clear, however, that Tilly had been taking very good care of James and Mia's father.

The older wizard grinned and ran a hand through his messy, salt-and-pepper hair. It was certainly more salt than pepper these days, and, despite it thinning around the edges, it still stuck up in the back just like James's hair did.

When they reached Charlus, Peter and Remus shifted to allow James to be the first to greet his father. It was, however, Lily who stepped forward with a bright smile, her small hand clutched within James's palm. "Hello, Mr Potter."

Charlus teasingly tugged her hand from James's grip in order to kiss the back of it. "I can't tell you how happy I am to see you both so . . . well . . . happy." He chuckled as he released her before wrapping James in a tight hug and then doing the same to Remus and Peter.

"Dare I ask?" Charlus looked at Remus with a raised brow.

Remus chuckled, knowing exactly what the man meant. He cleared his throat and gestured over his shoulder before looking back to see Mia and Sirius step off the train. Mia laughed brightly as Sirius danced her down the platform, spinning the little witch in his arms and dipping her low to place a kiss on her mouth. Charlus frowned at the sight, which caused Remus, Peter, and James to laugh.

"Less happy about *this*," Charlus said as Sirius lifted Mia back to her feet, taking her hand in his own and leading her toward her family, both smiling joyfully. "When did this happen?"

James patted his father consolingly on the back. "Last month."

Charlus turned his eyes toward Remus. "Do I get to blame *you* for this?"

"Would it help?" Remus offered with a smile, snorting in amusement when Mia rushed into her father's arms, but Sirius stayed behind a bit, suddenly looking out of place.

After hugging his daughter, Charlus looked at Sirius and raised a brow. "Son."

"Sir."

"Sir?" Charlus laughed loudly. "I haven't been 'sir' to you since you were twelve. When did I become 'sir' instead of 'Dad'?"

Mia smirked, taking Lily's hand in her own and walking toward the public Floo. She looked back, likely to see if the others would follow, but Remus shook his head. He spent hours on the train watching Sirius work himself into a fit as he practised what to say to Mia's father. They all predicted that the best case scenario was that Charlus would be thrilled to see his daughter dating his semi-adopted son. Worst case scenario involved a wizard's duel, and, for twenty minutes, James, Remus, and Peter jokingly made bets on how quickly Charlus could disarm Sirius.

Having witnessed the rehearsals, Remus was not about to miss the big show.

"When I started dating your daughter, sir," Sirius said.

"Has this been properly dealt with?" Charlus asked, looking at James.

James looked pleased with the awkward way Sirius was standing, his posture straight. "It's been taken care of. Although, I haven't received any Letters of Intent," he pointed out with a daring smirk. "Have *you*, Dad?"

"Not a one." Charlus shook his head, feigning disappointment.

Sirius narrowed his grey eyes at James before turning them on Remus. "Well, I'm not as old-fashioned as Moony," he said with a scowl. With Charlus's attention focused on Sirius, Remus flipped his friend a rude hand gesture.

"I am, however . . . going to move out. I'll be looking for my own flat over the hols."

"Son, you know that's not necessary," Charlus insisted, dropping the protective father tone and putting his hand on Sirius's shoulder. "You're just as much my son as James is, and your home is with us. Whatever new relationship you have with Mia . . . Sirius, I trust you."

"I appreciate that . . . Dad. You have no idea how much I appreciate that." Sirius sighed with obvious relief and ran a hand through his hair. "But it *is* necessary. You've given me everything, and I'm not going to disrespect you by living under the same roof as my girlfriend and her family. Even if it's also *my* family."

"Moony did it for a year," James pointed out.

"Hit Prongs for me, would you?" Remus asked Peter, who seemed to act on instinct, punching James in the arm only to look horrified when James did not dodge the hit in time. James spun on Peter, eyes wide, and Peter squeaked before hiding behind Remus.

"Boys," Charlus muttered under his breath.

"Moony didn't have the money to get out on his own," Sirius said. "No offence, mate."

Remus nodded. "None taken."

"Speaking of Remus, I'm taking him with me," Sirius announced with a smile that Remus shared. They had worked out a plan in advance before it became public knowledge, and, as they expected, Charlus looked surprised at the news. "Don't think I'd do too well on my own, anyway."

"I'm used to babysitting Sirius," Remus said, side-stepping James—who used the advantage to hit Peter in the arm—and put his arm around Sirius's shoulder. "We'll be fine on our own."

Charlus nodded his head at them, looking what Remus could only assume was a mixture of pride and fatherly concern. "All right, if that's your decision. You're both men now, and you've a right to decide for yourselves. But my home is always your home. That goes for the both of you. Now, James, how are things going between you and the lovely

Lily?" he asked with a smile as the five wizards turned and headed toward the Floo. "I don't see any hex marks or bruises."

Grinning, Sirius suggested, "Check *under* his clothing."

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Christmas was celebrated with less enthusiasm than in years past. Without Dorea there to lead the charge, it just did not feel as spirited as normal. Peter went home to his family after only one night at Potter Manor, while Lily stayed three full days before Apparating home to Cokeworth to visit with her parents, sister, and brother-in-law.

The full moon fell on Christmas Day, so instead of opening presents early in the morning, they had done it all the night before and spent the twenty-fifth of December napping the day away before setting up protective wards in the orchards out back.

As night fell, the dog, stag, and little fox sprinted across the wide open space, followed casually by a golden-eyed wolf. The four creatures fell asleep curled up together beneath a large tree near the river and woke to snow covering the ground.

After shifting back into her human form, Mia smiled at the sight and cast a Warming Charm on Remus before transfiguring her scarf into a blanket with which to cover him.

The rest of Christmas holidays were spent relaxing, at least for the young adults. Charlus had meetings to attend, and, while James, Remus, and Sirius were all curious about what these meetings entailed, Mia remained silent. She assumed that her father was a member of the Order of the Phoenix and that trouble was drawing near.

Despite their offers to help, James and Mia were politely declined when Sirius and Remus left in search of a flat. They returned home hours later, looking victorious, but insisted no one was allowed inside their new place until the summer when they had a chance to put things in order.

Just before the New Year, the four young residents of Potter Manor decided to pay their mother a visit. Dorea's final resting place was in a lovely cemetery just outside of Somerset. Mia had taken out her wand and waved it, creating and then placing a Christmas wreath on the grave of Dorea Potter. In very little time, the four found themselves in the mood to drown their sorrows. Apparating to the Leaky, they were faced with an abundance

of elf wine that Tom, the barman, had been gifted for Christmas and was all too eager to share with good company.

Several hours later, James was being carried into the Floo by a still-sober Remus, while Mia and Sirius slipped out the door and stumbled into Muggle London, mischievous looks on their faces.

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### January 17th, 1978

Once back at Hogwarts, routine became normal again.

In Gryffindor Tower, in the bathroom connected to the boys' dormitory, the three seventh year wizards stood in front of the long horizontal mirror that hung above a row of sinks. Peter was busy trying to use his wand to shave the stubble from his face. Remus had taken the easier route and applied Herbert Hyslop's Magical Hair Removal Cream, yawning and glaring at the dark circles under his eyes, courtesy of the approaching full moon. Sirius, meanwhile, stepped from the shower, a towel wrapped low around his hips as he faced the mirror and raked his fingers through his damp hair.

"You going to be ready for practice, Padfoot?" James asked as he poked his head into the door. He was already wearing his Quidditch robes, eager to start the year off right by driving the team into the ground.

"Do you think I'd risk losing a game to my little brother?" Sirius scoffed at the notion. "Are you out of your mind? I've been just waiting for the day I can smack a Bludger at his smug, stupid face and knock him off of his broom."

"Padfoot? What is *that*?"

Sirius looked at Remus, feigning innocence. "What is what?"

"Pads!" James grabbed him by the shoulders, spinning him around until he came face-to-face with the inked script written across Sirius's pectoral. He glared at the tattoo. "Is that my sister's name tattooed on your chest!?"

Sirius raised a challenging brow at his friend. Keeping one hand secure around his towel, he used the other to tug at James's robes. "Is that *Lily's* name tattooed on *your* chest?"

Flustered, James tried to play it off. "That's *completely* different."

"If by different, you mean that Lily doesn't have *your* name tattooed on *her*, then sure." Sirius nodded and turned away from James, reaching for his Morning Mouthwash Potion.

"You're taking the piss!" Remus gaped at him.

Sirius tried very hard not to laugh at the look on his face. He had once snorted Morning Mouthwash Potion, and it burnt all the hairs out of the inside of his nose. After spitting, Sirius ran his tongue over his teeth, schooled his features, and smiled at Remus's reflection in the mirror. "What can I say? The witch loves me."

"You actually convinced Mia to get a tattoo of your name?" Peter stared at him in absolute awe. "On her body?"

"No, idiot, on her book bag," Sirius said, ignoring the noises that were coming from James on his other side. "Yes, on her body, and I hardly needed to do any convincing," he insisted and then added as an afterthought, "that I remember."

"You got my sister drunk and took her to a tattoo shop?!" James snapped.

"Not like it's the first time. And *I* did not get her drunk. *You* got her drunk. Technically, you got us *both* drunk, and then just left us at the Leaky to fend for ourselves. Whatever else were we supposed to do?"

"*Not* get tattoos?" James suggested incredulously.

"Where's the fun in that? Besides, she *likes* it."

"W-Where'd she get it?" Peter inquired.

Sirius turned and glared at him, remembering years earlier when they had all found out that Peter had once spied on Remus and Mia having sex. Sirius was not about to fall into a similar situation.

"Nowhere Prongs wants to know, and nowhere either of you is ever going to see." He gestured to Remus and Peter both, the former laughing at the threat, considering he could easily say he had seen just as much of Mia as Sirius had. Peter, however, looked properly ashamed of himself for even asking in the first place. James just looked embarrassed.

Across the tower in the girls' dormitories, Lily, Alice, and Mary all sat on the edge of Mary's bed staring at Mia, who was clad in a pair of purple lace knickers and an old well-worn Black Sabbath t-shirt of Sirius's that hung past her hips. All three witches were staring at her, heads tilted to the side.

"Oh my God." Lily gaped, her bright green eyes wide in shock and possibly horror. Alice blushed. "It sure is high up."

"That is so sexy," Mary commented with a smirk. "Did it hurt?"

"Not that I remember." Mia laughed and slipped her jeans on before throwing her House robes over her Muggle attire.

"You were drinking?" Alice chuckled. "Firewhisky?"

"Elf wine," Mia corrected.

Lily laughed, shaking her head. "The two of you have a drinking problem."

"I'd say their addictions are of a more *carnal* nature," Mary pointed out with a grin, and the other girls laughed in response.

Mia smiled at her three friends, blissfully happy she had bonded with the witches so well considering how she struggled to maintain female friendships besides Ginny in her other timeline. She had always thought that Ginny was the exception to the rule, but after becoming friends with Mary, Lily, Alice, and even Pandora, Mia wondered if maybe Lavender and Parvati had been the problem all along.

"Did he really get one with your name?" Mary asked, her eyes alight with anticipation.

Mia nodded, blushing a little. "On his chest."

She had to admit it was foolish and reckless, and the most spontaneous she had ever been without putting her life in danger. All it had taken was Sirius saying he wanted her name against his heart forever, and she had swooned like one of Lily's romance heroines. After that, it was just a few well whispered words into her ear from Sirius before she was agreeing to get one to match. Once she sobered up, she felt mildly embarrassed, but when the mark healed, she noticed that Sirius had become a lot more sexually aggressive at the sight of his name on her flesh—especially so close to one of his favourite parts.

"That is so steamy." Mary giggled, snapping Mia out of her momentary daydream.

"It's insane," Lily countered.

"Is *that* what you tell my brother anytime he walks around shirtless?" Mia asked, daring her friend to argue with her.

"What's this?" Mary's eyes lit up once again. "James Potter has a tattoo?"

Lily rolled her eyes. "It's just a bunch of flowers."

"A bunch of *lilies*," Mia said with a grin.

"You two are so lucky," Mary announced dramatically.

Mia and Lily shared a look and both laughed. Mary certainly was one for theatrics, but neither could argue with her. They were indeed incredibly lucky, tattoos or not.

"Frank would never get a tattoo. He hates needles," Alice said and then hesitated a moment before speaking once more. "But . . . he did get something else quite permanent."

"Better than ink?" Mary asked curiously, rolling over on her bed just as Alice extended her hand toward her friends. The sunlight breaking in through the window shone over a sparkling ruby on her finger.

"Merlin!" Mary squealed and fell off of her bed in the process with a loud thud. She quickly recovered, jumping to her feet and snatching Alice's hand to examine the jewel. "Look at the size of this thing! He really asked you to marry him?"

Alice beamed brightly while nodding.

"Congratulations!" Mia grinned, pulling her friend into a tight hug. "I'm so happy for you! How did he ask?"

"Fumbled a bit, nervously," Alice replied softly, smiling the entire time. "You know Frank. He was really sweet, though. Apparently, he had to fight his mum and uncle for the ring." She studied it with downcast eyes. "It's been in House Longbottom for centuries."

"It's so lovely," Lily said admiringly. "I can't believe you're engaged."

Mary winked at her. "We told you that wizards work fast."

Suddenly a bit pale, Lily's eyes widened. "Do you think that James would . . . ? Oh no, I can't even start thinking like that."

Alice laughed softly. "My guess is you'll be engaged by summer."

Mia threw in her two Knuts worth, "I'm going to say by this time next year."

She could have done the Arithmancy equations, consulted tea leaves, or even looked into a crystal ball, but in reality, all she had to do was take Harry's birthday, subtract nine months, figure out how long it would take to plan a wedding, and then add what she thought would be an adequate amount of time for Lily to fret.

"I'm going to say you're a bunch of slags, and I'm jealous, and I hate you all," Mary insisted with a smirk, falling back down on her bed and throwing one arm above her head jokingly, like a damsel. "Not only is Alice engaged and the two of you have secured the two fittest wizards in school, but Mia probably ruined Lupin for the rest of the world, and now no other witch will ever compare. What're the rest of us left with?"

Mia laughed. "Peter."

"You're cruel," Mary said with a miserable groan. "I'd rather marry a Hufflepuff."

Twenty minutes later, the girls made their way into the Great Hall and over to the Gryffindor table, where James and Sirius were waiting for them. Both boys were wearing their red and gold Quidditch robes, and Mia appreciated the well-worn attire as she sat down across from Sirius.

"Look at these beautiful witches, Mr Padfoot." James grinned, standing up and stepping over the table to sit beside Lily instead of walking around. Lily scolded him with a silent look, rolling her eyes as he fell in place next to her. "Are we not the luckiest blokes in the whole Wizarding world?"

"We are, indeed, Mr Prongs." Sirius winked across the table at Mia. "Luckiest in the whole *world* in fact."

"Why, *so* lucky that I felt it was completely necessary to sneak into Hogsmeade last night and purchase a gift for my beautiful witch," James said before reaching into his robes and withdrawing a small package. With a flourish of his wand, the small box enlarged on the table.

Lily smiled down at it, nodding appreciatively. "Good man, Potter. You know I love Sugar Quills."

"Where's *my* gift?" Mia eyed Sirius teasingly, genuinely not expecting anything.

"Ah, I put a lot of thought into your prize, my lovely kitten," Sirius said. Following James's prompt, he stepped over the table, much to the annoyance of Lily, who removed the Sugar Quill from her mouth to frown at him. "Knowing you would find sweets and flowers appalling and cliché," he pointed out, and Mia nodded in agreement, "I thought long and hard about what you would love as a token of my affection above all else."

"And?"

She assumed he bought her a book. It was a fall-back gift that they were all aware of, and she had grown to expect such from her family and friends. Remus knew her better,

of course, but then again, he still bought her books—at least books she did not already own. Sirius had always been different, though. He gave her things that meant something to her, like the mismatched earrings from several Christmases ago, or even the Potter family bracelet an older Sirius had given her for her nineteenth birthday. Sirius *never* fell back on the easy gifts.

"I bought a very large box of Honeydukes chocolates," he announced.

Mia furrowed her brows in slight disappointment. She had not been expecting a gift at all. It was not a holiday, and she had only joked about wanting something. "Seriously? Appalling and cliché, and you still bought it?"

"Yes, and then I gave them to Moony because he looks like shit today," Sirius replied with a smile.

Mia let out a soft laugh and wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing him soundly. Merlin, she loved this man.

"Despite the insult to his appearance," she commented thoughtfully, "taking care of the people I love is the best gift you could ever give me."

"Because your name on his chest isn't enough?" James asked from behind Sirius, his tone less than pleasant.

"Don't be a hypocrite, Jamie." Mia smirked without even looking at her brother as she let Sirius kiss her again and again and again.

Eventually, Professor McGonagall cleared her throat loudly from the Head Table, causing Sirius to smile up at the Deputy Headmistress and slowly pull away from Mia.

"So, why are you two in such good moods this morning?" James asked, watching with great interest as Lily continued to suck on her Sugar Quills, his cheeks colouring.

"We found out that Frank proposed to Alice," Lily announced quietly.

"What?" James shouted, the colour rapidly draining from his face.

"Oh, Merlin . . ." Sirius groaned and leant his head on the table.

Both witches immediately rolled their eyes.

"Circe, you two are just as dramatic as Mary," Mia said with a laugh. "Don't worry; he hasn't set a precedent for the rest of Hogwarts, so ease back into your semi-comfortable, non-ball-and-chain-attached lives."

"What the hell, mate?" James shouted as Frank Longbottom walked into the Great Hall, stopping to let go of Alice's hand as it was commandeered by a group of girls eager to see her engagement ring.

"What?" Frank asked incredulously, looking more amused and smug than anything else. "It's not *my* fault I'm more mature than the rest of you, and I've been thinking about my future instead of the next Quidditch match. I've got a career in the works and a wife to look forward to."

"Hey! It's not just *any* Quidditch match," Sirius insisted, and Frank shook his head, chuckling in reply. "It's going to be the Quidditch match where my brother gets knocked off his broom. Nothing is more important than that!"

"Nothing?" Mia raised a brow.

"The only thing in my entire life more important to me than knocking Regulus off his broom is shagging you to celebrate knocking Regulus off his broom," Sirius said with the most genuine look on his face Mia had ever seen, which only caused her to laugh loudly.

"Oi!" James glared at his best friend. "My sister!"

"Is shagging your mate." Sirius grinned mischievously. "Get over it, Prongs. I'll start being quiet about it when you learn to cast Silencing Charms."

James turned to face Frank, his cheeks bright red. "Why are you so busy worrying about a career and a wife, Frank?" he asked, ignoring Sirius and Mia who continued to guffaw at his expense.

"Changing the subject?" Sirius smirked. "Classy move."

Frank laughed along with Sirius and Mia but indulged James in his need to divert attention away from himself. "We weren't going to make a big deal about it, but Alice and I got accepted into the program for early Auror training. We're going to go into the Academy right after graduation as long as our N.E.W.T.s are up to par."

James grinned. "Good job, mate! That's fantastic!"

"Thanks."

Sirius stopped laughing and suddenly looked worried; the boyish features that became so dominant while he was laughing faded into the sharp angles of a mature—and stressed out—adult. "Should I have put my application in early? I thought I had to wait to complete N.E.W.T.s."

"You're still planning on being an Auror?" Mia asked with a frown.

"What else would I do? Sit on my arse and live off my money?"

Granted, there had been a war going on, but in her original timeline, an older Sirius seemed perfectly content to do exactly that. She could not remember a single conversation with future Sirius regarding employment or recall a plan other than surviving the war and then getting everyone back on their feet.

Recalling the statistics she had read long ago about the number of Aurors killed in the First Wizarding War, Mia began worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. "It's just not a safe job. Makes me nervous."

"Aww, kitten, you worried about me?" Sirius grinned, leaning in to kiss her cheek and then the space behind her ear that sent shivers down her back. Those shivers would be the death of her, and she would greet Death like an old friend—willingly—as long as Sirius never stopped doing that. "Don't worry. I'll be one of the best Aurors the Ministry has ever seen. I'll change the whole game. Catching Death Eaters and Dark wizards. Azkaban will never be the same when I'm done with it."

Mia twitched. *Well, that's for sure.*

"Speaking of Death Eaters," Alice whispered as she took a seat beside Frank, frowning as she set a copy of the *Daily Prophet* down in the centre of the table.

James snatched it up immediately, and Sirius and Mia leant over Lily to read as James held the paper outward. In the centre of the front page was a moving photograph of several surly-looking Aurors, Alastor Moody and Rufus Scrimgeour among them. Beneath the photo read the caption:

*DEATH EATERS STRIKE  
FAMILY OF FOUR MURDERED*

Two of the victims had been children under ten, and there had been signs of torture before a Killing Curse was cast on the entire family. There had been many attacks over the years, and they all followed them closely, but this was the first public report of children being involved.

Almost instinctually, Mia turned and glanced across the room where she spotted the Slytherin table gathered around several copies of the *Prophet* as well. Some appeared to care less, while a few others—notably Barty Crouch Jr—were laughing.

Two faces at the end of the table, however, stood out. Cold and nearly emotionless, Severus Snape sat side-by-side with Regulus Black, both looking ill and regretful.

## Chapter Seventy-Six

### *Letters*

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*Nothing's gonna hurt you the way that words do  
When they settle 'neath your skin  
Kept on the inside and no sunlight  
Sometimes a shadow wins  
(Brave - Sara Bareilles)*

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**January 17th, 1978**

Other than the constant stream of reports about attacks and murders by Death Eaters coming in via the *Daily Prophet*, school was turning out to be relatively simple compared to previous years. There were no evil professors, no Death Eaters in the corridors—save perhaps for Snape and Regulus, who had been keeping quietly to themselves since returning from Christmas hols. There were no vicious werewolf maulings, no Wizards' duels on the pitch, and no cursed brooms above the Black Lake.

And, surprisingly, both Sirius and James had stopped hexing Snape in the corridors. At least when *Lily* was looking.

Mia soon buckled down with her friends, and they all began revising for their N.E.W.T.s with great devotion, each with a specific goal in mind. Lily, reminiscent of Hermione Granger, acted as though she had something to prove to the Wizarding world as a Muggle-born. Frank and Alice worked hard to show they were worthy of the jobs awaiting them as Aurors upon graduation. Sirius admitted to being a bit desperate to show off his intellect and talent so he could join their friends in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Remus needed high N.E.W.T. scores in order to justify to anyone outside of Hogwarts a reason to offer him any type of employment despite his condition. James claimed to still not know what he wanted to do with his life post-Hogwarts, outside of spending it with Lily, so he revised by her side to show her that what was important to *her*, was important to *him*. Mary and Peter were the only ones who struggled with their revising, and while Mary did her best to ask for help from her professors, Peter was incredibly put out that none of his friends would sacrifice their own time to help him, and he outright refused to admit to teachers that he even *needed* assistance.

Mia, not knowing what her own future had in store for her, worked hard on her N.E.W.T.s for the same reason she had done so for her O.W.L.s: to break records.

Completely devoted to their studies for the first time ever, Valentine's Day came and went with little attention despite it being the first the two new couples would spend together.

James and Lily had gone into Hogsmeade, but only officially as Head Boy and Girl—although James *did* take a momentary detour to feed Lily's Sugar Quill addiction.

Sirius and Mia had remained back at the castle to practice for their Defence Against the Dark Arts practical, showing off their wandless magic by taking turns throwing mild hexes and jinxes at one another throughout the day.

The only reference to the holiday was that morning when the owls brought in the post. Despite the fact that Mia had now *twice* cursed girls in regards to their unwanted attentions toward Sirius, he still ended up collecting the lion's share of Valentine's Day merchandise. However, instead of forcing Peter to taste test the potentially poisoned sweets, Mia flicked her wand, vanishing the whole lot and went about business as usual.

The only time the seventh years let their hair down was for their birthdays.

First, for Lily's at the end of January. James charmed a small flock of starlings—eighteen to be exact—to deliver flowers to her all day long—specifically, bright pink Stargazer lilies; one flower for every year since her birth.

Remus's birthday was spent back in the Room of Requirement, this time with firewhisky but *not* the Veritaserum. Per Remus's request, an informal Wizards' duel took place just for fun. By the end of the long competition, Lily had James stunned into submission, Alice and Frank had called a draw against one another, Sirius had transfigured Peter into a nogtail and Mary into a niffler, and Remus stood as victor over them all after sneakily defeating Mia with a Jelly-Legs Jinx—of all ridiculous things.

When the twenty-sixth of March rolled around on a Sunday, Mia and James insisted on celebrating despite their birthday not taking place until the following day. Monday meant not only classes but exam preparations that could not be missed. So they turned eighteen in the Gryffindor common room one day early, sharing butterbeer and stories with the people that meant the most to them in the world.

**March 27th, 1978**

Monday afternoon found Mia and Remus in the library going over Ancient Runes, their eyes wild with determination as they continuously scanned through the stacks of books piled up on their table. Mia's ink-stained fingers were beginning to cramp, and anytime she cracked her knuckles, Remus would chuckle and take a short break to stretch his long legs.

He glanced over at Mia's parchment, mentally taking note of her translations. A part of him double-checked her work for her, while the other half of him noted the differences in the way they broke down the text. He was not so smug that he assumed his way was the only way and, since she was at the top of their class, he was going to take advantage of any tips and tricks the little witch had.

"You're staring," Mia muttered.

"I'm *looking*," Remus corrected with a grin.

She smirked. "Prat."

"Witch." He chuckled and continued to watch as she scribbled out a correction on the parchment, tapping her wand on the paper to erase the earlier mistake.

Yawning, he stretched his arms over his head and glanced out the window to the side where, if he focused his eyes, he could see the tiny figures of James and Sirius flying over the Quidditch pitch where they were practising for the upcoming game against Slytherin. N.E.W.T.s or not, Padfoot and Prongs were not going to be satisfied with leaving Hogwarts without a perfect record. Remus smirked at the thought of his friends and the approaching game that would have both Houses positively riotous by the end of the year.

His gaze turned back to Mia, eager to see if she had finished the last translation on the practice exam when his gaze caught something moving along her skin.

He tilted his head to the side and stared down at Mia's exposed forearm where—as if an invisible hand were drawing on her with a purple quill—deep scar-like letters began appearing.

Remus opened his mouth to speak purely out of curiosity, but he held his breath when the letters began to spell out a word.

*Mudblood.*

His chest tightening painfully as he gawked in horror at his best friend's arm. "M-Mia?"

"One moment," Mia muttered, licking the corner edge of her mouth in concentration as she stared at the text in front of her. "Remus, these last ones aren't Old Norse. You can tell by the phonetic—What's going on?"

Remus gestured down at her arm, feeling like he was ready to be sick. "Mia, what is *that*?"

She looked down, her attention on the parchment until he gripped her arm and tilted it toward her. "Shit."

Remus gaped at her in shock. She did not look surprised in the slightest. "Shit? You say 'shit'? You don't start screaming because suddenly a word—*that* word—appears on your flesh out of thin air?"

His voice had drawn attention, and Madam Pince glared at the pair.

Mia tossed the old witch an apologetic glance before grabbing Remus's hand and tugging him back down into his seat. He had not even realised he was standing, having jumped away from her as though she were cursed.

"You weren't supposed to see it. No one was. On my birthday, how horrible is that? How did I not even know the day that it happened?"

"Do you want to clue me in on this?" Remus growled loudly, growing more concerned with every passing moment that Mia was not panicking.

Madam Pince cleared her throat and threw them both a nasty glare.

"I . . ." Mia began and then sighed. "Remus, remember how I used to tell you and Sirius to learn Occlumency? Did you ever?"

"No," he confessed.

"Remus!" Mia hissed in disappointment. "I've been telling you boys for years, and not even *you* could bother trying to learn a very helpful skill? We're at war, for crying out loud!

"I don't need to, Mia," Remus clarified. "I'm a werewolf."

She stared up at him. "What does *that* have to do with anything?"

"If a Legilimens tried to get into my head, all they'd hear is Moony," he said, awkwardly turning so that he was no longer gaping at her arm. "Unless they speak wolf, they wouldn't get much out of him."

Her eyes lit up with relief, and she cradled her arm against her chest. "Are you serious? Has this been tested?"

"Professor Dumbledore did it briefly before I turned eleven," Remus said, recalling how the headmaster showed up at his house unannounced. "Mum thought he was a burglar and tried swinging a stick at his head until my dad came downstairs. Dumbledore dodged everything, of course, and sat us all down to offer me a place here.

"I suppose he used Legilimency on me because he wanted to try and see how separated Moony and I were. When my dad asked what he saw in my mind, Dumbledore told him that he couldn't make heads or tails of anything. Then he laughed over the fact he'd said 'tails' in reference to *my* mind."

"Oh, that'll make everything so much easier!" Mia beamed, gripping his hand tightly within her own as she made a dash for the exit, pulling him behind her. "Come on, I have something to show you."

She dragged him down the long corridors and up the stairs, back to Gryffindor Tower.

Remus waited in the common room while Mia slipped up to her dorm to retrieve something. When she returned, she was holding a piece of folded parchment. Though, by the way she touched it, it might as well have been goblin-forged gold. She nervously extended the parchment, placing it gently in his hands.

After seeing the anxious look on her face, he decided to treat the paper delicately as he opened it and saw first in the corner a smudged date that read: *September 19th, 1998*

He read the words written in an eerily familiar script, and his eyes widened in confusion and curiosity at the story—because it could not be real—in his hands. Time travel, Department of Mysteries, Unspeakables, and Portkeys. It was all too fanciful, but still *so* specific. Sirius had been mentioned not once, but twice—apparently in danger both times. There were words about a war, destiny, and someone named Harry.

Then, there it was right at the bottom:

*Your ever devoted and obedient friend,  
Remus*

"This . . . This can't be real."

"It is," Mia confirmed.

"Your real name is Hermione?" he asked, taking note of the name at the top of the letter. She nodded, her eyes looking distant as the name fell from his lips; it was almost as though she did not like the way it sounded.

Then she smiled. "Jamie said it was a mouthful, so he nicknamed me Mia."

"You *bate* nicknames," he pointed out.

"I *love* Jamie."

"I umm . . ." He hesitated, looking back down at what she was insinuating was his own handwriting. "Is this real?"

"Yes. Every word. I imagine you have questions."

"Only about a thousand or so." He sighed, overwhelmed, as he folded the letter back up and handed it back to her—pleading with her to take it from him so he did not get lost in the words once more.

He had not spent much effort reading about time travel, just a few references some of their school books made, and even then, Remus never thought that form of magic was plausible. Even touching the letter felt wrong and dangerous.

"I wish I could answer them," Mia admitted sadly.

Remus suddenly recalled an argument they'd had a year earlier at the Astronomy Tower. Mia had come back into his bed to apologise, explaining why she could not tell him the details about her scars.

"Dumbledore," he blurted out. "You can't tell me. You *literally* can't tell me anything, can you? He's spelled you. That's what you told me last year."

Mia nodded, tears in her eyes. The look of sadness and desperation in her chocolate gaze stirred something inside of him; for the first time, he felt distrust toward the headmaster.

"I can't even write it down," she explained, wiping the moisture from her eyes.

Remus's heart went out to her, a part of him wondering what *exactly* she was keeping secret, the weight of such burdens, and how long she'd had to survive with them sitting firmly on her shoulders. More importantly, why Dumbledore felt the need to keep her silent. What could one witch know about the future that . . . ?

"I don't understand. Why would I send you back in time? Twenty years from now, *Merlin*." He blinked, a part of him shocked to know for certain he had even survived that long. Death always appeared to be just a blink away, especially considering they were

currently in the middle of a war. "Why would I do that? The laws of time are . . ." He briefly remembered the time travel references as they'd been applied to legal matters and Ministry restrictions. "And we were in the Department of Mysteries? Why was Sirius there? Why did you have to save him in your third year? Why did he need rescuing? And who's Harry?"

Mia groaned at the flood of questions, pushing her fingers through her hair. "Merlin, if I'd only known about your anti-Legilimency thing years ago, I could have told you everything. I *wish* I could tell you everything. Or *anything*."

"Try," Remus pleaded with her. She could not just show him a letter and leave the rest for him to figure out. She had too much faith in him; he certainly was not that smart. He pointed to her arm. "Mia, you can't just drop this in my lap. Where did that scar come from?"

She had apparently already forgotten about it and growled at the sight. Taking her wand, she charmed the sleeves of her blouse to lengthen and cover the offensive blemish. "I was attacked by a D-Death Eater."

Remus noted that she was working hard to get the words past her lips—like she was being purposely vague in order to work around Dumbledore's spell. "In the future?" he asked and she nodded. "Then why . . . ?" He could not think of the rest of his question, but wasn't *why* enough? Why *any* of this? "This is complicated."

Mia sighed defeatedly. "Try being the one who can't talk."

"Too bad I can't perform Legilimency." Remus ran a frustrated hand through his shaggy hair. "Then I could just go inside your head, and you could *show* me everything."

"You're a genius!"

Once more, Remus felt himself being tugged through the hallways of Hogwarts by the young witch, but this time, he did not resist at all; his head and body had been disconnected, his mind caught up in the thoughts of time travel and the possibilities and terrible consequences that would certainly come with such a feat.

Minutes later, they found themselves inside Dumbledore's office, the old wizard looking positively joyful that the two of them stood before him. He greeted them by standing and then gestured to the chairs in front of his large, trinket-covered desk.

"Miss Potter, Mr Lupin, what a wonderful surprise. I had been meaning to send for you later, Miss Potter, as I happen to have a birthday gift for you. Well, not so much a gift, since it is an item you once let me borrow."

"An item? You mean it's my . . . ?" Mia looked longingly as she held out her hand, and a small box was placed into her palm.

"Yes." The old wizard smiled. "Unfortunately, I have been unable to find any use for it."

Mia frowned and tucked the box into her robes without mentioning what it was. "Thank you, sir. Speaking of . . . the item, other things in relation have surfaced." She pushed up her sleeve and held out her forearm to the headmaster.

Dumbledore frowned at the scar. "Oh dear."

When the headmaster's blue-eyed gaze fell on him next, Remus shrank under it as though he had done something wrong; but, then again, hadn't he? His future self had thrown an innocent witch back in time. It was awful, horrible, immoral, and, not to mention, illegal!

"I suppose, then, it's time for Remus Lupin of the *present* to begin his journey to becoming the Remus Lupin of your *future*?"

Mia nodded. "Yes, Professor. Remus explained that, as a werewolf, no one can properly gain information from him by Legilimency. I've shown him the letter, and I wish to explain things by way of Pensieve."

"Interesting way around the truth spell, Miss Potter, since you neither had to speak or write words of the future yourself," Dumbledore commented.

Mia kept her face expressionless other than a dangerously raised brow, eerily reminding Remus of Dorea. Unlike the bravest of men, Dumbledore did not curdle in fear at the sight. Remus suspected that he should have.

"I did not think you would simply *show* anyone the truth."

"Yes, I've been told I'm quite *cunning* in this timeline," Mia said, letting the corners of her mouth turn up into a smirk.

"You know," the headmaster began with a smile, "I sometimes think we sort too soon."

"So, it's true, then?" Remus interrupted. "Mia's really from the future?"

"Indeed, it would appear so." Dumbledore nodded. "Before you learn any information, Mr Lupin, I must request that the only questions you ask would be in regard to things you have already witnessed or will soon witness, mainly Miss Potter's scars and the letter in question." He gestured to the witch, who was still clutching the letter in her hand as though it were her lifeline, not at all delicately like she had done up in the tower. "The future is fragile, you see, and while the letter indicates nothing can be changed, it is such that I am not willing to risk it, whatever the reason. I would stake my own life on the outcome of the future; do you understand, Mr Lupin?"

"It's about the war, isn't it?" Remus asked, burying the suspicion that Dumbledore might have subtly just threatened him.

It had to be about the war. Why else would Albus Dumbledore stake his life on it? Mia's letter—or *Remus's* letter, he supposed—had mentioned the war, mentioned lost lives, and how she could not change anything or save anyone. According to the letter, his future self had sent Mia back in time because he had been *asked* to.

"Mia knows what happens, and you don't want me to accidentally or intentionally ruin the outcome."

"That is correct," Dumbledore replied.

"If the future is better, and the war is over . . ." Remus hesitated as he thought of the most recent editions of the *Daily Prophet*. A family of goblins had been massacred three days earlier, at least seven Muggles had been reported missing from Wizarding villages, not to mention the very public attack outside the Ministry of Magic in which two Aurors and three Muggle bystanders had been murdered. "I wouldn't want to risk it either. No matter what. I understand, sir."

"Very good. I value your word a great deal, Mr Lupin; however, even though Legilimency cannot be used against you, you are not invulnerable to other spells, torture, or even the use of Veritaserum. The last of which I believe the two of you are most familiar with?"

Mia and Remus innocently avoided eye contact.

"So, how do we avoid it?" Remus asked.

"A vow: an Unbreakable Vow to prevent secrets of the future from being revealed," Dumbledore insisted.

"No!" Mia shouted, pushing herself to stand in between Remus and the headmaster, as though the little witch could prevent him coming to harm at the hands of the most powerful wizard in the world. "Sir, he would die."

"And that, perhaps, would keep him most unwilling to reveal what he sees," Dumbledore explained in a casual way that made Remus nervous. "But, not only that, it would prevent *you*, Miss Potter, from showing him things that perhaps would *cause* him to want to reveal the truth and make changes."

Remus watched as Mia narrowed her eyes angrily. Clearly, she knew something about the future that would, in fact, make Remus *want* to take action. He tried to put the thoughts from his head. She would not be able to tell him, and soon he would be bound to keep the secret himself. What was the purpose in being burdened with the knowledge? He already wished he did not know her secret as it was.

"His life is quite a bit more precious to you than it is to himself."

Remus noted the calm threat behind the headmaster's words. Dumbledore was using him as a tool to prevent Mia from revealing too much. Even if Remus himself cared little for his own life, he knew he would never allow himself to die because of her.

"I'll do it."

Mia turned on him, her eyes pleading with him to fight this alongside her, but Remus was completely at ease with putting his life on the line on the chance that she would be able to control what he would learn about the future.

"Fine," Mia agreed, looking positively enraged by the manipulation. "But he is bound to *me*, not *you*," she added, glaring at the headmaster.

Dumbledore nodded politely. "I'll accept that and choose to be the Bonder if you both agree."

Instantly, Remus and Mia grasped hands, and Mia's eyes lingered on Dumbledore's wand as it touched them.

"Will you, Remus Lupin, keep the secrets that shall be revealed to you today in regard to the future?" Mia asked him, her brown eyes connecting with his gaze.

"I will," Remus said, and a thin tongue of brilliant flame issued from the wand and wound its way around their hands like a red-hot wire.

"Will you speak the truth only to those who already know it," Mia paused, then quickly added, "and reveal it only to Sirius Black in fifteen years?"

She spoke the words so carefully and specifically that Remus could not help but wonder what would happen in fifteen years, and why Sirius could not know the truth about his own witch until that time.

"I will," he replied and watched as a second tongue of flame shot from the wand and interlinked with the first, making a fine, glowing chain.

"And, in regard to the future and the knowledge you obtain from me, will you defer to my judgement and my requests?"

"I will." He nodded and watched a third flame emit from Dumbledore's wand, wrapping its way tightly around their hands, binding the Vow—and Remus's life—in the secrets.

## Chapter Seventy-Seven

### *A Long Story*

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*Trying hard to reach out  
But when I tried to speak out  
Felt like no one could hear me  
Wanted to belong here  
But something felt so wrong here  
So I prayed I could break away*  
(Breakaway - Kelly Clarkson)

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**March 27th, 1978**

Remus stood in front of a shallow, stone basin with runes carved around the edge of it. A part of him wanted to look closer and examine them, translate them, but his brain was too full of questions regarding the current situation for something as simplistic as Ancient Runes. Inside the basin was a substance that looked to be neither liquid nor gas, but a strange mixture of the two. A bright, whitish-silver swirled constantly, the surface of it rippling as though being touched by wind. He had never seen a Pensieve up close before; they were far too expensive to be sold in just *any* shop.

Behind him, Mia stood, concentrating closely as Dumbledore held the tip of his wand to her temple and extracted several wispy silver strands. She paused for a moment, thinking hard to make sure the memories were still in her head, verifying that the headmaster had only removed a copy.

He inserted them into a large phial. When they were done, they approached Remus, and he watched as the headmaster poured the memories into the basin, observing with interest as the silvery strands swirled amongst the unidentified substance.

"Could you lift the spell temporarily sir, or at least modify it so I can answer Remus's questions?" Mia asked politely.

It was obvious to Remus that she was still holding back her anger from earlier; playing kind in order to get what she needed from the headmaster.

"Of course." Dumbledore nodded and silently waved his wand over the witch.

A moment later, Mia stood beside Remus, gesturing for him to lean forward. The moment his face actually touched the surface of the strange substance, the office around

him lurched, and suddenly, he was tossed into darkness. Once inside the memories, Mia was there next to him, smiling as he gained his footing next to her.

"You all right?"

"It's still a little surreal," he admitted.

"I suppose you're about to feel the same way I did when I was first sent back to 1971. I can't tell you how shocked I was to see you, James, Lily, and Sirius." She chuckled despite looking sad. "Though 'shocked' might be an understatement."

"So, you know us all in the future, then? I mean, obviously you know me since I'm apparently the one who sent you—" Remus would have continued, but Mia cut him off and gestured to a scene that appeared in front of them.

"I've put together a short collection of memories to try and cover as much as I can without revealing *too* much," she explained as they stepped into what looked to be the hospital wing of Hogwarts. The details were difficult to make out as the room was entirely dark. "I'll answer the questions I can, and just . . ." She fell silent, her attention drawn to the large silhouette of a figure sitting beside a bed.

"What?" Remus asked nervously.

"Can you forgive me for keeping this secret for so long?" Mia whispered.

Remus frowned, remembering the guilt he had heaped on her for keeping secrets; knowing Sirius had done the same thing only made it that much worse.

He offered her a timid smile. "According to my letter, you have nothing to be blamed for."

"All right, this is the worst of it." She wiped tears from her eyes. "This is how I got my scars."

Remus was about to ask for clarification, when a small voice whispered in the darkness, drawing his attention.

*"What happened to me?"*

*"Not sure. You were hit with a powerful curse. Neville and Harry mentioned that the Death Eater who threw it had been silenced. We think you survived because of it."*

"Is that *me*?" Remus asked, listening to the voice in the darkness. "I can't see my face. Why am I in the dark?" He turned to look at Mia, who was staring into the shadow with a soft expression on her face.

"It's the hospital wing." She gestured to the second voice coming from the bed. "I'd been unconscious for several days, and you didn't want the lights to give me a headache."

"How old are we?"

"This is going to be an awkward conversation."

He eyed her suspiciously. "Why?"

"In this memory, I'm sixteen," she explained quickly. She paused, perhaps doing the math in her head before continuing, "You would have been thirty-six, I believe."

"I'm twenty years older than you?" His eyes widened in absolute shock. All at once and completely unwillingly, a flood of his own memories passed through his mind. Far too many that took place inside the Room of Requirement beneath a fake full moon, several within the curtain-drawn four-poster bed in Gryffindor Tower, and one specific memory that took place in a dark alley of Muggle London. Remus felt his cheeks warm over, and he put his face into the palms of his hands while Mia chuckled beside him.

"Technically, when I arrived in 1971, I was eight years *older* than *you*. I took a De-Ageing Potion so I could attend Hogwarts with you and the others and be adopted by the Potters, all without drawing attention to myself. So, instead of complaining about age, why don't we just call it even?" She put a hand on his shoulder, pulling his gaze back to her. "Besides, witches and wizards live well past one hundred. What's twenty years compared to a century-long life?"

*"Can I see it?"*

Mia, or the girl she had once been—would be?—appeared to be waiting for the older Remus to reply, but he did not speak. However, about a minute later, he wordlessly lit the end of his wand and handed it to her.

Remus watched with interest, his eyes falling to the girl as she hesitantly took the wand—a wand he recognised as his own—and light passed over her face. "Merlin, she looks just like—"

"She *is* me," Mia explained. "She's my past: Hermione Granger."

The girl in the bed—Hermione Granger—tried to smile at the older man before looking down at the bandages covering her small frame. Remus smiled appreciatively when he noticed his older self turned away to offer her some privacy, and the flood of intimate images in his memories became slightly easier to deal with knowing that, at the very least,

his future self had not used his connection to Mia Potter to take advantage of this girl called Hermione Granger.

Remus frowned as he watched her observe the long scar on her ribs. Remus *knew* that scar well: deep, thin, and purple, cutting across pale, soft flesh. He had intimately touched that scar—kissed it affectionately. Mia never seemed to mind the flaw on her flesh, but this girl in the bed certainly did. She laid there, teary-eyed as she stared at the disfigurement and whimpered.

Almost as though he could try and ease the discomfort of the girl, Remus tried to speak to her, but his older self got there first.

*"They're just scars, Hermione. 'Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars.'"*

And then the scene faded away in front of them.

"Were we close?"

"We were friends." Mia nodded thoughtfully. "I respected and adored you above many others, though I can't exactly tell you the reasons why," she said with a smile. "Even though we weren't as close as you and I are now, I loved you. You were my friend, and I would have done anything for you."

"Who are Neville and Harry?" Remus inquired as he recalled those names, one of which had been in the letter.

Mia frowned. "I don't know if I should say."

"I made the Unbreakable Vow," he pointed out.

"Neville is Frank and Alice's son."

Remus digested that information with a smile. "Wow. What's he like?"

"Brilliant, when given the chance," she replied in a sweet tone she usually reserved for James. Remus could already tell by how she spoke that Mia thought of Frank and Alice's boy as family. "He's so much like his father, it's amazing. Neville was a very close friend of mine. He was the first person I met on the Hogwarts Express. You could say he was my first friend."

"And Harry?" Remus asked, breaking her from her reflection on the past.

"Harry," she said, the name sounding like it choked her. There was emotion there, thick and heavy and deep, and Remus wondered if this Harry fellow had been a

boyfriend—a lover? "How do I even begin to explain Harry?" Mia took in a deep breath, smiled and just said, "Harry James Potter."

Remus grinned excitedly. "Prongs has a son? And is he—?"

"Lily's." Mia nodded, beaming. "Looks just like them. Identical to James, but Lily's eyes. Exactly." She must have not realised she was crying again, because she startled when Remus gently wiped a thumb across her cheek. "He was my best friend. At least, before you. Before I was sent back."

He wanted to ask about Harry, to know more about him. He wanted to ask if James and Lily had any other children and what they were like. He wanted to know about Sirius and himself and Peter, and if any of them had families. Certainly not himself, of course, and maybe Sirius never settled down either, considering he was Soul Bonded to Mia—but surely Peter eventually found *someone*. He never had the chance to ask, though, as the scene changed.

They were in the Astronomy Tower, and it looked as though a herd of hippogriffs had been trapped inside it at some point. Rubble and dirt were littered everywhere, and up ahead a bushy-haired girl leant against the railing.

*"Hermione, are you all right? Let me see your arm."*

"That's . . . That's me," Remus said knowingly, and suddenly faced with his future-self in better lighting, he winced, noting the additional scars, lines in his face and significantly grey hair. "I look—"

"As handsome as ever," Mia whispered from behind him.

He turned and looked at his best friend, who was staring at his older self with pure admiration.

"Wow," she said, gasping a little. "I'd forgotten. It's been so long since I've seen you—*older* you, I mean."

*"It's nothing," Hermione insisted, tucking her arm in close to her. "Stray hex. Had you not been there, I'm sure it would have been worse."*

"What does she mean 'Had I not been there'?" Remus asked, watching as his older self examined the wound on the girl's arm. His own focus turned to Mia, who was subconsciously picking at the triangular shaped scar on her arm: the one they had fought about back when they had been dating.

"We got caught up in a fight," Mia explained. "I wasn't paying attention, and you pulled me out of the way."

*"Did this happen in the battle?" the older Remus inquired. "Why wasn't it treated?"*

*"I cleaned it myself," Hermione replied. "It'll heal naturally."*

*"Madam Pomfrey should have some Dittany back in the infirmary."*

*"No. I . . . I need it to scar. I need to remember."*

"How long does the war last?"

"Longer than I care to talk about," Mia sadly admitted, her eyes filling with tears again. "It stops for a time, but . . . Let's just keep going," she insisted as the scene changed once more.

Instead of the dark Astronomy Tower, the images bled away into a large, light-filled drawing room.

"I need you to stay calm and remember that I'm fine *now*, all right?" Mia said quickly, turning to face Remus and reaching for his hand, squeezing it tight as though he might try to make a run for it.

"Okay, I'll try," he promised, squeezing her hand back. He wondered if she needed him for support, or if she was holding on to him to prevent him from panicking.

*"Wait! All except for the Mudblood and Sirius. Keep the blood-traitor away from Potter."*

Remus's green eyes flashed gold at the sight of a familiar black dog hovering in the air, bound with magic. The girl he had come to recognise as Hermione was being threatened, and she looked far too skinny, wearing clothes that looked as though they had not been washed in some time. She looked like she had been chewed up by war. Innocent and injured, and Remus realised that this was why his Mia was who she was—she had been tempered by fire.

*"Where did you get that sword?" Before Hermione could even answer the question, Padfoot began kicking in mid-air, paws lashing out against his restraints, barking madly and growling as loudly as possible. His barks echoed off of the marble floors and walls, nearly drowning out the screams of Hermione's name coming from the opposite direction.*

Remus could not place the voice.

*"Take him to the other room while I deal with the girl. Can't get an answer out of her with him making all that racket!"*

*A tall, blond woman spoke nervously as she stared at Hermione, "Bella, the girl . . ."*

"Is that . . . ?" Remus began, his eyes falling on a woman who looked similar to Sirius's cousin, although it had been years since he had seen Narcissa, and *this* witch was quite a bit older.

Before Mia could answer him, another voice confirmed his suspicions.

*"Narcissa, go! Draco, go with your mother!"*

Remus watched as Lucius Malfoy shouted at Narcissa and then to a blond teenager who was his very likeness but with less of a hateful glare. The boy huffed but took his mother's arm in hand and swept into the next room, flicking his wand upward and levitating Padfoot to follow.

Remus stepped forward as though he could do something—perhaps follow after Padfoot and release him from his bindings—but Mia clutched his hand tightly and pulled him back to her side.

"Quiet, Remus. We need to just get through this."

He noted that her breathing had quickened; when he focused, he could hear her heartbeat pounding hard against her chest.

"Where'd they take Padfoot?"

*"I'm going to ask you again! Where did you get this sword? Where?"*

*"We found it . . . We found it . . . PLEASE!" Hermione cried out.*

*"Liar! Crucio!"*

"No!" Remus shouted, watching in horror as his best friend was tortured right in front of him, while he stood there unable to stop it. When the black-haired witch stopped cursing Hermione, she knelt down and pulled a long dagger from her boot. Suddenly, the girl was screaming again as the blade tore into the flesh of her arm.

Remus could not look. He felt sick, and his eyes fell on Mia, who looked strangely, defiantly calm on the outside despite his werewolf senses picking up her racing pulse.

"I don't understand; where'd they take James?" he asked her, remembering that the black-haired witch had insisted Sirius and Hermione be kept away from *Potter*. "Why am *I* not here with you?!"

"Because it wasn't your job to protect me," Mia explained.

"Yes it is!" he shot back, her words sounding blasphemous in his ears. "It's *our* job. *Our* job to keep you—"

"No, Remus. It wasn't your job to protect *me*."

His face paled, and his breath caught in his throat. Hope and terror battled for dominance in his heart because truly she could not mean . . . He inhaled sharply. "A *mate*?"

Mia smiled. "Yes."

"But I—"

"We should keep going," Mia interrupted him. "Do you have questions about the letter?"

Remus could barely understand her words as he tried to process the knowledge: he had a *mate*. He had known it since the first night he and Mia had slept together all those years ago. He had fought it, but she had always insisted, promising he would one day find his perfect mate. And that was because this whole time *she knew*. Mia *knew* he *had* found her in the future. He had someone out there, waiting for him. Someone that he would protect and keep safe. Someone meant just for him the way that Sirius and Mia were meant for one another. Hope triumphed and settled inside him, easing the nausea caused by the previous memory. He tried to pull himself together so he could answer her and ask the questions he knew he needed to know.

"Why did I send you back?" he blurted out.

"Apparently, because I asked you to."

"When?"

"Now. I'm asking you *now*, Remus." She turned to face him, and her eyes bore into his. "On the nineteenth of September in 1998, you will be in possession of a Time-Turner that's also a charmed Portkey. You will present it as a birthday gift and trick Hermione Granger into going to the past, specifically to the first of August, 1971. You charm the Portkey to land me in the Defence Against the Dark Arts room."

He frowned. "*Trick* you?"

"Yes. I wouldn't have accepted it otherwise. I—Hermione is stubborn when it comes to time travel. She won't understand why I need to come back."

"You're . . . Aren't you the same person?" He shook his head. "I can't do that. She's just a girl."

"You *have* to," Mia argued, her face suddenly stern. "If you don't send Hermione Granger back, then Mia Potter will never have existed. Hermione won't *become* me. I wouldn't have known you, wouldn't have loved you, or been friends with Lily, or been Jamie's sister, or fallen in love with Sirius." At that last declaration her stony exterior broke

enough to reveal actual utter panic in her eyes. She looked so scared that it actually frightened him. Gripping his shirt in her tiny fists, her voice shook as she pleaded with him, "You *have* to promise me—promise me!—Remus, no matter what happens, you will send me back! I need to go back. I can't not have lived this life. I need you and Jamie and . . . and Sirius."

Remus slowly nodded his head, a part of him wondering what his life would have been like if he had never known Mia. He remembered sitting on the Hogwarts Express, terrified out of his mind, not only that his secret would be found out, but that he would end up hurting someone. Mia had changed all of that. She had changed everything. She had changed *him*.

At his nod of agreement, she let out a sigh of relief and collapsed against his chest. Automatically, he wrapped his arms around her shoulders. "It'll be fine, Mia. I won't lose you."

The scene once again switched, and Remus and Mia found themselves standing in a large, dimly lit library. Remus smiled as he watched Hermione Granger tightly hugging his older self; a tall, black-haired wizard stood nearby with a grin on his face.

"*That's* Sirius?" Remus chuckled, his smile turning into a full grin at the sight of his friend. "Merlin, look at him. He really can't stay away from those tattoo shops, can he?"

He observed the way Mia was staring wistfully at the memory. Her fingers twitched as though she wanted to reach out and touch. While he never doubted Mia's love for Sirius, it was painfully obvious now that she had been in love with him long before they had ever met as children. She loved the Sirius that he knew, of that Remus had no doubt, but there was a longing in her eyes as she stared at Sirius's counterpart, and he realised she was in love with that man too.

"This is the night I go back," Mia pointed out, gesturing to a crimson box. "You put the Time-Turner in that."

*"Let me open your present while you're right here."*

*"No. Wait until I leave. It's . . . private. I mean, it's just . . . You might not like it. The next time I see you, you can tell me if you like it."*

"I liked it," Mia said with a grin, turning to look at Remus.

*"Is everything okay?" Hermione asked quietly*

*"Hope so."*

Remus watched his older self give the girl a tight smile before letting her go and walking out the door, placing a hand on Sirius's shoulder before exiting the library.

*Hermione frowned, clearly worried. "Is he okay?"*

*"He's got a lot on his mind," Sirius said. "We've been going through a few stints of nostalgia lately. Brought up some intense memories from the past." He shrugged his shoulders and slowly walked into the room, reaching for her bracelet-clad wrist and tugging her toward him. "It's almost the day after your birthday."*

"Is that important?" Remus asked.

"We were supposed to talk about the Soul Bond; about us," she explained with a frown, looking longingly at the memory. "I'd only known about it for a year or so, and it was confusing. Sirius knew, because he knows about it now, and he had promised to explain it all to me, but . . . but I went back into the past, so we never got the chance to talk. Pretty sure you both set it up that way on purpose," she added with a slight glare.

"I've been meaning to ask this for . . . Mia." Remus sighed, his eyes drifting between the images of the older Sirius Black and Hermione. "Why did you never tell me about the Soul Bond between you and Sirius?"

"Honestly? I don't know. At first because I didn't know what it meant, and then I didn't know if I could, because I wasn't sure if you—older, *future* you—already knew about it, and in the end it just . . . It got too complicated."

Remus slowly nodded his head in understanding.

*"Before we dig into old magics and awkward adult conversations, will you allow an old dog one last moment of recklessness?"*

He widened his eyes slightly as he watched an older version of Sirius lean in and kiss the young witch in his arms. She did not look much older than Mia currently was, but Sirius himself looked to be forty if not close to it. It was briefly uncomfortable until Remus turned to see Mia, who was staring at the scene as though it was life-giving. He suddenly understood, this memory was not entirely for him. She needed to see it. She needed to *remember* it.

*"Happy birthday, kitten," Sirius whispered. "No matter what happens . . . promise me you'll just try to be happy, all right?"*

*"Sirius, I don't underst—"*

*"Nope, no more talking until tomorrow. Now, open Remus's gift. He's been fussing about it forever."*

"You miss Sirius Black," Remus whispered. "That's what you said the night we made you and Sirius drink Veritaserum to confront your relationship issues. You meant *him*, didn't you? This version of Sirius."

"If you bring up the age thing, I'm going to hex you," Mia threatened without even looking at him.

Remus chuckled, believing her. "Not a word." He thought back to the letter. "It says you used a Time-Turner before? To save Sirius?"

"He got in trouble," Mia said in a clipped tone.

"He does that." Remus smirked slightly, a part of him glad to know that not much would change in the future. Sirius was apparently still Sirius. "And the Department of Mysteries?"

"That's a very long story. And one better to be lived, I think."

"What lives are lost? Who dies in the war?"

Mia frowned and averted her gaze. "You *know* I can't say that. I've already tried to fix things, and it blew up spectacularly in my face. Dumbledore and even Mum told me not to change anything. Yes, she knew. She knew *everything*." She shook her head in frustration. "I couldn't even change things if I wanted to. I've actually done the Arithmancy calculations on my success rate as well, and none of them come out in my favour. If I were to change things, and actually have them change, it would make the future worse. Even so, I don't think it would work."

"Why's that?"

"Because time is, in fact, a loop—just like the letter says. If I were to successfully make any change in the past, I might somehow prevent my future self from obtaining the Time-Turner to begin with and, thus, never be sent into the past to change it." She reached into her pocket and removed the small box Dumbledore had given her. Opening it, she tugged on the gold chain and removed the item that was attached to show Remus.

Dangling there before him was a small hourglass wrapped in a silver casing. Inside was blue sand that looked to be frozen, unmoving. He hesitantly touched the Time-Turner, looking at it carefully, tilting it to the side where he noticed a rune carved into the bottom.

"Predestination," he noted and looked up to see Mia smiling at him. "I don't know how you've been able to wrap your mind around all of this."

"Well, I've had almost seven years to get used to it." She shrugged her shoulders. "Plus, there've been quite a few distractions. Did you know I dated a werewolf for two years?" she asked sarcastically. "*Plus*, my current boyfriend is incredibly high-maintenance."

Remus smirked, agreeing with her silently. "Is *this* why you were spying on Slytherins? Some of them *are* Death Eaters, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"Are we in danger now? With them in the castle?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I only know three for certain, and two of them eventually defect to our side of the war. They're actually pretty crucial. In fact, if there was anyone I would try to redeem, it would be those two. There's another, but . . ." Mia closed her eyes and bit her cheek, something he knew she did when furious. "I can't even *try* to do something. Simply by knowing the future I'm in danger. If You-Know-Who found out—"

"Okay." Remus nodded, interrupting her, not wanting to think about what You-Know-Who would do to her. "Why me? Why not Sirius or James or Lily?"

"Because I trust you above all others," was her instant reply. "You are my best friend, and it certainly helps that your mind can't be read." She paused for a long moment before speaking again. "Sirius is too emotional, too reckless, and he sucks at Occlumency. James is the same way, and Lily would ask too many questions."

Remus gave a nod of understanding. "Are we happy in the future?"

"There are a lot of bumps. But we get to a wonderful place that I wouldn't change for anything. I love my life here, but I still dream about the future often. I miss it so much."

"Future Sirius." Remus smirked as he recalled something. "You told me when we broke up that you were dreaming about *future* Sirius, and from the look of that kiss—"

"It's complicated."

"Clearly." Remus laughed. "He's twenty years older than you."

"*Nineteen*, and you weren't supposed to mention the age difference." She eyed him. "Believe me, *you* are not one to be challenging me on the age issue."

"What?" He blinked. "But you said . . . And I saw . . . You and I aren't—I mean in the future?"

"What?" Mia turned to him and raised a brow. "No! But, well, your mate is a *bit* younger than you as well."

"She is?" A part of him wondered *how* young. Initially, the thought of his older self being with a younger Hermione had horrified him, but after seeing the memory of Hermione and Sirius, he wondered if Mia was right and age really did not matter. "Who is she? Can you show her to me?"

"You know I can't. Just . . . When the time comes, don't be afraid of her. Don't be afraid to fall in love," she pleaded with him.

Remus nodded with a smile on his face. "So, if you're not Mia in the future, what happened between now and then? Where's the older version of Mia Potter?"

"I don't know. That's something we'll both have to play by ear."

"This is unbelievable."

He ran a hand through his hair, a part of him wondering how he was supposed to go on with life knowing all of this. How he was supposed to look at Sirius after seeing the man he would turn into? He was thankful she had not shown him memories of anyone else. He could not imagine what James and Lily would look like in twenty years. Remus wanted to see more, wanted to see his mate and James's son and Frank and Alice's boy, but he noted that Mia had been quite specific when choosing memories; besides Sirius, the memories had only included private moments between his older self and Hermione.

"So you've just been following my instructions this whole time?" he asked, glancing down as Mia clutched the letter tightly in her hand. "Living your life and . . ." He stopped and then grinned brightly up at her. "Your tattoo! You tattooed *my* words on your shoulder!"

Mia smiled. "I did."

"Wow." Remus laughed thoughtfully. Soon his chuckles turned into outright guffaws and he bent over, holding onto his stomach as he continued to laugh.

"What's so funny?" she asked suspiciously

"Sirius . . . Sirius was so smug when he told us all you got a tattoo of his name, and you've technically had *me* tattooed on you for the past year!"

Mia flushed, her face red even in the shadows. She clearly was unaware that Sirius had told the rest of them. "That bloody gossip. That's not a conversation I'm looking

forward to having with him." When Remus kept laughing, she smacked his arm. "Get rid of that cocky smirk, Moony."

"Fine, fine." Remus took a deep, cleansing breath and released it slowly as his laughter died down. "So, what do we do now?"

"Well, I've got to figure out a way to explain this new scar to everyone else." She looked down at her arm and frowned. "I suppose during Easter hols I can disappear for a while and then say I got attacked by Death Eaters."

Remus's former smile faded instantly, and he shook his head. "You can't do that," he insisted. "Mia, if Sirius thinks you got attacked, he'll go spare. Not to mention James. They'll blame themselves. *I* would. I still kind of am." A part of him was still angry with his future self for not being with Sirius and Mi—*Hermione* when they had been attacked at the Malfoy's home.

"I'll figure something out. Let's go." Mia raised her wand in the air and gestured for Remus to do the same. When he did, they were pulled from the Pensieve and landed right back in Dumbledore's office.

Remus turned to the headmaster, although he did not appear to have been waiting for them. A letter was in his hand, and the twinkle had vanished from his blue eyes. Remus frowned at the sight and took a step closer to the old wizard. "Sir? Is everything all right?"

"No, unfortunately," Dumbledore replied, still looking at the letter. "I would wonder if the two of you could be so kind as to fetch Miss Evans for me."

Mia paled. "What's wrong?"

"It appears that there was an accident," Dumbledore explained mournfully. "Miss Evans's parents died last night."

## Chapter Seventy-Eight

### *Muggles and Maps*

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*Every demon wants his pound of flesh  
But I like to keep some things to myself  
I like to keep my issues drawn  
It's always darkest before the dawn*  
(Shake it Out - Florence + The Machine)

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**March 30th, 1978**

Harold and Aster Evans died in a car accident in their hometown of Cokeworth. The couple had been driving away from their home when the car veered off the road and into a telephone pole. Muggle police could find no signs of the car braking, no skid marks on the road, nor sign of any other cars involved. Neither of the Evans parents had been found to be intoxicated in any way nor under influence of any kind—not any kind that could be traced by Muggles, that is. The only silver lining was that the accident report indicated Lily's parents had passed away almost immediately, and they did not suffer.

Lily had been understandably devastated. Professor Dumbledore allowed Mia to accompany her through his Floo, which had been connected to a squib acquaintance, who lived in Surrey. The kindly old woman who Mia knew from her former timeline as Mrs Figg, greeted them on the other end of the fireplace and offered her the use of her telephone so that Lily could get in touch with Petunia and Vernon Dursley. Lily's sister assured her that the funeral arrangements were being taken care of, though was also quick to point out the financial stress it would put on her and her new husband, but that Lily need have nothing to worry for, since Petunia would handle it all. The witches returned to Hogwarts, and Lily was dismissed from her classes to be doted upon by James, who refused to abandon her in her grief.

Whether it was prefect and Head Boy and Girl privileges, or because Dumbledore had a soft spot for the Gryffindors, the headmaster allowed Mia and the others to accompany Lily to her parents' funeral as emotional support pillars.

Mia took it upon herself to make sure that the purebloods were all dressed appropriately in Muggle attire, transfiguring their dress robes into long black overcoats and

charming their trousers and dresses all black. Only Sirius looked out of place; one glimpse of the man in formal attire and Lily actually laughed for the first time since she had received word of her parents' deaths. She immediately pleaded with him to put his jeans and leather jacket back on.

They all arrived at the Apparition point in Cokeworth and made their way to the small cemetery where Petunia had instructed Lily to be. There were no speeches or stories, few flowers, and even fewer people in attendance. Just a simple minister who said a short prayer over the double plot, and then it was all done and over with.

"I'm going to go and say hello to my sister." Lily smiled sadly at her friends who nodded, agreeing to wait to see what the plans would be for the Evans sisters before making any of their own to return to Hogwarts.

As she walked away, Mia narrowed her gaze at Vernon and Petunia Dursley and muttered, "Ears up, gents," to Sirius, James, Peter, and Remus.

Lily approached Petunia, who was just as red-eyed as her younger sister, though she wore a much harder expression on her face, even when Lily wrapped her arms around her and pulled her tightly into a hug.

"Thank you for taking care of everything. I know Mum and Dad had money saved up just in case, but I'm aware arranging this came at a personal financial loss to you both. Once I'm out of school, I plan on paying you back for what would have been my share."

Vernon snorted at the sentiment as though it were an outright lie.

Hearing the noise, Sirius scoffed and stepped forward, only to be held back by both James and Remus, and hushed by Mia when he opened his mouth to protest.

"It's fine, Lily," Petunia responded shortly. "There's no need."

"We can talk about it another time," Lily said, pushing the subject aside. "I was thinking maybe we could go back to the house and sit and visit awhile. My headmaster gave me the entire day off of classes, and it feels like it's been forever since we've spoken."

"*We* are going home," Vernon insisted.

"You can't go to Mum and Dad's instead?" Lily asked, clearly trying to reason with the stubborn and miserable man.

"We can't go there because, well . . ." Petunia hesitated. "The house no longer belongs to us. At least, not entirely."

"What do you mean? It's still our home, just because Mum and Dad are . . . are gone, doesn't make it any less home for us."

"Actually, Vernon and I have planned on selling it. Signed a contract this morning to a company that's looking to buy out the whole neighbourhood, actually," Petunia explained, refusing to make eye contact.

"Oh no," Mia muttered.

"Should we—?" James began, ready to assist his girlfriend, but Mia held him back, hoping that perhaps the sisters could work out whatever problem there was without interference. She knew Vernon would not appreciate any of them stepping in to assist Lily. It would only serve to further estrange the sisters.

"You're selling the house?" Lily snapped, her voice a near screech. "Petunia, how could you?"

"It was left to me and Vernon, and we've already moved to Surrey." Petunia narrowed her swollen eyes. "We've no need of an extra house to take care of, especially one so old. And in Cokeworth no less."

"You're *from* Cokeworth, so don't turn your nose up, Tuney. That was our home! We grew up there!" Lily cried.

"I grew up there," Petunia said bitterly. "That hasn't been *your* home since you left to that . . . *freak* school of yours."

Lily ignored the insult entirely, evidently in favour of pressing her luck to find out more information on her childhood home. "Why did Mum and Dad leave it just to *you*? It doesn't make sense."

"The last time they changed their wills, you were still underage, I suppose." Petunia shrugged her bony shoulders. "Goodness, I can't believe you brought *those* people with you." She glared over Lily's shoulder as Sirius lit a cigarette with a Muggle lighter, immediately drawing the attention of Frank and Mary who were staring wide-eyed at the fire-starting device.

"Put it away," Mia muttered to him.

"They're my friends, and they came to support me," Lily defended, clearly more upset that Petunia was now ignoring her. "If you've sold the house, where are my things?"

"Boxed up and ready for you to take back to wherever you want."

"Wherever I want . . . Right. Because I just happen to have an extra house lying around!" Lily screamed, and the ends of her hair started sparking.

James took the initiative, bypassing Mia to approach his emotionally overwrought girlfriend.

"I graduate in a few months. What am I supposed to do?" Lily asked Petunia, who briefly showed a hint of concern but covered it up all too quickly with indifference. "Where am I supposed to go? You're my sister!"

"How dare you raise your voice to my wife." Vernon stepped forward and glared down at Lily with disgust. "Don't you know she's just suffered through the deaths of her beloved parents?"

Mia felt Sirius's arm slip around her waist to hold her back, muttering under his breath about how she needed to let James handle this.

"They were my parents too, you . . ." Lily began, shaking with rage, "you . . . filthy *Muggle!*"

"Lily." James reached her, pulling the witch into his arms. "Calm down, love."

Vernon glowered at the intimate embrace. "And who is *this?*"

"James Potter," James answered as he turned and extended a hand to the thick-chested man, looking like he hoped to help salvage Lily and Petunia's relationship by being as polite as possible to what was a very *large* obstacle. "I'm Lily's boyfriend."

"Potter." Vernon snorted at the name and stared at James's hand, making no move to shake it. "You're one of *those* aren't you?"

"A good person? Yes; I can see how you'd struggle to know one upon sight," James snapped, his previous desire to be polite apparently long gone.

Vernon sneered and stepped forward as though he were preparing for a physical altercation. "Now you listen here, you freakish—"

Mia snarled, and Sirius stuck his cigarette in his mouth, using both free hands to hoist her over his shoulder. "Mary, get her wand," he muttered to the blond witch, who followed suit, snatching Mia's wand from her pocket. When Mia struggled in his grip, Sirius gave her a good swat on the arse, drawing attention.

Petunia looked scandalised, but Lily actually looked amused.

Despite not wanting her brother to get in trouble, Mia had seen the aftermath of what happened when James went after his own *friends* in a minor brawl and could only

imagine what he would do to a man like Vernon Dursley, who he would have no desire to apologise to after hitting him.

Before anyone took to violence, however, Remus stepped between James and Vernon—much to the displeasure of both men, who were apparently trying to one-up the other merely by height. James had Vernon on that angle, though anyone would be lying if they denied that Vernon had James beat when it came to *width*.

"Everyone calm down," Remus ordered quietly, putting a gentle hand on James's shoulder.

"I don't take orders from riff-raff like you!" Vernon spat toward Remus, his face beginning to turn a shade of purple. His look of disgust only increased when he got a good up close look at the scars on Remus's face.

"Mate," Remus said looking directly at Vernon, "I am your best friend right now because I am currently keeping my friends over there from coming over here and introducing themselves."

He gestured to the group of witches and wizards who were all glaring at the man from where they stood, but none likely looked more menacing than Mia and Sirius. Even hanging over her boyfriend's shoulder, Mia felt like she was a hair's breadth away from shifting into Animagus form and mauling the Muggle.

"Upsetting Lily has not won either of you any good marks," Remus added, glancing to Petunia who briefly looked ashamed of herself as she hid behind her husband. "One more step out of line, and I can promise, it'll win you a trip to the hospital."

Vernon sputtered up at Remus. "Are you threatening me?"

"Yes," Remus answered tersely.

"Moony's got this," Sirius said with a chuckle, letting Mia slide off of his shoulder, catching her with one arm before she fell to the ground.

Mia wondered if Remus's eyes had turned gold. She figured they must have to have caused Vernon to stumble over his next words, because he hesitated and took a step back. Though still aggressively ignorant about the Wizarding world that his sister-in-law had exposed him to unwillingly, he still apparently retained an iota of self-preservation; if he pressed the issue with Remus, he would deeply regret it.

"Where are my things?" Lily whispered through stifled sobs, her temper finally having calmed down only to give way to misery and grief once more.

"What?" James asked, still eyeing Vernon angrily.

"They sold my parents' house," Lily cried. "I don't . . . I don't have a home."

"Yes, you do," Mia said loudly as she approached, casting a scathing look at Vernon and Petunia. "You'll come and live with the rest of us at the manor."

"Manor." Vernon snorted and rolled his eyes.

Mia glared in response, a part of her wanting to take him to Potter Manor just then to show him. She wanted to kidnap the large Muggle and drag him through the Wizarding world by his neck rolls, show him Hogwarts and Gringotts, let him piss himself at the sight of Sirius's vault. Then, just for the hell of it, she would leave him to rot inside the drawing room of Malfoy Manor.

"No." Lily shook her head. "I couldn't impose."

"Lily, you belong with us."

"That's for certain," Vernon muttered under his breath.

"Sirius," James called over his shoulder.

Sirius approached, looking imposing as ever with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his leather jacket and a cigarette hanging from his lips. He inhaled and then blew smoke into Vernon's face without a care to the way the man choked in front of him.

"You and Mia take Lily back to Hogwarts," James instructed, keeping his eye on Vernon the entire time. "Remus and I will collect her things and have them sent home. I'll expect an address to where they're being kept," he insisted before turning back to Mia. "I'll let Dad know everything."

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"Merlin!" Sirius exclaimed in exasperation as the large group Apparated just outside of the school gates, waiting until one of the professors or Hagrid came to let them inside. Mia flicked her wand, letting a silvery fox rush away to alert the headmaster to their return. "Did we just meet the Malfoys of Muggles? That Dursley is a right cunt."

"They're awful," Mia agreed, snatching the new cigarette from Sirius's mouth, taking a drag from it before vanishing it with the wand that Mary returned to her. "Lily, I am so sorry you had to go through all that on top of everything else."

"I've lost everything." Lily let out a shaky exhale, her normally bright green eyes were dim and no longer sparkled like emeralds in the light. She leant against the gates and slowly slid downward until she was sitting on the ground. "My home, my family—"

"Your family is right here," Sirius insisted, kneeling in front of her.

"Sirius is right," Mary said as she linked arms with Alice and knelt down to Lily's side. "Don't let it go to your head, Black." Turning her attention back to Lily, she reassured, "We get to choose our families, and we've all chosen you, don't you know?"

"Exactly. In fact . . ." Sirius said with a thought and quickly tapped his wand against the gold bracelet wrapped around his wrist. Mia knew that it was one of two items he never removed under any circumstances, the other being the silver chain around his neck. He looked up at Mia as though asking for approval, and she smiled sweetly down at him, understanding.

Turning back to Lily, Sirius gently clasped the bracelet around her wrist, turning it so that she could see the House words engraved upon it.

Lily protested, "Sirius, no! This is expensive!"

"It wasn't even mine to begin with," he told her. "So, it's not like I spent money on it."

Mia smiled at her friend. "Just an old heirloom we had lying around."

Lily took a slow breath and looked down at the bracelet, her hand still held by Sirius. "*Animo et astutia*," she read aloud. "These are the words of the House of Potter."

"By Courage and Craft. Mia gave this to me when I lost my own family," Sirius explained, though he kindly left out the rest of the detailed story about how he had shagged her rotten shortly after. If such was a tradition after receiving a new bracelet, Mia was glad to leave it to her brother to handle later. "She gave it to me when I became a part of the Potter family; now it's your turn."

"I'm not a Potter, Sirius. I can't accept this. Take it back."

"Nope."

"Mia . . ." Lily looked up at her friend.

"Nope." Mia shook her head, cutting Lily off. "I agree with Sirius. You're my sister. That makes you a Potter, or maybe a Black since Sirius is the one giving it to you." She laughed and knelt down opposite Mary and Alice, cocooning Lily between them all. Still standing, Frank put his arm around Peter's shoulders, both boys smiling at the scene.

"Besides, James will just fall to pieces when he sees you wearing it," Mia added with a mischievous grin, glad when Lily blushed. "If anyone honours the words of our House, it's you. Courage and Craft? Might as well just say 'Lily Evans.'"

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It took an additional five minutes for Lily to stop arguing with Mia and Sirius, and even then, Alice and Mary had to intervene and try to pretend that Lily was offending pureblood tradition by refusing the bracelet. Mia, a Muggle-born herself by birth, noted the lie and shook her head in disapproval. She wondered if Ron and Ginny had ever pulled something like that over her eyes.

Once back inside Lily and James's common room, Sirius sat beside the redhead on the sofa, hugging her close to comfort her. Mia fixed hot chocolate in the small attached kitchen, not wanting to bother the house-elves for it. It gave her something to do to keep occupied and not let her thoughts linger on the future where Petunia and Vernon Dursley still existed. Had they not already written themselves on Mia's shit list based on the way they treated Harry, they would have been added today for how they had treated Lily.

"We got everything taken care of," James announced as he and Remus walked through the portrait hole. Sirius vacated the spot on the sofa, letting James take his place beside Lily with a tender smile. "All your things are back at the manor, Lils. And I tried to stop her, but Tilly's already gone through half of the first box. She's setting up an entire room for you. Hopefully, you like purple, it's the colour I saw her charming the walls when we left."

Lily laughed and hugged James tight. "Thank you."

"What happened?" Remus inquired as he stood in the centre of the room looking alert and nervous.

"What do you mean?" Mia asked as she approached, placing the tray of hot chocolate on the table in front of the sofa. "We've just been here since getting back. Frank, Alice, Mary, and Peter headed back to the tower to change into normal robes."

Remus shook his head. "Something's different. Something changed . . ." His nostrils flared and golden eyes settled on Lily. "Are you . . . ?" he began and then looked

around the room curiously as though he were missing something important. "What did we miss?"

"Just some girly bonding," Sirius teased, gesturing to Lily and Mia as he took his seat beside James on the sofa. "I tried to convince these two to take their clothes off and have a pillow fight, but no one ever thinks to put *my* wants and needs first. Ow!" He glared at James, who retracted a balled fist from Sirius's shoulder. "It was a joke, you wanker."

"Sirius gave Lily the Potter bracelet that I gave him a few years ago," Mia gestured to Lily's hand, ignoring Sirius's depraved sense of humour.

"Is that all?" Remus prompted, still on edge. "I . . . I feel something . . . I can't explain it."

Mia gasped, eyes wide. "Oh!"

"What?" Remus turned to her.

"Familial Bond! Sirius, you provoked a Familial Bond by giving Lily that bracelet!" she said excitedly. "That's what happened to me. I got the bracelet when I was first adopted, and it provoked a Familial Bond between me, Jamie, and our parents. It's what made me a Potter."

"Wait. I'm a Potter now?" Lily paled as she looked at James with horror. "Did I just become your sister? Oh God. It's already weird that Mia and Sirius are basically second cousins."

"Twice removed," Sirius said at the same time that Mia argued, "I'm adopted."

"You are most definitely not my sister," James insisted, but then looked to Mia to confirm, an edge of concern in his voice as he asked, "Right?"

"Well, not *technically*," Mia promised with a laugh at the look that Lily was giving her. "I'm kidding. It's still an unsealed bond. To become a Potter, you'd have to either be officially adopted or . . ." Her gaze drifted to her nervous-looking brother, whose face was a lovely shade of vermilion.

"Oh." Lily nodded thoughtfully, looking down at the bracelet. When she eventually understood Mia's words, her eyes briefly flickered to the blush on James's cheeks. "Oh! You mean if we ever—Umm . . . But we're bonded? Like your Pack Bond?"

"That must be why Moony can sense something," Sirius added thoughtfully. "You're bonded to *us*, and we're bonded to *him*."

"She's Pack now. I mean, sort of," Remus said with a confused look as he sat down by Lily. "I feel much more protective than before. This is amazing. I wonder if this means that anyone else that's either born or marries into the family becomes a part of this."

Remus thoughtfully looked up at Mia who smiled, knowing that he was referring to Harry.

"I'm a part of your Pack?" Lily smiled, emotions surfacing. "And your family?"

It was clear that she felt both sadness and relief. She had lost her own family that very day, only to be officially welcomed into another so quickly.

"You always have been," Mia promised. "Magic just happens to agree with us now."

Lily laughed and let out a relieved sigh, smiling through her tears. "I love magic."

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### **April 1st, 1978**

"What do you mean you lost the map?!"

Mia had not seen her brother this panicked since he thought he had accidentally misplaced his Invisibility Cloak their third year. She had walked into the boys' room to see all four Marauders tearing the place apart. The beds were practically dismantled as they searched in vain for the family heirloom. James practically crumpled to the floor in defeat, muttering, "Dad's going to Avada me," over and over again until Mia reminded him that he had let her borrow the cloak the day before to slip down to the kitchens in order to see if the elves would prepare something special for Sirius's birthday.

But the map had not been lent out to Mia. It had been taken by Peter, who was now cowering in front of two of his friends, all of them grateful that Sirius was not there to take part in the scene.

"I didn't mean to!" Peter insisted, looking terrified.

"What the hell were you doing, Wormtail?" James demanded, eyes wide. "Why'd you even need it? We had no plans, no pranks, and we haven't had a reason to use the Cloak in forever since we know all the secret passageways!"

"I-I was s-sneaking out to . . . to . . . to see my g-girlfriend," Peter nervously stuttered his way through a poor explanation.

Remus and James looked shocked at the revelation, but Mia only rolled her eyes.

"You have a girlfriend?" Remus rose a confused brow. "Since when?"

"Who the hell is she? And how come we've never met her?" James snapped.

"Because you . . ." Peter swallowed. "You wouldn't understand. She's . . . a Slytherin."

All three were shocked; Remus and James over the fact that their friend was willingly dating a Slytherin, and Mia because she was shocked that *any* girl, Slytherin or not, was willing to date the rotten little rodent. Despite the fact that he was not exactly pure evil yet, Mia was still angry at him for spying on her and Remus having sex years earlier.

"Pete, mate." James put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Who is she?"

"Her name's Iris." Peter frowned. "She's a sixth year."

"Iris *what*?" Mia inquired.

"Hmm?"

James eyed his friend. "What's her last name, Wormtail?"

"M-Mulciber."

"Oh, Merlin." Mia rolled her eyes and walked away from the scene for a moment as her brother officially lost control.

"Mulciber?!" James howled, throwing his hands into the air in exasperation. "You're dating *Mulciber's* little sister? Have you completely lost the plot?"

Remus stared at Wormtail, looking completely gobsmacked. "Mate, you've fancied Mary for years. Don't you remember what Mulciber *did* to her in fifth year?"

"*Iris* isn't bad," Peter insisted. "She's nothing like her brother, I swear it on my life."

"So you sneaked out to see Iris . . . *Mulciber*." Remus shook his head, still in shock. "And then . . ."

"Got caught by Filch." Peter nodded, frowning as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his robes, looking properly shamed for his actions. "He saw the map hanging out of my robes and snatched it right up."

"All right." James returned from a brief stint of pacing back and forth, now looking determined. "We can just have Sirius use his penknife to break in and take it back."

It would not be the first time they had broken into the caretaker's office; knowing the Marauders, Mia assumed it would not be the last.

"No," Mia insisted.

James turned and glared at her. "What do you mean, no?"

"I mean, first, you cannot let Sirius know why Peter actually lost the map. If he finds out that Peter's dating a Slytherin, let alone Mulciber's sister, you might as well tell him that you're dating *Snape*. He'll lose it," she said, staring at the looks of agreement on James and Remus's faces, particularly enjoying the expression of terror on Peter's at the thought of facing an enraged Sirius Black. A part of Mia *really* wanted to let her boyfriend dismantle the rat piece by piece, but she knew that the map needed to *stay* in Filch's office, and Sirius would go back for it no matter what he did to Peter prior. "Secondly, it's time to let the map go."

"Go?" James gaped. "Go where?"

"We're graduating soon, and we won't need the map anymore. I say leave it in Filch's office and let some new student break in and steal it from him. Pass it down. A Marauder heirloom."

Oddly, James looked amused at the thought. "Something we created being passed down through future Marauder generations, pranksters who are all too eager to evade Filch, prefects, and professors alike."

"What if *no one* ever gets it back from Filch?" Remus asked.

"Then they aren't deserving of it." Mia smirked, and both James and Remus smiled in agreement.

"Pete, mate." James sighed looking at his short friend. "You're so lucky that my sister's looking out for you."

He laughed and ignored the scathing look that Mia gave him. She was most certainly *not* looking out for Peter. She was looking out for the *rest* of them. Peter getting out of this scot-free was merely an *unfortunate* side effect.

Peter offered up a smile. "Thank you, Mia."

"Don't thank me," she insisted. "Just keep an eye on your little snake, and don't even think about agreeing to meet her family. I'm not exactly one to talk, considering I'm dating Sirius, but you *know* what Mulciber is, Peter. Iris may be okay, but her family is decidedly not."

"I understand. I'll be careful. I'm really sorry for losing the map," Peter reiterated to James as they headed back toward Gryffindor Tower while Mia tried to think of a way to explain to Sirius why the map was no longer in their possession.

"We all make mistakes, mate." James sighed, trying to focus on the silver lining. "Besides, Mia's right. It's not like we could use the map once we all leave. It belongs to future Marauders."

"What day is it?" Mia asked thoughtfully.

"First of April," Remus replied. "Why?"

She grinned. "Just curious." *Happy birthday, Fred and George.*

## Chapter Seventy-Nine

### *Life Isn't Fair*

---

*I stand naked before you now  
No walls to hide behind  
So here am I, you see all of my scars  
Still here you are, I bare my soul and I'm not afraid  
Not afraid  
(Beautiful With You - Halestorm)*

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**May 31st, 1978**

The Marauders and Mia had decided to stay at Hogwarts during Easter holidays. The excuse was that they needed the time to revise, but in reality, they all knew that Lily was not yet ready to return to Potter Manor and call it "home" so soon after losing her own. James stayed with Lily in her room for the first few weeks after her parents' deaths.

When time permitted, Sirius slept on the sofa in their personal common room, saying that he felt a strange need to be close to the witch he now thought of as a sister—to make certain she was all right.

Mia did not mind in the slightest as it gave her one extra reason to avoid Sirius's bed at night, where he would undoubtedly catch a glimpse of the scar on her forearm. After the horrible way he had reacted to seeing the purple mark on her ribs, she was not looking forward to his eventual discovery.

The final Quidditch match of their school careers took place, and, as usual, Gryffindor dominated the pitch. While they won the game and the Quidditch Cup, Sirius was mildly disappointed he had not been able to knock Regulus from his broom, as the younger Black had not been present for the game. Rumours circulated that the Slytherin Seeker had been acting strangely, a bit morose since returning from holidays, and his gaunt resemblance to a sixth-year Draco Malfoy did not go unnoticed by Mia.

Thankfully, with a silver Quidditch Cup to make sweet love to, neither Sirius nor James took much interest in Regulus's whereabouts or appearances. Focusing on their unblemished Quidditch record and accompanying new fame was also helpful in diverting the attention that Sirius would normally be spending on *Mia*.

Unfortunately, when it had been over a month since she and Sirius had been intimate in any way, shape, or form aside from snogging, she knew she had to let the secret of her scar out, at least in part. Sirius was already becoming suspicious of the fact that she would not let him touch her, which resulted in two minor arguments: one where Sirius had a slight panic attack in thinking that Mia had rekindled feelings for Remus, and the other where he had actually blacked out after talking himself into thinking that she was pregnant.

"You certainly are reliable in a crisis," Mia said sarcastically, looking down at Sirius as he regained consciousness.

"I would say he's a bit dramatic," Remus said, having walked in on the tail end of the argument, "but when you and I hadn't shagged in a while, I didn't exactly behave very well to you acting all suspicious either. Then again, I only yelled a bit and walked away."

"I prefer to think of it as a tantrum," Mia said, smirking when Remus narrowed his eyes at her. "Will you go and get the others? I want to get this over with."

"Everyone?"

"Pack meeting. Marauder meeting. Bloody *House* meeting. Mary, Alice, and Frank will probably end up catching a glimpse if I'm not careful in the future. Considering two of them are going to be Aurors," she said, groaning in frustration, "it might be beneficial to not have them come to their own conclusions."

"They'll understand," Remus assured her.

"Understand what?" Sirius asked, his heavy-lidded eyes looking up at them. "You *are* keeping a secret?"

Mia scowled at her boyfriend. "Don't sit up yet. You hit your head when you fainted, you prat."

"I did *not* faint." Sirius glowered at the accusation, but reached a hand around and rubbed a sore spot on the back of his head. His narrowed gaze followed Remus as he left the common room. "Why're you still keeping secrets from me? And why does Moony know?"

Mia sighed, hating the accusatory tone he used. "Because Remus was there when it happened. Sort of. I'll explain it all soon."

"How'd I end up on the sofa?" Sirius asked, looking around curiously.

"Like I said, you fainted," she explained, running her fingers through his hair, moving her hand away when he went to grab it. Sirius glared at her when she pulled from him.

"So, if you aren't pregnant," he said the word on a sharp exhale of relief, "and you're not sneaking around with Remus behind my back . . ." he added, as Mia tossed him her best look of deep loathing at the mere suggestion. "I said you're *not*, so stop with the evil eyes. After everything we've been through, I actually trust that if you still had feelings for him, you'd just tell me." He sighed and leant back into the pillow, letting her rub his head in peace. "Why are you still keeping things from me?"

"I've kept this one from everyone," Mia admitted. "Not even Jamie knows."

Sirius's eyes widened. "How bad?"

"I'll be making you all take a Wizard's Oath before I tell you," she told him, hoping that would imply the severity of the situation. "But you should know that my secret has *nothing* to do with you. You are not in *any way* responsible."

She knew that Sirius had long ago blamed himself for the scar on her ribs. Inadvertently, she had admitted that he was involved somehow, which *was* the truth. This scar, however, was different. Sirius—older Sirius—had nearly gotten himself killed trying to prevent it from happening, and she would not have his younger self thinking he was responsible for it.

Twenty minutes later, her friends and Peter were gathered in the boys' dormitory where the door could be locked. Mia cast a quick Muffliato Charm, just in case, before insisting they all take a Wizard's Oath. Predictably, James was the first to offer his wand, swearing secrecy upon his magic, followed soon behind by Sirius, Remus, Lily, Alice, Frank, Mary, and, eventually, a hesitant Peter.

"Some of you already know this. I'm adopted," Mia whispered, catching the surprised looks on Alice, Frank, and Mary's faces. Peter stared at her for a long while as though he were trying to add it all up in his head. "I was a Muggle-born," she explained and watched his reaction go from confusion to surprise to irritation and mild disgust.

*And there it is,* Mia thought. *A pureblood Slytherin girlfriend for a few months and he's already slipping.* However, Peter's prejudices and damaged soul weren't her concern just then. If it would not have looked suspicious, she'd have preferred him to not be included at all; as it was, only his Wizard's Oath was keeping him involved now.

"My Muggle family was attacked by Death Eaters years ago. When they were . . . gone, and I found myself without a family, the Potters adopted me."

"Is *that* your big secret?" Mary asked with a smirk. "Mia, you don't think we'd think poorly of you because you were *technically* Muggle-born, do you? If that was so, then we'd have hexed Lily years ago."

Lily smirked. "If I didn't hex you first."

Mia laughed and shook her head. "No. I know you'd all be my friends, no matter what. I was attacked as well, you see." She cleared her throat nervously. "It left a permanent scar on my body—one that can't be glamoured. However, when I came to Hogwarts, Professor Dumbledore was able to procure a potion that would hide the scar from everyone else. Unfortunately, it had a time limit."

Remus had informed her that some version of the truth would be best, and she understood. The best lies were based in truth.

"Unfortunately, it appears that time has run out, and my scar has resurfaced."

"It's okay, Mia," Remus said, placing a hand of support on her shoulder.

"Remus knows?" James inquired, surprised. "I mean, when we were young and I saw—" He gestured to her ribs. "I asked Mum. She told me that when they adopted you, she and Dad agreed to let you start life from scratch and that if you wanted to share your past, you would. I just . . . How come Remus knows but not me? I'm your brother."

"Remus was there when the potion wore off," Mia explained with a shrug of her shoulders, not knowing how else to placate her brother. She took his hand and squeezed it tight, glad when he squeezed back, looking slightly reassured. "And, frankly, after seeing his reaction, I wanted him to be here when I showed the rest of you. *Please* don't panic."

James sat up straight, and Mia noticed that Sirius did the same, looking more on edge than ever. With great hesitation—and a last minute concern over whether she should just Obliviate the lot of them and wear long sleeves from that point forward—she pulled the sleeve of her blouse up, revealing the purple scarred word in her flesh.

They each reacted *exactly* how she had assumed they would.

Lily gasped at the sight of it and practically shoved James out of the way to pull Mia into a sympathetic hug. Mia could feel her friend—*her sister*—shaking and wondered if Lily was afraid something similar could happen to her.

James stood looking confused and helpless, like he wanted to do something to help but did not know what. Remus made his way across the room and put his hands on his shoulders as if hoping to help ground him.

Frank and Alice stood by with wide eyes, staring, likely trying to remain calm and not show Mia an ounce of pity, knowing that it would quite possibly make the situation that much worse.

Mary, on the other hand, had no pity but *plenty* of anger. She reached out and took hold of Mia's arm, staring down at the word on her skin and began swearing up a storm. "Fucking Death Eater cunt pieces of shit! Merlin, please tell me they got what was coming to them?"

"They did." Mia nodded, remembering a bleeding and gasping Bellatrix Lestrange. "They suffered more than I did, that was certain."

In the corner of the room, Peter sat on the edge of his bed, his eyes drawn away from everyone else, looking a mixture of nauseous and terrified. A part of Mia wanted to ask him how he was if only to assess his current thoughts regarding blood supremacy and Voldemort, but she did not have the chance. There was a loud bang, and they all turned to see that Sirius had left the room.

"Where the hell does he think he's going?" Mary snapped irritably.

"Maybe he just . . . just needs some time to himself?" Alice suggested.

"No," James said as he, Peter, and Remus made for the door. "If I know Sirius, he's going to want revenge."

"He can't," Lily said firmly as they all left the room, running down the stairs. "Mia just said that whoever did that had already been taken care of."

"That won't matter." Mia frowned, regretting that she had not *warded* the room to prevent anyone from leaving before they had all had a chance to calm down. "If he can't find the Death Eater who attacked me, he's going after what he *thinks* is the next best thing."

Minutes later, when the large group of Gryffindors made it down to the dungeons, they found a bleeding Regulus Black pinned against the wall, Sirius's wand shoved against his throat. There was a mad look in Sirius's dark grey eyes; Regulus actually looked frightened.

Mia gasped at the sight and tossed Remus a panicked glance.

He and James went into immediate action.

"*Expelliarmus!*" James shouted, quickly pocketing Sirius's wand as it flew into his hand.

When Sirius turned his rage on his friends for interrupting what looked to be less like an interrogation and more like a demonstration, Remus took over, using his werewolf strength to subdue him.

Frank jumped in as well, restraining Sirius's arms while Lily pulled her wand from her robes and waved it over his body, muttering, "*Somnus.*" Sirius collapsed in Remus's arms. "Don't worry, he's just asleep," she explained, letting out a sigh of relief. "Take him back to his room. I can ward the doors there. Mary, can you see about getting a Calming Draught from Madam Pomfrey?"

Mary nodded. "Sure. This close to N.E.W.T.s, shouldn't be too difficult to get a hold of."

"Frank, Peter, Alice?" James ran a hand through his hair. "Could the three of you go to the Great Hall, or head to the library? Maybe casually mention around that Sirius has taken ill, that way no one wonders why he's missing." When they dispersed from the dungeons, he looked back at Regulus, who was now sitting on the ground, cold eyes staring at the opposite wall as he pressed his hand to his neck to stop the bleeding. "What about *him?*"

"Go," Mia insisted. "Take care of Sirius. I'll be there soon."

"Mia—" James stepped forward, his own wand clenched in his hands.

"Go."

Once Remus, James, and Lily removed an unconscious Sirius from the dungeons, Mia knelt in front of the Slytherin and frowned.

"Let me see," she insisted, gesturing to his neck.

Regulus raised his focus to her face and looked at her suspiciously.

"I'm not going to hurt you," she assured him and rolled her eyes when he scoffed at her. "I'm quite good with Healing Spells, but if you want to bleed to death, then by all means. We'll engrave your tombstone to say 'Regulus Black: Stubborn Arsehole.'"

Rolling his own eyes, Regulus muttered, "You and my brother deserve each other."

"I take that as a compliment," she muttered, prying his hand away from his neck to get a look at his injury. The large cut was not deep, but it looked painful. Mia knew how

good Sirius's aim was, so this wound was meant to be a warning. She examined it closely and held her wand up, running it over the slash to close it cleanly.

"Is anyone going to clue me in on what exactly *that* was about?" Regulus snapped, hissing when something she did stung.

"Sirius has issues with Death Eaters," she explained. "After everything that's been in the *Daily Prophet* lately, he was bound to snap at some point."

"So, he attacks *me* because . . . ?"

"Why do you think?" She eyed him carefully, her gaze drifting down to his left arm.

Reflexively, he pulled it close to his chest and stared at her as though he were waiting for her to make the first move and attack. When his eyes looked less cold and angry, and more sad and empty, she sighed as a thought occurred to her.

"You'll need dittany if you don't want this to scar. If you don't want Madam Pomfrey to ask too many questions, I'm sure you could just summon Kreacher and he'd bring some to you," she suggested, watching Regulus's reaction carefully.

His eyes widened only slightly as he stared sceptically at her when she said the house-elf's name. "I'll be fine."

"Oh?" She tilted her head to the side, watching the wizard carefully like a serpent would before striking. "Is there something *wrong* with Kreacher?"

"What do you know?" Regulus demanded, his eyes narrowing.

*It's starting*, Mia thought, feeling a strange sense of dread and relief at the same time.

"I know that you're not a bad a person. Don't get me wrong, you were a little prick when you were younger. But I know that Sirius wanted to save you back when he was attacked. When they tried to mark *him*." She frowned at the memory and noticed a lost look in Regulus's eyes as he hugged his arm tighter. "It's not fair that the two of you were put against one another like this."

"Yes, well." Regulus cleared his throat. "*Life* isn't fair."

"No," Mia agreed. "It's not."

"You're not going to tell anyone?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Why?" he questioned suspiciously, his brows furrowing.

She sighed, exhausted. "A few reasons. Firstly, I think if Sirius were to find out for certain, he'd hate himself for what he might do in reaction," she explained truthfully,

remembering the deep hatred that Sirius had formed for his younger brother post-mortem, in the future, only days before they had all discovered the truth about Regulus's defection. "Secondly, I don't think you're one of them. Not really. And I think you agree with me."

Regulus did not react at all, merely stared at her coldly, holding back any emotion or hints to how he felt in regards to her words. Mia felt terrible that she could not help him, could not save him, but she knew how important it was that he make his own decisions regarding Voldemort.

Slowly, she stood, dusting off her robes and pocketing her wand. "I'd avoid your brother for a while. We'll all be graduating in a few weeks, so after that, it should be quite easy."

She shrugged her shoulders and turned to walk away.

"Potter?" Regulus called after her, and she turned to look back. After a moment of contemplation, he sighed, the cold fury leaving his features. "Take care of my brother."

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Mia knocked on the door to the boys' dormitory and watched as Remus carefully opened it, revealing himself and James standing in the middle of the room, while Lily sat on the edge of Sirius's bed. Mia frowned as she stepped inside, listening as Remus shut and re-warded the door.

"How is he?"

"Pissed off," Sirius muttered quietly, his back turned from her as his face rested on his pillow. Mia sighed at the words and looked at Lily, pleading for a little more information.

"We woke him up to give him the Calming Draught—"

Sirius groaned behind her, "Tastes like piss."

Lily rolled her eyes. "He's a little better."

"Better or bitter?" Mia asked.

Sirius snorted, but she assumed it was a sarcastic laugh.

"He also knows he's not allowed to leave the tower without one of us next to him," James explained, arms crossed over his chest. Mia could see Sirius's wand still in the pocket

of her brother's robes, for which she was grateful. "I'd honestly like to keep that rule in place until we graduate."

"Fuck off, Prongs," Sirius mumbled and then growled when Lily swatted the back of his head.

"Language. You should be grateful that we're all being so calm about this. You attacked a fellow student, got caught by the Head Boy and Girl *and* two prefects, but instead of *reporting* you, we are *protecting* you."

"I don't need your bloody protection," Sirius snapped, still not moving to look at any of them. "And I didn't attack a fellow student. I attacked a Death Eater."

"You attacked your own brother," Mia corrected him.

"The only brothers I have are in this room right now."

"How's Regulus?" Remus asked Mia, ignoring Sirius.

"I healed the wound on his neck, told him to find some Dittany so it wouldn't scar," she explained but left out the details of the conversation she had with the young Death Eater. Sirius stirred at her words, his body stiffening. "Yes, Sirius, I *healed* your brother so he wouldn't scar. You might have an idea as to how I feel about scars."

"We'll leave you two alone," Remus said with a significant look in Sirius's direction. He gestured to Lily and James, and the three made their way to the door.

James stopped and looked at Mia, silently pointing to Sirius's wand in his pocket as though asking a question. She shook her head and pointed to the door, indicating that he should take the wand with him, just in case. When the door shut behind them, she re-warded it with her own security charms to prevent Sirius from escaping again.

She made her way back to Sirius's bed, where she crawled over his body and fell onto the other side of the mattress, facing the angry, yet passive wizard who was filled with bitterness and Calming Draught.

"Hi," she whispered.

"Hi, yourself."

"You can't do that to me, Sirius. I know you were feeling helpless, and you needed to do something, but if you're going to be an Auror, you need to keep your temper in check." When he made to argue, she cast a daring look that silenced him immediately. "I got over this scar, and this word, a long time ago." She rolled her sleeve back up and showed him, watching with sadness as he looked away from it. "Am I so hideous now?"

Sirius turned his attention right back to her, clearly offended by the accusation. "Of course not," he snarled. "We've all got scars." He reached his left forearm up where an old faded burn scar rested from when Lucius Malfoy had tried and failed to place the Dark Mark on him. He glowered, comparing their arms as they lay side by side. "Fucking Death Eaters. So, *this* is why you haven't let me touch you all month?"

"I didn't want you to accidentally see it like you did the other one." She subconsciously touched her ribs. "I wanted to figure out how to tell you first. Thought it would be easier telling everyone at once. Didn't think you'd snap and go on a rampage."

"What the hell did you *expect* me to do?" he asked calmly, and Mia was incredibly grateful to Mary for procuring the draught for him. "While I might not have been conscious for it, Prongs told me that when *I* got attacked by Death Eaters, you put up security wards around my hospital room that a *Curse-Breaker* couldn't even get through. When Remus was threatened at St Mungo's, we all drew our wands on *Aurors*. Of *course* I would react violently to seeing that word on your skin."

"Well, we *all* need to get a grip then." Mia smiled and then let it fade away all too quickly. She brushed some of the hair from Sirius's face, letting the tips of her fingers linger on his cheek. "I need you to promise me that you're not going to go after Regulus again."

Sirius scoffed at the request and looked away from her.

"I mean it, Sirius. Please. We're leaving Hogwarts in less than a month, and I don't want to start our lives with you being arrested for attacking your own brother."

"If I challenge him to a wizard's duel, it's perfectly legal," he pointed out.

Mia growled reproachfully. "Sirius."

"Fine," he relented. "Bloody witch making me not hex Regulus," he complained under his breath as he closed his eyes. He tugged her up against him, nuzzling his face into her hair as his body relaxed.

"Yes, poor Sirius can't hex Slytherins," Mia retorted sarcastically.

"I know," he agreed, ignoring her tone. "You've just got that kind of power over me, kitten. No hexing," he promised, still looking put out by it. "I must really love you."

Mia gasped at the words but said nothing in return, not wanting to make a big deal out of it in case he had said them by accident. She held him tighter against her and buried her face against his chest before eventually drifting off to sleep in his arms.

## Chapter Eighty

### *Those Who Should Be Here*

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*But it's too late, to go back.  
I can see the darkness, through the cracks.  
Daylight fading, I curse the breaking.  
The day is gone  
(Day is Gone - Noah Gundersen)*

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**June 2nd, 1978**

The very last day of Advanced Potions had the students hovering over one final cauldron in front of Professor Slughorn. With little left to teach them, he asked his most brilliant students to assist with restocking the hospital wing with necessary potions. Only Damocles Belby was given permission to work on something else, as he had requested Slughorn's help in patenting the potion he had created in class. Damocles proudly called it Wolfsbane Potion, after figuring out that it could be helpful to the werewolf population. Mia, Sirius, and Lily had joyfully congratulated him on his discovery, while Snape sneered at them all.

"Are you done already?" Mia asked as she watched Lily clean out her cauldron and reach into her bag, retrieving a small glass bowl. Mia raised a brow and watched with interest as her friend grinned and poured water into the bowl from the tip of her wand. "Do I want to even ask?"

"I made a gift for Professor Slughorn," Lily answered with a smile. "He's always been very nice to me, and I know how he feels about Muggle-borns. Maybe now he'll see that blood has nothing to do with talent. Despite his being a Slytherin, I want to thank him for all that he's taught me." She pulled a flower petal in a sealed jar from her bag and made her way to Slughorn's desk, the sealed jar tucked under her arm and the bowl of water in her hands.

"You done? Because my keeper is beckoning," Sirius said sarcastically to Mia after putting his things away and sealing the phials of Blood Replenishing Potion that he had been assigned to brew. At her strange look, he gestured to James, who was waiting by the door, holding his empty hand out toward Sirius with an impatient look on his face.

After Sirius's attack on Regulus, the pack had sat down and decided that, unless he was using it for classes, he would relinquish his wand to James, at least until Sirius himself felt that he could look at a Slytherin without wanting to attack.

Mia smirked at her brother. "He looks more like a Chaser to me. Go ahead. I'm going to wait around for Lily. You two save us seats," she requested, thinking that the library would certainly be packed with their fellow seventh years who were all preparing for N.E.W.T.s.

Sirius nodded and kissed her cheek before heading out the door, dropping his wand into James's palm.

Mia turned around and looked at Snape, who was sealing up a dozen phials of Pepper-Up Potion. After her brief conversation with Regulus, Mia was realising how many years she had spent in this timeline being angry about the future. It had taken being confronted by a vision of herself, a slew of Arithmancy calculations, and a trip with Remus inside of a Pensieve to see that she had wasted too much time being bitter instead of doing what Future Remus's letter had instructed her to do. She really was not living her life if she was focused on the future and what was meant to be.

A great portion of that wasted focus had been spent being angry at the wizard in front of her. Angry at him for pushing her to the ground and sparking the feud between himself and James. Angry at him for being terrible to Lily, for being mean to her, for hexing James and Sirius, and for never standing up for his friend. She was also angry in knowing that it was Severus Snape who would hear and then relay the prophecy about Harry to Voldemort, ultimately putting targets on James, Lily, Alice, and Frank's backs. But her anger did not stop there. She was furious that he had brought his bitter past into the future with him, taking his rivalry with James into another generation by being so publicly cruel to Harry. It also did not help that he had called her an insufferable know-it-all and made fun of her teeth after she had been hexed—the asshole.

But if she could bring herself to see the path to *Regulus's* redemption, and forgive *Draco* for tormenting her for years, then surely she could somehow figure out how to remember that Severus Snape would one day be essential to ending the war. He would provide them not only with the Sword of Gryffindor and assist in their infiltration of the school, but he would protect the students of Hogwarts from being completely manhandled

by the Carrows. He would spend decades as a spy, putting his life at risk only to lose it. Arsehole or not, Severus Snape would *die* on the right side of the war doing the right thing.

"Do you need help?" she offered.

"I can manage," he drawled, rolling his eyes.

"I wanted to apologise to you." She shifted the strap of her bag over her shoulder as she stood and faced him. "I shouldn't have punched you—"

"Twice," Snape interjected without looking at her as he continued to work.

"Twice," Mia agreed with a smile. "Granted, you *did* deserve it, but I shouldn't expect others to be kind when I resort to violence so quickly. If it makes you feel any better, you're not the only Slytherin I've punched in the face." She smirked, thinking of Draco *and* Lucius Malfoy.

"I care as little for your physical altercations with my Housemates as I do for your pathetic attempt at an apology." Snape looked annoyed when she did not take his bait and instead smiled at him as though they were friendly acquaintances—not nemeses.

"I also want to forgive you," Mia said quietly, her smile fading.

Without even bothering to ask what for, Snape glowered at her and hissed, "Why would I ever care to obtain forgiveness from you?"

"Because one day, Severus Snape, you're going to *want* it. One day, you're going to do something you can never take back." Her gaze flickered to his left forearm.

Instinctively, Snape pulled it to his chest as Regulus had done.

*Merlin, they're both really going to need to work on that if they plan to properly defect from the Death Eaters,* Mia thought, shaking her head.

"One day, you're going to realise the consequences of decisions you've made in anger and jealousy, and you'll want forgiveness from someone, but it won't be there." She looked over her shoulder to see Lily smiling brightly, being hugged by Professor Slughorn. A beautiful fish was swimming around in the bowl of water that now sat on the man's desk. Mia turned her attention back to Snape, who was staring at Lily, no longer with desire as he used to, but with a sad yearning. Mia wondered if *she* ever looked like that when thinking about Harry.

"Snape, when you get in over your head," she whispered, making a subtle gesture toward his hidden Dark Mark, "remember, once you figure things out, that help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it."

Snape scowled at her. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

She sighed, frustrated. Even if she *wanted* to tell him, the Tacere Veritas prevented her from doing so. "You'll figure it out. One day."

"Everything all right?" Lily asked, looking wary as she approached Mia from the side, briefly casting a glance at Snape, who averted his gaze, clearly unable to stare into her eyes. Mia understood why.

"Everything's good. I was simply saying goodbye to Snape," Mia explained with a smile. "Seven years in a classroom together merits at least *that*, don't you think?" Lily frowned and looked down at Mia's forearm, knowing the word that was hidden beneath the robes. The same word that had severed her relationship with the wizard in question.

Eventually, Lily looked up, schooled her expression and nodded thoughtfully. "Goodbye, Severus. Good luck on your N.E.W.T.s and . . . and whatever you decide to do with your life."

Snape maintained a stony mien, but Mia saw the very briefest of emotions in his expression as he nodded to his former best friend, still unable to meet Lily's gaze.

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### **June 24th, 1978**

The grounds were opened up to family and friends of the graduating class of 1978. It was a beautiful day, so the staff opted to forego tents and have the ceremony under the open sky. Rows and rows of colourful chairs had been transfigured, and parents were escorted to the seats supporting the Houses that their children belonged in.

Mia escorted her father to a golden chair with his name on it. He kissed her forehead, laughing when he looked up. She turned to see James waving dramatically while Sirius was subtly shortening his trousers and robes with a wandless charm until James's knees were revealed. Likely feeling the sudden draft, James spun and hit Sirius in the shoulder before turning to have Lily fix his robes and trousers.

The rest of the little band of misfits, all dressed in scarlet and gold, were standing in a line waiting to receive their certificates of completion.

"Better get in line, love," Charlus said.

"There's still plenty of time. Is it odd that I'm nervous?" she asked, but Charlus never had the chance to answer as a woman with a pet vulture perched on her shoulder shuffled her way into the next seat, distracting them.

Charlus stared at the bird in horror, but Mia cleared her throat and smiled politely. "Lady Longbottom."

The witch nodded in greeting, narrowing her eyes as she observed Mia. "Potters, right. I never got to say my condolences last year." Her gaze turned to Charlus. "Your wife was formidable and much more pleasant than her relatives."

Charlus smirked. "Of that, we can certainly agree."

Augusta Longbottom then complained for a full ten minutes about the unpleasant couple to her right—the Pettigrews—who she was adamantly avoiding, as well as the couple in front of her—the Browns—who were eagerly trying to get her involved in the wedding plans for Alice and Frank.

"Our oldest boy Robert just got married last year." Mrs Brown smiled as she turned to face Augusta and Charlus, gesturing to the brown-haired wizard sitting next to her and the blond witch attached to his arm. The girl was giggling and calling her young husband, "Wobbie," in a high-pitched squeal.

Both Charlus and Augusta looked horrified by the display, though the former was stifling a laugh. Mia, having horrid flashbacks to her original sixth year, took that as her cue to leave, brushed a kiss against her father's cheek and made her way toward her friends.

"Merlin." Mary groaned, looking over Mia's shoulder as she approached. "I'm pretty sure my mother just hit on Pandora's father."

Mia turned back to see Mary's mother, Begonia Macdonald, eyeing a passing wizard. The man swallowed nervously and walked away just as quickly as he had arrived, leaving Begonia laughing with amusement.

"Oh, that's lovely," Pandora said with a smile, her blue and bronze robes parted to reveal the clashing bright orange dress beneath them. "My father's quite nervous around witches; I'm sure he appreciated being complimented by her flirting."

"He didn't come," Remus muttered as he scanned the crowd. Mia followed his gaze, spotting an empty reserved chair reading *LUPIN* on it. She frowned and pulled her best friend into a tight hug, quickly followed up by Lily, Sirius, and James. Eventually, all the Gryffindors were clinging to one another, laughing.

"It could be worse, Moony. *My* parents could have shown up." Sirius gestured with a grin to the two reserved seats in the centre of the crowd reading *BLACK*. "Just in case they *did* decide to pop in and say hello, I charmed those seats to bite whoever sits down on them."

As the ceremony commenced, they all received their certificates and praise from the headmaster and their professors. Slughorn spent extra time shaking the hands of his favourite students. Professor Broadmoor, their seventh and final Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, had stopped to congratulate Remus, James, and Mia on their exceptional work in class.

As Sirius stepped up to receive his certificate from Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall pulled the parchment from the headmaster's hand and greeted Sirius with a stern glare. Instead of the certificate, she held out another parchment.

Sirius paused before reaching out to accept it from the deputy headmistress, who was now smirking at him. Glancing down at the parchment in his hands, he laughed loudly. Mia recognised the paper as the one Sirius had charmed to stick to Professor McGonagall's desk.

"Does this mean you're going to miss me, Minnie?" Sirius winked at the older witch, who fixed him with narrowed eyes.

"This means, *Sirius*," she said with a small smile, using his given name as she handed him his actual certificate, "that the only reason I'm allowing you to step foot off this platform with your hair intact after vandalising my desk, is the fact that you helped win more consecutive Quidditch Cups for Gryffindor than we'd had in fifty years."

"Stop flirting with me." Sirius grinned at her, and the smile on her face faded away, replaced with a scowl. "You know I'm a taken man. Shame on you, Minnie!"

Dumbledore gave a long speech that caused a few to fall asleep until he announced the many triumphs that had occurred from this particular class of students. Damocles Belby was praised for his work with potions and for having been recruited into St Mungo's research department. Otto Bagman had been signed on as a Chaser for the Wimbourne Wasps, the same team for which his older brother had played.

Alice and Frank were spoken highly of by the headmaster, who proudly announced that not only they, but also Sirius, had been given early acceptance into the Auror program within the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

James was publicly exalted for his captaincy of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, leading them to many victories over his time as a student while also maintaining amazing exam scores and working hard during his final year as Head Boy. Mia had worried that such public praise would inflate her brother's ego again, but one glance at Lily's adoring face told her that James no longer needed to puff out his chest and peacock about for her attention.

Dumbledore told the audience that four students had broken N.E.W.T. records, and then he clapped Snape on the back for achieving the highest Potions N.E.W.T. score in over a century. Lily, of course, beamed when Dumbledore announced that she had broken records on her Charms exam, much to the pleasure of a bouncing Professor Flitwick. Mia, naturally, had smashed Transfiguration records to the great pride and annoyance of Professor McGonagall. But it was *Remus* who stood shyly smiling as the headmaster told the gathered crowd that his overall average in N.E.W.T. scores went above and beyond every other student in their entire year.

"I could not be prouder of any of you," Charlus said with a grin as he approached the teenagers with open arms, laughing when they all nearly tackled him to the ground. "Why was Professor McGonagall glaring at you, Sirius?"

"How should *I* know? The woman can't keep her eyes off of me," Sirius said, feigning innocence and laughing when Mia slapped his arm.

Charlus looked between his daughter and Remus. "I'm curious. How *exactly* did Remus's average scores trump Mia's?"

At the question, Mia scowled at her best friend, who laughed in reply.

"Our practical Defence exam had two parts. One where you showed various offensive and defensive spells and charms, which Mia aced, of course," James explained with a smirk. "The second part of the exam was a duel, and Broadmoor put Moony and Mia up against one another."

Mia pouted. "It wasn't *that* funny."

Sirius grinned. "Oh, kitten. It *really* was."

Charlus raised a brow. "What happened?"

"In the middle of the duel, Remus . . ." Lily whispered, stifling a laugh, "transfigured Mia into a fox."

The rest of the group burst into laughter at Mia's expense.

Remus had not actually *transfigured* her into a fox as most assumed, but instead he had silently used a charm that forced Mia to shift into her Animagus form. She had been so shocked at the transformation mid-duel that she had been unprepared to shield the attack. Not only that, but she essentially had to give up right then and there. Had she shifted back, she would have outed herself as an Animagus, so she pretended to be transfigured instead and waited for Remus to pretend to end the charm so she could turn back into her human form.

"He cheated," Mia huffed.

"I did *not*." Remus grinned, clearly enjoying his victory over his best friend. "I followed the rules very clearly. I took what I knew about my opponent and used it against them to win."

"Said the cheat."

"Well, regardless of how it all happened. I am proud to know and be father to so many talented young wizards and witches." Charlus's bright smile faded into something a little more serious, and he lowered his tone when he spoke again. "Albus also informed me that in addition to your certificates, you've all received an invitation from him?"

One by one, each of the Gryffindors nodded their heads.

"Good. It's time then for you to read the invitation, memorise it, and then dispose of it immediately."

All at once, the teenagers opened the small slips of parchment that had been handed to them by the headmaster upon graduating.

Though Mia had a feeling what she was going to see, it was no less a surprise when she read the words:

*The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at Tuts Tower, Tutshill, England.*

"I don't get it," Peter said.

"Memorise it, destroy it, ask questions later," Charlus instructed him.

"*Incendio*." Mia was the first to burn the parchment in her hand, followed swiftly by the others, some who looked as though they understood what was happening while others, like Peter, still seemed to be confused.

"It'll all be explained later." Charlus smiled at the group proudly when they were joined by the Browns, the Pettigrews, Begonia Macdonald, and Augusta Longbottom.

"Quite a group of children we've got here," Charlus said to the other parents. "I say their achievements deserve a toast."

A house-elf popped up behind him with a tray of various drinks.

When Sirius and Mia each reached for a goblet of elf wine, James hurriedly jumped between the pair and the wine, shouting, "Absolutely not!" and handed out bottles of butterbeer to everyone instead.

"To our children, the future of the Wizarding world, and to those who should be here, but are not," Charlus said as he raised his bottle, a sad smile on his face.

Remus nodded with a grateful glance to Charlus. "To Hope Lupin."

"To Aaron Macdonald." Mary cast a smile at her mother, who sniffled loudly and dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief.

"To Edgar Longbottom," Frank said proudly, raising his glass and meeting his mother's approving stare.

"To Harold and Aster Evans," Lily said with a watery smile, leaning her head against James's shoulder as he wrapped an arm around her.

James raised his glass, meeting Charlus's teary stare. "To Dorea Potter."

"To Dorea Potter," Mia echoed her brother.

"To Dorea Potter," Sirius added quietly.

Finally, they all drank.

There was little time for nostalgia, for memories, or for celebrations. No sooner than the Gryffindors toasted their late parents, flashes of light shot across the grounds. Blurs of black smoke flew into the crowd, and Mia gasped at the sight of Death Eaters in full regalia.

In a moment of panic, she flashed back to the final Battle of Hogwarts that ended the Second Wizarding War. Though there was only a handful of Death Eaters now, they were no less threatening than before. Instinctively, she stepped in front of Remus and Sirius, but neither wizard was content to stand idly by and be protected by her.

The Gryffindors separated immediately, forming smaller groups, standing back-to-back to protect one another as they drew their wands on the attacking masked menaces, stunning as quickly as possible.

The staff jumped right into the middle of the fray, protecting members of the crowd who were too young or old to fight. Professor McGonagall stood in front of at least ten

children, fighting off two attackers. Professor Flitwick sped along faster than Mia had ever seen him, flinging nasty-looking hexes at unsuspecting Death Eaters. Dumbledore easily avoided any spell sent his way, instead raising his wand to reactivate the wards that had been adjusted to allow for visitors.

Mia caught sight of her father standing beside Augusta Longbottom who sent what Mia was certain was an illegal—though not Unforgivable—hex at a Death Eater who began gushing blood from his arm where the spell struck.

With her back to Sirius and Remus, each of them pivoting to protect the others, Mia caught a glimpse of James, Lily, and Peter doing the same. Across the field, Alice, Frank, and Mary stood back-to-back, looking determined.

"Jamie!" Mia screamed and threw a Stunning Spell at a Death Eater who had his wand aimed at her brother. The wizard flew backward, collapsing into a row of chairs. James went to apprehend the man but was cut off when another Death Eater approached, took hold of his fallen comrade, and Disapparated.

Apparently, the other Death Eaters were thinking along the same lines. One by one, they vanished as quickly as they had arrived, and no sooner were they gone than Dumbledore raised the protective wards on the grounds, looking furious that they had been attacked, and rightly so.

It was not a power play, it was not an assassination attempt on Dumbledore. No, this was a message. This was Voldemort showing that he was not afraid to walk into Dumbledore's own backyard and take without asking. This was chaos for the sake of chaos.

It was also a massacre.

Students were rounded up first, led by Lily and James who stepped back into their roles as Head Boy and Girl to determine who was injured, who was killed, and who might be missing. Many students suffered small wounds, and three had been killed, though more adults had lost their lives in the short-lived fight than teenagers and children.

In the end, only one person remained unaccounted for: Severus Snape.

**August 6th, 1978**

"I, James Potter . . ."

"I, Sirius Black . . ."

"I, Lily Evans . . ."

"I, Remus Lupin . . ."

"I, Peter Pettigrew . . ."

"I, Frank Longbottom . . ."

"I, Alice Longbottom . . ."

"I, Mary Macdonald . . ."

"I, Mia Potter, do swear to pledge my loyalty as a member of the Order of the Phoenix, to serve to the best of my ability, willingly and honourably protecting my fellow Order members and the Wizarding world as a whole, and will do my part to put an end to the reign of Death Eaters and Dark wizards."

She said the oath, noticing a distinct lack of magical binding. A part of her wanted to suggest one, knowing that the lack of such restrictions would allow Order members such as Peter to break the oath he had so willingly just taken.

The newest recruits sat in the back of the room while the elder members spoke of plans regarding the safety of the more famous Muggle-born families as well as business owners who were openly against blood supremacy. They were the most prominent targets for now and needed to be protected.

Mia smiled sadly at the way Alice was nervously fidgeting with her wedding ring. Though they had planned on marrying later that summer, Alice and Frank sped things along after the attack at graduation when Alice's mother was amongst those who were killed. It was too painful to plan a big, celebratory wedding without her mother, so they eloped as best they could with Augusta Longbottom pulling rank on the whole ceremony, which none of their friends attended.

Frank and Sirius looked exhausted, the latter leaning his head on Mia's shoulder, doing his best to stay awake through Alastor Moody's rants about a lack of security around Gringotts where suspected Death Eaters, Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrage, were known to have visited recently. Though they had no evidence yet against the couple, Bellatrix had

been loud enough inside the bank to draw unwanted attention, yelling about extra protections on her vault.

Mia bristled at the news, and with every irritable sigh she let slip out of her mouth, Dumbledore tossed her an interested look followed by a kind smile that caused her blood to boil in response. After coming to terms with the future, Mia had decided not to actively try and change anything, but sitting there and *knowing* something while everyone else *speculated* was driving her spare.

"Sirius," Mia whispered. "Sirius, you're snoring."

He slowly opened his tired grey eyes and looked up gratefully to her. "Thanks, love."

Mia smirked lightly. "Constant vigilance."

He rolled his eyes and tossed a brief glare up at the front of the small living room at Tuts Tower where the meeting was taking place. A two-legged, two-eyed—but still paranoid as fuck—Alastor Moody was in an argument with fellow Order member and Auror, Edgar Bones, over the way a recent Death Eater arrest had gone south due to evidence being mishandled.

"Man's a right lunatic," Sirius whispered to Mia while looking at Moody.

Within days of the attack at their graduation, Moody hauled Frank, Alice, and Sirius into the Ministry to begin their training. Frank and Sirius were paired up together to be trained directly under Moody himself, while Alice was paired with another witch to be trained by Edgar Bones.

The two elder Aurors clearly had different definitions of what consisted of proper instruction. Alice and her partner, Elspeth Entwistle, were loaded up with books and manuals during the first half of the day and sent to physical training during the second half. Sirius and Frank, on the other hand, were told to study their manuals and texts all day long. Meanwhile, Moody would interrupt at various points during the day to ambush his trainees by hexing them in the back, jinxing them while they read, and cursing them every other time they blinked.

Frank and Sirius had begun sitting back-to-back while revising, taking turns to keep watch for their boss and mentor. Both were exhausted and paranoid by the end of their first week. As training progressed, they continued being just as tired, though quite a bit more skilled and knowledgeable in their chosen careers.

When the meeting was officially over, everyone stood. Dorcas Meadowes, the owner of Tuts Tower, offered everyone refreshments and then, trying to cheer them all up, suggested that they take a commemorative photograph of the entire Order.

Mia offered to take it, joking that if her hair were in the picture, it would not leave room for anyone else.

A quick snap of a camera and the smiles faded once again from the faces of the Order members, as many gathered in front of a large chalkboard where suspected Death Eaters were listed along with known associates, potential allies and investments, properties, and criminal histories. Alongside the suspected were cut out *Daily Prophet* articles relating to Death Eater attacks and sightings.

Mia's attention lingered on one in particular.

### HORROR AT HOGWARTS

*Yesterday, after the celebration of Hogwarts' most recent graduating class, Death Eaters—servants of You-Know-Who—attacked the sacred institution without warning. While Albus Dumbledore and the teaching staff of the school fought to secure the grounds as quickly as possible, it was left to students and families to defend one another in the onslaught. Though the Death Eaters quickly departed, and Aurors are looking into the attack, far too many lost their lives in yet another bloodbath.*

*Hearts go out to the families of those we have recently lost:*

*Elizabeth Abbott, Samantha Alton, Otto Bagman, Lucia Bagman, Amaranthus Brown, Julia Fawcett, Sarah Fawcett, Begonia Macdonald, and Charlus Potter.*

## Chapter Eighty-One

### *Outside the Order*

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*Put your lighter in the air and lead me back home  
When it's all said and done I'll follow the echoes  
I hear you night after night calling out my name  
And I find myself running to meet you, I didn't want to escape  
From the bricks that I laid down  
(Break In - Halestorm)*

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**August 6th, 1978**

Mia stared at her father's name on the paper until arms wrapped around her waist, the soothing smell of leather bringing about an old comfort.

"You ready to go, kitten?" Sirius asked.

In the aftermath of the attack at graduation, the Gryffindors had rallied together to offer assistance to the wounded. It had been chaos. Both Alice and Mary had lost their mothers in the attack; while the witches had fallen to the ground consumed with grief, Peter was unable to handle the near-fatal attack on his *own* mother, which left her comatose. His father, Evan Pettigrew, turned murderous at the sight of his wife, having assumed her dead. He drew his wand and started throwing hexes and curses at anyone who came near, Peter included. When the Aurors showed up, Evan Pettigrew was arrested for accidentally hitting an innocent bystander with a Cruciatus Curse.

When Charlus's body was found, Mia broke.

Dorea's passing had hurt like nothing else in the world, but there had been time—even though it was a short amount—to adjust to the idea of her death. Mia had to be strong for the others as well; James and Sirius were losing a mother, too, and neither had experienced death before. Not only that, but Remus had just lost his own mother and needed to be taken care of.

Losing Charlus felt like the last straw, and Mia had fallen to pieces in Sirius's arms at the sight of her father, dead on the ground with a long, familiar, purple scar on his ribs.

Dolohov had been with the Death Eaters that attacked.

Those who had seen Mia's scar instantly recognised the similar one on Charlus's body, but no one said a word about it, likely assuming that it was a Death Eater specialty—

much like they assumed of the Sectumsempra Curse. Mia, however, knew better, and recalled Future Remus informing her that silencing Dolohov in the Department of Mysteries—so that he could not cast verbally—had *probably* saved her own life; now, Mia knew for certain that it had.

The funeral was a quiet event, nothing like Dorea's had been. There were too many deaths to handle in such a short amount of time, not to mention that Sirius, Frank, and Alice had started their Auror training.

Despite how much it hurt and how hard they all had cried, once each parent was in the ground, the newly graduated Gryffindors made a silent promise to move forward. They were at war; as horrible as it was, death was something they all needed to get used to.

"I'm ready. Let's go home."

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"Master is home!"

As James exited the fireplace, he was subsequently attack-hugged by an overly enthusiastic house-elf.

After the death of Charlus, Tilly became quite a bit more attached to James and Mia—extremely protective and anxious anytime either of them left the manor. Mia was initially angry at herself for allowing it, but she eventually conceded to James, who went about setting out a large list of tasks for Tilly to keep her occupied. Boredom was a house-elf's worst enemy. Tilly was having trouble not dwelling on the danger out in the Wizarding world, and work seemed to ease her anxiety.

"Is dinner ready, Tilly?" James asked as they took seats in the large drawing room. "We need to eat quickly so we can keep packing everything up."

"Tilly fixed Master's favourites. Steak and kidney pie and treacle tart. And Tilly made roast chicken for Miss Lily, chocolate cake for Master Remus, lamb stew for Master Sirius, and trifle for Mistress."

Mia frowned, ever concerned for Tilly's health and welfare. "You didn't have to do all that."

James cleared his throat, silencing Mia's objections with a glare. "Of *course* she did. And we're very happy that you've made us all such wonderful things, Tilly."

Tilly beamed up at him and then vanished to set the table.

James turned and sighed. "You know she'll snap if you try to keep her from working."

"I know. I don't want to *keep* her from working. Believe me, I got over that issue years ago. But I don't want her to hurt herself by overdoing it." Mia dropped her gaze. They already had lost so much, and the idea of losing Tilly—who had also raised them to a certain extent—was horrifying to think about.

"I promise you, I will take care of her." James stretched his arm and took Mia's hand within his own. "You could see for yourself if you want. It's technically *your* house too, you know."

Mia smiled at her brother, kicking her feet up onto Sirius's lap. "You and Lily can start your lives together in Godric's Hollow. Potter Cottage is your home. I'll make do living with *these* mongrels."

One day after the funeral, they had all sat down together to discuss plans for the future. Each and every one of them agreed that living in the manor felt wrong without Charlus or Dorea there with them. Sirius and Remus were already planning on moving out, and Sirius had put money down on a flat somewhere in Diagon Alley, though he and Remus had yet to let anyone over to see it. Sirius asked Mia to move in with them, stating that he worried he and Remus would perish without her there to boss them around.

Mia accepted the offer immediately, then smiled when James asked Lily to move with him into Potter Cottage, a lovely home in the centre of a village called Godric's Hollow. Tilly had already been to the old Potter residence to clean up the place and make it habitable for the new occupants and herself; James requested that she move with them, leaving Mia guilt-free over owning a house-elf. It also helped to know that Sirius would be forced to clean up after himself from now on.

"'Mongrels,' she says," Sirius scoffed as he rubbed Mia's feet, smiling when she brushed her hand against his cheek. "You'd think she didn't like us much, Moony."

"You're both rotten." She tilted her head back to look at Lily, who sat perched on James's lap as though it were a throne fit for a queen. "Do you know I *still* don't know where I'm moving?"

Lily shook her head and laughed. "Let them have this surprise. They're slowly weaning off the need to prank Filch and hex Slytherins. Speaking of hexes, I'm very proud of you, Mia."

"Why's that?"

"Marlene," Lily replied.

"I can't believe McKinnon is in the Order," Mia hissed under her breath and looked down at the end of the sofa where Sirius was aggressively rubbing her feet in what she assumed was a pre-emptive attempt to avoid an argument about She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

"Well, I know how you feel about her, so I'm happy to see that you've matured and are no longer letting your wand do all your talking for you," Lily insisted.

"I left my Tele-Portkey in my other robes," Mia said seriously, looking down at her nails as though she were examining a fresh manicure. The pink polish that Mary applied a week earlier was badly chipped. "Besides, was I going to hex the cow in front of Dumbledore and a collection of Aurors?"

"No, she'll wait until she's sent on a mission and Marlene is her partner; *then* she'll hex her good." Sirius chuckled, receiving an adoring smile from Mia in return.

"She would not," Lily argued. "Mia might have a grudge, but she would never risk a mission for the Order."

"Actually . . . I'll be on a permanent mission *outside* of the Order," Mia slowly explained, concealing her fading smile and the approaching scowl behind an expression of indifference.

"What's that?" James rose a brow, looking anxious. "'Outside of the Order.' What does that mean?"

Mia frowned, knowing that he was probably thinking that Dumbledore had recruited her as a spy, thus putting her in danger. "I'll be fine. It's more behind-the-scenes type of stuff: arithmancy equations, attempting predictions of future events," she lied through her rehearsed excuses, "but it means I can't be at the meetings very often. If I'm too involved there's a chance I could try to work the equations in favour of a predetermined outcome, and that never works, so I have to get my information directly from Dumbledore."

*"So, basically, I'm an official member of the Order only because it would look suspicious to the rest of my friends and family if I wasn't inducted," Mia summarised as she stood in a secluded and silenced area of Tuts Tower looking across the room at Dumbledore, who had the nerve to fucking smile at her. "I suppose if my skills and exam results weren't as high as they were, you could have said I wasn't qualified. As it stands, I'm the most qualified person to be in the Order."*

*"I do believe you could easily duel any member here and win," Dumbledore said with a strange look of pride for his former student. "Save perhaps for Remus."*

*"That was a fluke, and he's a dirty cheat. You really should retest him," Mia insisted, narrowing her eyes as he referenced her loss during her second practical N.E.W.T.s exam for Defence. "So, what am I supposed to say? 'I know I'm actually a part of the Order, but I can't attend any meetings because Dumbledore believes I'll get overly emotional, snap, and confess everything about the future'? Except I can't confess everything, so I'll probably just throw a fit." She frowned and folded her arms tightly across her chest.*

*"The future cannot be changed, and I believe you being involved in meetings would only hurt you in the end," Dumbledore said, a look of remorse on his face. "The Order will be the front line of defence in this war, and none of us is too prideful to think that we won't suffer casualties. Casualties of which you might be aware."*

*"I am most certainly aware of them," Mia snapped. It was torture knowing what would happen to James and Lily, and sitting in a room full of people she knew were also destined to die made her feel sick with herself. She felt like an accomplice to murder.*

*"Which is why I don't think it fair for you to be involved with people you know may die and hear them be put on assignments from which you know they will not come back. It is a kindness I am trying to extend to you, Miss Potter."*

*"It would be kinder to prevent them from dying. Still, we've been arguing this point for years now." She took a deep breath and slowly let it out to try and calm herself. "Nothing changes; I'm well aware."*

*Dumbledore smiled at her. "I have faith that we will win this war."*

*Mia looked at him, hoping that she nailed the "you're an idiot" stare of incredulity that she really wanted him to see. "You have my word that we have already won it. That is not faith. That's not even hope. It's assurance."*

*She uncrossed her arms and peeked into the room where others had gathered together, getting ready to be inducted. She smiled sadly at the sight of Sirius and Frank, who were nodding off on the sofa.*

*"Alastor tells me that our newest Aurors-in-training are doing well," Dumbledore commented, following her line of sight.*

*"I'll be joining the Ministry soon as well," she reminded him. "Wizengamot Administration Services. A mild-mannered file clerk. I don't think I could draw less attention to myself if I spent the rest of my life Disillusioned."*

*"In your new position, you will have a great deal of access to public and sealed records," Dumbledore noted thoughtfully. "Involved in the meetings or not, Mia, you will become a great asset to the Order."*

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After Tilly stuffed them all with their favourite foods, Sirius and Remus led Mia away from Potter Manor to show her their new flat. James and Lily were more than happy to be left alone, having the manor to themselves for the first—and quite possibly the last—time ever; they were set to move into Potter Cottage the following morning.

When Sirius, Remus, and Mia stepped into the Leaky Cauldron, Tom raised a suspicious brow at them and stepped from behind the counter, folding his large arms across his chest as he blocked the path to the back door, his eyes narrowing briefly. "You all right there, love?"

"Tom?" Mia laughed, embarrassed. "Yes, I'm quite well. These two idiots have a surprise for me; apparently, I have to be blindfolded for it to reach maximum excitement."

"Right then," Tom said, sounding not entirely convinced that Sirius and Remus were not up to something nefarious. "Out you go, I guess."

"I told you the blindfold was a bad idea," Mia muttered as the men led her to the back where they came face-to-face with the brick wall separating them from Diagon Alley. Sirius held Mia close to his chest, and she could hear Remus using his wand to tap their way in.

"I believe your exact words were, 'Blindfolds are not to be used outside the bedroom,'" Sirius said.

"I did *not* say that! And I've *never* worn a blindfold in the bedroom, as you well know," Mia murmured with an indignant huff.

"Really?" Sirius leant in close to brush his lips against her ear. "Because the blush on Remus's cheeks tells me that you're lying."

Remus cleared his throat. "To be fair, *she's* never worn a blindfold, and we weren't exactly in a *bedroom* at the time."

Sirius let out a bark of laughter as the brick wall began to give way. "You've been holding out on me, kitten. We're keeping *this*," he said, gently touching the knot on the back of her head where the blindfold had been secured.

Mia shook her head in exasperation as she felt Sirius take one hand while Remus took the other. "Mother of Merlin, how am I going to *live* with the two of you?"

They led her through the opening into the Alley, where she was grateful to not hear that many people nearby. All she needed now was to wake up with her photo in the *Daily Prophet*, Sirius and Remus being suspected of witch-napping or worse.

"I think we'll all get along famously," Sirius said, gently touching her elbow as he helped direct her over the cobblestones without falling. "Any problems we have, a few Silencing Charms can easily fix; isn't that right, Moony?"

"Not sure why you'd even bother," Remus said with a chuckle. "Any noises Mia makes, I've already heard in abundance."

Mia flushed, annoyed over the utter lack of jealousy that she felt was needed to keep the men from openly talking like this with one another. Really, they could each do with at least a dash of shame.

"And you're fine with hearing *Sirius*?" she asked, hoping to provoke at least one of them to embarrassment.

"I shared a bathroom with Sirius for seven years, Mia. If he's as loud with *you* as he is with *himself*, then it's nothing I haven't already heard."

"By yourself?" She turned her blindfolded head in Sirius's direction as though he could see the strange disbelief in her eyes.

"What?" Sirius questioned innocently. "I'm a very talented lover, and I like to let myself know when I'm doing something I like."

They burst into laughter, and Mia felt the stress of the previous months melt off of her shoulders. Grief was heavy, and war was painful, but somehow the two wizards at her sides had a way of healing her pain.

"All right," Sirius said with excitement. "Ready to see our new place?"

"Yes! Get this blindfold off of me!"

Sirius removed it in one swoop. Mia slowly opened her eyes, blinking to adjust her vision to the bright light, and stared ahead at the building in front of her. "Oh, Merlin," she heard herself mutter just as her jaw fell open.

The all-too-familiar building lacked the bright colours and flashing lights. It did not have revolving, popping, and bouncing merchandise in the windows, nor was there a giant ginger wizard wearing a top hat perched over the entrance of the building; but, sure enough, there it stood: Ninety-Three, Diagon Alley—the future home to Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes.

"I don't understand," Mia whispered, her mouth still open like a goldfish.

"This is our home! Well, not the whole building, obviously." Sirius gestured to the run-down shop that had a *Closed for Relocation* sign on the front window. "It used to be Madam Primpernelle's Beautifying Potions Shop, but she's upgrading and needed to move somewhere bigger down the street. I bought the whole building from her, and there's a flat just above the shop."

"What are you going to do with a shop?" Mia asked as she was led in through the door where she saw a massive empty space that would one day be filled with shelves full of Skiving Snackboxes, Patented Daydream Charms, and Pygmy Puffs.

"I have no idea," Sirius answered with a grin.

"When we were out looking for a flat, we came to Diagon Alley for lunch, and he spotted the 'For Sale' sign in the window," Remus elaborated as they walked further toward the back of the shop where a small staircase ascended to a door that Mia was vaguely familiar with. "I'd barely finished my butterbeer at the Leaky before he was signing the lease and handing over his Gringotts vault information to Madam Primpernelle."

She had only been to Fred and George's flat once—and that had been shortly before going on the run with Harry, Ron, and Sirius—but Mia walked up the stairs to the flat as though she were already home, smiling at the piece of the future that had been opened to her in the past.

She wondered how on earth Fred and George had not known about the fact that their shop had been previously owned by two Marauders.

*There was no way they could have known. If they did, the whole world would have heard about it. The twins might very well have shut down their shop and turned the whole place into a proper shrine.*

Mia wondered if Future Remus and Sirius had known, but considering during that period of the war Remus had been undercover with werewolves, and Sirius had been either stuck inside the veil or hunting Horcruxes, she assumed neither pair knew about the serendipitous connection.

The inside of the flat looked practically Muggle in decor save for the few photographs that Remus and Sirius had already hung on the walls, all moving within their frames. She slowly approached a large picture on the mantle of the fireplace next to the container of Floo powder. The photo had been taken just before graduation—after they had all completed their N.E.W.T.s. She picked it up and grinned.

Far to the left, Mary and Alice stood with their arms linked together. Frank was behind Alice with his hands on her shoulders, her ruby engagement ring glittering in the light. Peter stood in front of the laughing girls, his head turned to the side as James lifted Lily into his arms, bridal style, and she laughed, smacking his chest. To James's right was Sirius, Mia, and Remus. In the photograph, Mia began in Remus's arms, swaying back and forth as though there was music. Sirius reached out and took her hand, spinning her away from Remus and into his arms where he then dipped her low, Remus laughing behind them.

*This is my family*, Mia thought happily to herself, and then replaced the photograph on the mantle before turning her eyes to the rest of the flat. *This is my home*.

They quickly gave her a tour of the dwelling, which included a small kitchen, though Mia knew Remus could not cook to save his life and Sirius had grown up dependent on house-elves. Refusing to dote on the boys the way Tilly did, Mia realised that they were going to be surviving on the Leaky Cauldron's offerings for the foreseeable future. Instead of a refrigerator in the kitchen, there stood a large cabinet, spelled with a Cooling Charm to keep food fresh. She did take note that the boys had properly filled it with pumpkin juice, butterbeer, and milk.

Mia noted that Sirius had already stashed several bottles of firewhisky in a nearby cabinet. Then, with a smirk on her face, she quickly looked underneath the kitchen sink where there sat a large, black cauldron. Grinning, she reached inside and pulled out a handful of hidden Chocolate Frogs. *Predictable Remus*, she thought with a laugh.

Remus's room was the first down the hall; she smiled at the sight of what she considered a library with a bed in the centre. It was simple, quaint, and very Remus. The

walls were painted a soft cream colour like the rest of the flat. Much like the decor of the living space, Remus's room was all neutral colours that were easy on the eyes.

"I hope you've made room for all of *my* books," Mia said threateningly to Sirius after observing Remus's large collection. "If not, I think I might spend more time in Remus's room than you'd like."

Remus laughed, and Sirius scoffed before dragging her down the long hallway to the second—and larger—bedroom.

The room was predictably decorated in deep reds and golds, reflecting Sirius's room back at Potter Manor, which Mia certainly did not mind in the slightest. She noticed that boxes of her things were stacked at the far end of the room, and she was grateful they had not unpacked for her, as she liked to do things on her own and in her own way. She did take note that the large bookshelves against the opposite wall were more than half empty, waiting for her collection to fill them.

The boys opened the door to the attached bathroom, and her eyes widened at the sight of what was possibly the largest claw-foot tub in existence.

"Sweet Circe." She stared reverently at it, walking into the bathroom and crawling into the copper tub the way a housecat would with an empty box. Inside, she rolled over onto her back and laughed. "This thing is big enough for two people!"

"Three if we get bored," Sirius said teasingly.

Remus chuckled. "I'll keep to my own bathroom, thanks."

"Good, then get out." Sirius nodded his head toward the door with a chuckle. "We need to properly break in our new bathtub."

Just as the door slammed shut in his face, Remus yelled, "Silencing Charms please!"

## Chapter Eighty-Two

### *Order Business*

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*So if I run it's not enough  
You're still in my head forever stuck  
So you can do what you wanna do  
I love your lies, I'll eat 'em up  
But don't deny the animal  
That comes alive when I'm inside you  
(Animals - Maroon 5)*

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**August 13th, 1978**

Digging her nails into his shoulders for purchase, Mia slid herself down slowly over Sirius's cock, watching with rapture at the way his body tensed. A hiss escaped his lips as her slick heat surrounded him. She grinned at the noise, relishing in the bit of her that was more Slytherin than Gryffindor, amused that there was quite a bit of silver and green in Sirius as well.

Dorea had always insisted that within each witch and wizard lay attributes of each House. Mia and Sirius were no exceptions to this: they were loyal Hufflepuffs in times of crisis, wise Ravenclaws when planning for missions, brave Gryffindors while fighting, but Merlin, they were ambitious Slytherins when they fucked.

The copper clawfoot tub had been used more than their bed in the few days since moving into the flat above the empty shop on Diagon Alley. As comfortable as every other surface in the flat was, there was something exquisitely beautiful about a *wet* Sirius Black. The way his long, raven locks clung to the skin of his neck and chest when soaked, the glistening shine of his marble torso when damp. Mia always refused bubbles, though he offered every time; she simply could not allow anything to stand in the way of viewing every single inch of him.

She straddled his lap, and he gripped her thighs, thrusting as she moved above him, grinding down and circling her hips as he pushed himself deeper inside of her. His head fell back on the edge of the tub, eyes closed. She knew that every so often, he basked in the way she dominated him. When he felt she was getting a little too smug for her own

good, he would swipe his thumb against her swollen clit and grin when she whimpered and lost focus.

Regaining control of her movements, Mia smiled as she leant down to run her tongue along her inked name, permanently etched into the skin of his chest. She shivered at the rumble she felt over her actions, knowing that it was a promise of reciprocity. Never before had she been so delighted over the location she had chosen to tattoo Sirius's name on her own body, knowing his tongue would pay it ample attention later.

"You're dragging this out on purpose," Sirius groaned as she circled her hips slowly once more, grinning when he took hold of her waist. He lifted her with ease and brought her back down onto his rigid length hard enough to make both of them moan at the new angle. "Stop teasing me, kitten."

Pressing his forehead between her breasts, he plucked a tightened nipple between his thumb and finger, causing her to let out a soft cry and clench tightly around him.

"You know, just because you're on top doesn't mean you're in control." He ran his open mouth against her wet skin, breathing heavy against her flesh. "I think you like it too much when I tell you what to do, isn't that right, kitten?"

She moaned in response, pushing herself up and down his length with strained focus. The quickening pace caused the water to slosh around the edge of the tub. It certainly was not the first time they nearly had flooded the room, and they had only been living in the flat for less than a week.

"I asked you a question, Mia," Sirius said in a gravelly voice as he thrust up into her, hard and deep.

Gasping, she wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him flush up against her body as she rode him.

"You like it when I tell you what to do, don't you?" he repeated his words and then his movements, driving up into her heat.

"Yes!" Mia keened in pleasure. "Sirius . . . Sirius, please . . ." The morning had turned around on her. Hadn't *she* just been in charge a few minutes ago? She whimpered at the tight grip he had on her hips that prevented her from seeking the deep friction she craved.

"Please *what*, kitten?"

"Harder."

She cried when he granted her wish, her voice echoing off the walls like loud applause for his performance. She knew that her noises only stoked the fires, made the deep burn inside of him more focused, more intense, and she used this to turn the game against him. *Sirius* was now the one silently pleading for release as he bucked wildly into her, simultaneously holding onto her waist and driving her down onto his cock.

He groaned, shutting his eyes tight. "I need . . . Mia, come. I need you to come now," he pleaded. When her walls tightened around him, he growled deep in his chest as he came. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he moaned into the skin of her breasts, tonguing the peak of one as she screamed his name above him.

"Don't . . ." Mia panted, releasing her arms from around his neck as she came down from her high, her thighs pulsing with the ache of overuse. "Don't get used to being the dominant one."

"Wouldn't think of it, love. You can boss me around tonight all you want." He smiled at her as he climbed out of the bathtub. Grabbing the large, crimson towel that hung on the nearby wall, he wrapped it low on his hips and shook his head like a dog to rid his hair of the extra moisture, laughing as she made a face.

"Go on." She swatted his arse as she stood and wrapped herself in her own towel. "Jamie and Lily will be over in twenty minutes for breakfast," she reminded him after reaching for her wand and casting a quick *Tempus Charm* to check the time.

"I said you can boss me around *tonight* all you want. I said nothing of this morning." He dried the rest of his body and flung the towel over the edge of the sink, placing a kiss to her bare, scarred shoulder before strutting out of the bathroom looking like he had not a care in the world.

Mia laughed and tilted her head to the side to use a *Drying Charm* on her long curls, wishing she had the time to properly tame them. The extra length really helped to keep her hair from frizzing like it had when she was younger, even if it took longer to style.

Staring at herself in the mirror, she smiled. Basking in the afterglow of a morning bath with *Sirius* was becoming routine. Despite all the losses they had experienced through the years, despite being at war, she had never been happier in her entire life.

A high-pitched scream coming from the other room snapped her from her euphoric daze. Panicked, she rushed out the door, towel wrapped around her still, only to hear a familiar voice follow the scream:

"SIRIUS, GO AND PUT PANTS ON! GOOD GOD, YOU'RE A GROWN MAN!"

A few seconds later, a grinning Sirius came walking back into the bedroom, still as naked as he was when he emerged from the bath. "Prongs and Lily are early."

Mia smirked at her boyfriend. "You're terrible, you know that, right?"

Sirius laughed as he reached into their shared closet, snagging his favourite pair of jeans from the shelf. "I don't know what Evans's problem is. I think I look quite fetching today."

Unable to resist, Mia leant against the wall of their bedroom to watch him dress. Her eyes raked over his sculpted arse in tight denim. She ignored the few scars on his back from early abuses of childhood in addition to the few he retained from his attack several years ago at Grimmauld Place; Sirius was slowly beginning to cover them all with colourful scars of his own choosing.

Already perched on his right shoulder blade sat a proud, magically tattooed phoenix that preened at the attention when it noticed Mia staring. The bird ruffled its feathers and held its head high under her gaze. Opposite the phoenix on his left shoulder was a simple, solid black paw print. Above it was written: *I wanna be Anarchy*; below read: *No dogsbody* which Mia knew had nothing to do with Sirius being a dog, but were, in fact, lyrics to a Sex Pistols song.

Sirius was not picky with the decorations he chose for his skin; already lyrics from various Muggle and Wizarding bands were covering his body. Down the right side of his ribs were Led Zeppelin lyrics: *Upon us all a little rain must fall*. Down the left side was written the words of Judas Priest: *Hell bent for leather*; quite possibly the most fitting tattoo Sirius had—save for the *Toujours Pur* on his arse. A series of numbers covered his left shoulder blade. While they may have looked nonsensical to most, Mia knew that they were the birthdates of her parents, memorialised on the skin of the son they never anticipated raising but loved nonetheless.

"You're staring," Sirius said with a playful smile.

"How can you tell? You're not even looking this way."

"You're *always* staring at me."

*Why the hell wouldn't I?* Mia thought to herself with a blissful sigh as her eyes swept over his body one last time while she dressed, slipping into a pair of jeans and throwing on

an old Puddlemere United t-shirt of Sirius's before heading out the door, swatting him on the arse once before ducking into the hallway.

"You're out of pumpkin juice," James stated as he walked out of the kitchen, draining the last of their juice from a large jug. Mia narrowed her eyes at her brother before turning her attention to Lily, who was sitting on the sofa looking through a copy of *Witch Weekly*.

"You can't teach your wizard to drink from a glass?"

Lily scoffed. "*You*, apparently, can't teach *yours* to wear clothing."

"He looks better without it." Mia laughed and watched as James groaned, tossing the empty jug of pumpkin juice in the bin. "Something wrong, Jamie?"

"I just don't need constant reminders that my best mate is shagging my little sister." He rolled his eyes and took a seat beside Lily.

"I wouldn't sit there then if I were you, Prongs." Sirius smirked when he walked into the living room, leaning in to give Mia a chaste kiss on the cheek.

James leapt from the sofa, grimacing as he stared down at the piece of furniture with disdain before moving to the big, fluffy armchair in the corner. He looked up questioningly at Sirius, who waggled his eyebrows in reply. James groaned, looking like he decided to just stand in place.

"If you're that put out, Prongs," Sirius said with a grin, "you're *really* going to have a problem eating breakfast at the kitchen table."

"Sirius!" Mia hissed.

"We're going to the Leaky for breakfast," James insisted, closing his eyes. "Someone go get Moony."

"Remus!" Sirius shouted through laughter over James's prudish sensibilities as he walked back down the hall and pounded on Remus's bedroom door. "Oi! Moony, wake up! All right, I'm coming in, so if you're in there having a wank, it's your own fault when I catch you."

"How's life at the cottage?" Mia asked Lily as she sat down beside her friend, ignoring the mild tantrum James was throwing by purposely avoiding every piece of furniture in the flat, apparently determined to steer clear of anything that she and Sirius might have touched whilst naked.

*He probably shouldn't be leaning up against that wall,* Mia thought with a grin.

"It's so beautiful. We're still unpacking everything."

"She's doing it all the *Muggle* way," James whinged.

"It's better," Lily insisted, scowling at him. "Mia knows what I mean."

Mia smiled thoughtfully, remembering a time when she did, in fact, enjoy doing things the Muggle way—as though it connected her to her roots somehow and the world she'd been born into.

"Actually, the only thing *I* unpacked by hand was my books," she admitted. "And that's just because a lot of them are really old, and I wanted to make sure that Sirius and Remus packed them properly."

While it was nice to have something else in common with her best girlfriend, Lily knowing that Mia was Muggle-born often became a depressing thought. It had taken the redhead several months to stop staring at the Mudblood scar on Mia's arm anytime the Muggle world was even referenced.

"Pads!" James shouted. "Tell Moony to hurry the hell up!"

"That's going to be a problem," Sirius muttered stiffly, hair curtained around his face as he stared down at a parchment in his hands.

"What's that?" Mia inquired.

He held the parchment out to her. "Remus is gone."

"What do you mean *gone*?" She drew her focus to the letter now in her hand, the familiar script calling out to her as it always did. "*Pads and Mia,*" she read aloud, "*Sorry, I'll be missing breakfast this morning. Order business. I would have stuck around to say goodbye, but I'll be gone for a little over a month, and I know you'd make a fuss. Please don't worry about me. Love, Remus.* What does he mean *Order business*?"

Her eyes swept over other three in the room, hoping they knew more than she did. When they all appeared to be just as confused as she was, she began to panic.

"No, no, no." She stood, dropping the letter on the sofa before rushing down the hallway and into Remus's room. Ignoring the fact that she was intruding on his private space, she began opening his dresser drawers, moving things aside hoping to find subtle hints to where he had gone. No clothing was missing, save for his travelling cloak which he normally hung on the back of the door. She continued digging, searching until she finally came upon what she was looking for.

There in the drawer beside his bed were seven large phials of untouched Wolfsbane Potion that she brewed for him the week prior. She counted them twice and frowned. *He should have taken one last night*, she thought as she felt her heartbeat in her temples.

"Mia?" Sirius called from the door, and she turned to see him standing, looking at her with anxiety written on his face. "Where'd he go?"

"Undercover. Dumbledore's sent him to infiltrate other werewolf packs." She sank onto Remus's bed, putting her head in her hands. "He left his Wolfsbane Potion," she informed Sirius just as James and Lily followed him into the room.

"I'm sure he'll be okay," Lily said with a frown as she sat beside her. "Dumbledore knows what he's doing."

Mia scoffed.

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### **August 24th, 1978**

Mia sat in her office—a small room down the hall from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. She had been led there on her first day by an elderly wizard who acted as though escorting her into the file room was a large sacrifice on his part.

Essentially, she had no real boss to report to as she worked directly for all of the department heads and the Wizengamot and, therefore, had little personal interaction with anyone unless they were there to drop off paperwork for her to organise.

The small room contained a tiny desk in the corner and three large filing cabinets with Undetectable Extension Charms on them so that they could contain the centuries and centuries of laws, edicts, and regulations passed by the Wizarding government. The witch who had the job before her left the place in complete disarray, so when Mia took the position, she spent her first week cleaning the office and organising the mess of files left behind. It was a much-needed distraction for her since she had been spending every waking moment worrying about Remus.

The full moon had been a week earlier, and without Moony there to take care of, Mia and Sirius were uncomfortable—as though the moon were affecting them as well. They tried to distract themselves with games, firewhisky, and even sex, but by the time the

full moon was at the highest point in the black velvet sky, the only thing that had been able to calm their nerves was shifting into Animagus form and curling up together beneath the window in their flat that let the moonlight in.

In between filing away reports about cauldron thickness, law appeals, and arrest records, Mia spent her time reading over *Guidelines for the Treatment of Non-Wizard Part-Humans* and the original 1637 copy of the *Werewolf Code of Conduct*, which had not been amended even *once* since it was put into place centuries earlier. Since her job was of little impact on her own life, she used it to learn about the laws and regulations currently in effect, as well as old laws and pureblood traditions of which she had been previously unaware. It was amazing how many ancient customs were still viewed as legal in the Wizarding world.

*"Accusing a pureblood with more than four generations of pure magical ancestry of being anything but a pureblood is an offence worthy of action taken by the ancient laws, and the witch or wizard has the right to duel their accuser to the death for the slight against their name."* Mia read some of the laws aloud, rolling her eyes dramatically after every single one. "Merlin, these insane traditions and customs explain so much about people like the Malfoys."

A bright and cheerful voice brought her out of her distracting thoughts: "Good morning, Mia!"

Mia turned her focus up to the figure in her doorway and smiled. The tall, lanky redhead stepped into her office and sat himself down in the chair opposite her, on the other side of her desk.

"Hello, Arthur. How's your wife?"

"*Not* pregnant!" Arthur said with a laugh.

She had been in her new office for less than three hours before a young clerk from the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office came in with a stack of parchments needing to be filed away after someone hexed twenty Muggle door knobs to lock and unlock at random intervals with the intention of selling them to Muggle criminals for the purpose of burglary.

Mia had been shocked to meet the man she had once considered a father figure—the *actual* father of one of her best friends in her other life. Arthur Weasley in this time was not much different from his older counterpart: joyful and kind to everyone he came into contact with, but also extremely defensive of his family and those who could not defend themselves.

Mia smirked at the man. "Overjoyed?"

"After the twins?" Arthur weakly laughed and ran a hand through his already thinning hair. "I have to admit, I'm a little relieved. I don't think any of the older boys *ever* caused such a fuss." He yawned, clearly exhausted from having two newborns back home, not to mention Bill and Charlie who, according to Arthur, were entering a trouble-filled stage of life, breaking everything in sight and picking on their younger brother, Percy. "I honestly feel terrible that I'm not there with her all the time to help."

"You're a good man. From what you've told me about her, I'm sure Molly will get along just fine. Maybe bring her home some flowers."

"Flowers?" Arthur chuckled. "Haven't you heard? I've got *five* kids to feed. No spare Sickles for flowers."

"Are you a wizard, or aren't you?" Mia rolled her eyes and picked up a spare bit of parchment, rolling it up and then waving her wand over the top. The paper melted away, curling in on itself only to reveal a purple orchid that bloomed from the twisted parchment.

"Brilliant." Arthur gave her a lopsided grin that was almost identical to Ron's. It made her heart ache just a little. Growing up with James and Lily made her feel like Harry was always somewhere nearby, but Ron had been sorely missing. Until Arthur had walked into her office, she was all but certain she had forgotten what Ron looked like.

"Can you do carnations?"

"Hmm?" Mia looked up, pulled from her thoughts. "No. My mum always said that carnations were cheap."

Arthur nodded thoughtfully. "Shame I can't transfigure a vacation. I think Mollywobbles could use one. Feels like she's been pregnant since we graduated Hogwarts."

Mia very slowly raised an eyebrow. "Really now? Since *Hogwarts*?"

She could not possibly imagine interacting with Arthur and Molly at Hogwarts and was glad to know that they had graduated before the Marauders arrived at school. It was already strange enough to know Arthur at *this* stage of life, but to witness his courtship of Molly Prewett would have been incredibly awkward.

"Oh, not quite. We married straight after school, of course, but little William didn't come along for another year or so," he explained. "We were very careful with the charms and potions there . . . in the beginning."

"Smart man."

"Had to be. We had at least *two* pregnancy scares during our seventh year."

Mia nearly choked on the gasp that was trying to escape her lungs. Her eyes widened at the news that Arthur so casually let slip out because she was a peer and not the swotty little witch who would befriend his youngest son in the future. To hear that Arthur and Molly had pregnancy scares while still in school floored her.

She could remember *multiple* instances of an older Molly Weasley scolding her sons for being overly familiar with young witches, threatening to remove Ginny's bedroom door at the Burrow to stop Harry from slipping into the room, giving dirty looks to Fleur when her back was turned, not to mention the whole "scarlet woman" incident during her original fourth year, courtesy of Rita Skeeter's lies.

Mia carefully filed away this bit of new information in the back of her mind should she ever reunite with Molly and have to face her warpath of self-righteous, conservative smother-mothering. The woman was a dear, but Mia sorely hoped for a version of Molly somewhere who kept her judgemental thoughts to herself.

"Sometimes, I think that's why she accepted my proposal so quickly," Arthur admitted. "Didn't want anyone to be suspicious if we did start having kids a little early. Weasleys are cursed with fertility."

"You couldn't have abstained?" Mia questioned him with a laugh.

"You should see my wife." Arthur waggled his eyebrows, and Mia immediately saw Fred and George in his flirtatious features. "She's the most beautiful creature to ever exist. Couldn't keep away from her if I tried, and why would I ever *want* to since she's found it in her charitable heart to lower her standards to my humble bed?"

"You're worse than my boyfriend, Arthur." Mia shook her head, smiling at the man who came into her office at least once a week to file away his paperwork while going on and on about the wife he had waiting for him at home. "Molly is a lucky witch."

"A lucky and *exhausted* witch," he countered with a sigh. "Haven't been out of the Burrow without a babe attached to breast in . . . Merlin, what year is it?"

"I've got a friend I could volunteer for babysitting. She might enjoy not being the only ginger in the room for once." She smirked at the thought of Lily, who had just yesterday confessed to being bored at Potter Cottage where Tilly would not let her do anything. "Did you come down to visit, or was there something you needed?"

"Oh, yes." His focus turned to the parchment in his hands. "I have a rejection that needs to be filed away."

"Another one?" Mia frowned as she took the paper from him, glancing down at the words she had read multiple times over the last few weeks.

"Mark my words, one of these days I'll get them to pass my Muggle Protection Act!" he said with a determination that made her smile with pride. "Just need to word it properly."

"Unfortunately, with people like Lucius Malfoy, Orion Black, and Theodros Nott on the Wizengamot, you'll have a fight there." Mia sighed as she turned to file away the parchment alongside the several others that Arthur had received since he had begun drafting the act six months earlier after a young Muggle family was murdered in their home by Death Eaters. However, nothing was done about it because Muggles did not fall under Wizengamot rule, with the exception of Obliviation.

"Unfortunately, I think you're right. It seems you have to know the right people—"

Mia scoffed. "Or pockets."

"Or pockets," he agreed, "to get anything done around here. Say, I'm not usually one to ask for favours." He frowned, and Mia knew the expression well; Ron wore it anytime Harry offered to pay for anything that his friend could not afford. Weasleys did not accept charity, something they apparently had learnt from their father. "But didn't you tell me that your boyfriend is a Black?"

"He is. Unfortunately, he's the *last* person that would be able to help you when it comes to the Wizengamot. Orion Black is his father, and Sirius was disowned several years ago because of his affinity for Muggles and distaste for Death Eater attire."

Instead of being disappointed, Arthur grinned. "Sounds like a good man to me. We blood-traitors are nothing if not loyal."

Mia grinned. "He's a very good man."

"Right." Arthur exhaled as he stood, looking like he was preparing himself to go back into battle. "Well, I suppose I'll see you same time next week when my new proposal is denied."

"Keep up the good fight, Arthur."

On his way out the door, Arthur nearly collided with Sirius. "Sorry there, friend."

Sirius looked over Arthur's shoulder at Mia. "I didn't realise you'd be in a meeting."

"I'm not. Sirius, this is Arthur Weasley." Mia introduced the two wizards with a smile. "He works in the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office. Arthur, this is my boyfriend, Sirius Black."

"Good to meet you." Arthur extended his hand to Sirius, who took it instantly. "Lovely witch you've got here. Hang onto her."

"You think she's lovely *now*, you should see her when she's angry." Sirius winked, and Arthur laughed in reply.

"You and I have something in common, my friend. My own wife is *quite* the firecracker."

"With five children under ten years old, I imagine she'd have to be," Mia commented with a teasing smirk and watched as Sirius's brows raised to his hairline.

"Five?!" He gaped at the ginger wizard. "Did you lose a bet?"

"I'd say I *won* a bet." Arthur grinned, and Sirius barked a laugh in reply. "I think we're done after the twins, though."

"Would you care to make a wager?" Mia offered deviously, wondering how the exhausted Arthur Weasley she was now acquainted with would react to knowing that he had not one, but *two* more children to prepare for.

"Don't do it, Arthur. She's either a Seer or a cheat when it comes to predictions."

"I'll take that into consideration. Pleasure to meet you, Sirius. Mia, until next week." Arthur nodded to her before slipping out the door and closing it behind him.

"Nice bloke," Sirius said, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his robes, a tell-tale sign that he was nervous about something.

Mia eyed her wizard carefully, frowning when he turned to look at her. "What's wrong?" she asked, a lump in her throat.

They were at war, and Sirius was right there on the front lines beside Frank Longbottom and Alastor Moody, who declared that first-hand experience would do the new Aurors some good. Sirius had already been taken out on several reports of Death Eater sightings, leaving her in a constant state of worry.

"Dumbledore's called an Order meeting for tonight," Sirius said with a frown.

"And?" she asked, waiting for the ball to drop.

It did.

"Moony's missing."



## Chapter Eighty-Three

### *Missing*

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*It is a calcifying crime, it's tragic  
I've turned to petrified past life baggage  
I want to disappear and just start over  
So here we are  
(Hercules - Sara Bareilles)*

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**August 24th, 1978**

By the time Sirius and Mia entered Tuts Tower, she had created a cold stone wall, blocking all emotions from her expression. She walked into the room with her head held high, and Sirius could see Dorea standing there in Mia's visage, a look that both fed his heart and terrified him at the same time. She had neither screamed nor cried. Mia had barely acknowledged him when he informed her that Remus was missing.

Word reached him through Moody, of course, and an Order meeting was called. Despite knowing that Mia was supposed to be left to the sides, Sirius knew he needed to bring her. Remus was not only her best friend, he was a part of her. As much a part of her as Sirius himself was. Unfortunately, the second she erected that cold barrier of indifference, he began regretting his decision to include her.

*"She has found a beautiful balance between the bravery of a Gryffindor and the self-preservation of a Slytherin,"* Dorea had once told him in regards to her daughter.

Sirius wondered what other traits Mia had picked up from their rival House. He, more than anyone, knew what it was like trying to find that balance. The bit of himself that was pure Gryffindor struggled against the Black blood in his veins, and that made him rash, reckless, and often left him riding a fine line between sanity and fury.

Mia had a habit of doing one of two things when faced with a threat: either, like a Gryffindor, she would bravely face it head on, with a wild and sometimes violent temper; or, like a Slytherin, she would seem completely in control, calm, and indifferent, so that her target would not even realise until it was too late.

Sirius watched her closely, wondering which Mia he was in the presence of. Her best friend was missing, presumably in serious danger, and she looked calm, which meant that she could be quite lethal.

Her chocolate brown eyes remained emotionless until she spotted Peter in the corner of the room, and Sirius caught it immediately when the shift took place, and her gaze flashed amber. *Instincts*, she had called it the first time her fox form had tried to maul Wormtail in the Shrieking Shack. Considering they all found out later that Peter had once spied on Mia and Remus having sex, Sirius understood her mistrust of his friend; her instincts had been right.

While he felt angry and possessive over the idea that anyone else—save Remus—saw Mia in the throes of passion, he could not help but feel a bit sorry for Wormtail, who, until recently, never had a girlfriend of his own. It was with this pity alone that Sirius stepped away from Mia and gestured to Peter.

"Might want to sit on the other end of the room, mate."

Peter looked over Sirius's shoulder and nodded, shifting his way around a few chairs to take a seat at the end of the row between Edgar Bones and Gideon Prewett.

When Sirius turned back, he found Lily tightly holding onto Mia.

The meeting began, and Lily pulled Mia to the sofa to sit beside her while Sirius made his way up to the front next to Frank and Moody where the old Auror explained the situation.

"Most of you already know, but one of our own has gone missing. Lupin was sent to infiltrate a sub-group of potential allies to You-Know-Who's lot in the hopes that he could retrieve information for us, see where numbers stand. We lost communication with him a few days ago. We've already got Aurors on the lookout, and we're doing our best to track the movements of the group. Unfortunately, it's difficult due to their numbers and the danger it presents to the rest of us. So we're keeping on top of the situation in the hopes that Lupin re-establishes contact with us in the meantime."

"What group is this?" Marlene McKinnon asked from the front of the room. While it had not been clear what part Marlene would play among the Order, Sirius had discovered that she was infiltrating the upper-class social circles of pureblood debutantes, being considered quite the catch herself.

"Werewolves," Moody answered.

Frank, Alice, and Mary—who, unlike the Marauders, Mia, and Lily, might have *suspected* but had never *known* Remus's secret—looked a bit shocked, but none of them carried the horrified expressions that appeared on several Order members' faces at the simple word: *werewolves*.

"Werewolves?" Dorcas Meadows shrieked. "And Remus is . . . is . . . ?"

"A good man," James chimed in to Sirius's relief, narrowing his eyes. "And one who's currently risking his life in a situation none of us would dare enter, all to gain information for the Order. So maybe show a little sodding respect."

"That's hardly the point," Sturgis Podmore snapped, turning to stare up at Dumbledore. "You've put all our lives at risk by letting one of those in with us."

"*One of those?*" Lily hissed and actually stood up, glaring down at Sturgis. "Remus is not some . . . *thing* that we're here to discuss behind his back! He's missing, and we're supposed to be figuring out a way to save him!"

"I don't understand." Marlene frowned, trying to shake the look of disgust off her face as she made eye contact with Sirius, who was now glaring down at her, having a bad feeling about where she was going with this. "And I mean no offence, but how do we know that he hasn't turned on *us* to join up with his own kind?"

"*Protego!*" Sirius and James shouted at once, their wands aimed at Mia who was now standing, firewhisky-coloured eyes glaring at Marlene. Her left hand was visibly shaking, her *wand* hand, however, was as steady as the Black Lake on a windless day and, unsurprisingly, aimed at McKinnon.

"Get her out of here, Black!" Moody snapped. "McKinnon, while it may offend your delicate sensibilities, this bloody war doesn't just affect *you*. Wizards, goblins, werewolves . . . Hell, You-Know-Who is trying to get *giants* involved."

Sirius slowly approached his girlfriend, silently pleading with her to lower her wand while James kept his wand trained on her, his firmly-placed shield protecting the rest of the Order from her wrath.

Despite edging closer, Mia did not lower her wand or even take a single step backward. Sirius could feel her magic pulsing in the air around her, and he could almost hear the way her mind ticked with fury.

Mia's rage was palpable, so much so that she could not blame Sirius and James for not touching her as they all but herded her into another room of Tuts Tower. The rest of

the Order continued bickering in the main room instead of putting together a proper plan to rescue Remus from whatever hell Dumbledore had sent him into, quite obviously unprepared.

Once again torn between the present and the future, she sat down on the end of a bed in the small guest room, trying to convince herself that Remus would be all right. He survived whatever this was because she knew him in the future. However, without the ability to look into his eyes and see for herself that her best friend was safe and well, she worried that she had, in fact, changed something in the past, and Remus was now suffering the consequences of her foolishness. Would he make it out of this alive? Intact? Unharmed? Would he be able to live and move forward and meet up with a young Hermione Granger, just to send her back to 1971? Without Remus, Mia realised, her entire world would crumble. Without Remus, there would be no growing up with James as her brother, no dog pile snuggling in her bed after nightmares, no laughing with Lily over silly romance novels, no Mary, no Alice, no Frank . . .

No Sirius. No Remus.

"Prongs, can you . . . ?" Sirius began, looking uneasy about leaving her on her own. He stared at her, swallowing hard and looking helpless.

"Go." James knelt in front of her, taking her hands into his own and offering Sirius a small smile. "We'll be fine."

The very second that the door closed behind Sirius, Mia burst into tears and fell forward into her brother's arms. James held onto her tightly, and they both crumpled on the floor of the small guest bedroom at Tuts Tower.

"Why aren't they out there looking for him?" Mia sobbed, terrified and angry.

"They will be," James promised. "*We* will be. We'll find Remus, Mia, I promise you."

"What if you don't? What if something horrible has—?"

"Stop," he ordered her, pulling her face into his hands and looking directly into her eyes. "The Order will do everything we can to find Remus. And I know you don't want to hear this, but this is what we signed up for. War. Remus is out there fighting it."

"He shouldn't be. None of us should be. I can't lose him, I can't lose any of you. Jamie, I think it'll kill me," she admitted, tears pouring down her cheeks.

"Don't you let it."

James's hazel eyes were soft and yet commanding at the same time. Mia stared into their depths, losing herself in them, wondering how no one else saw it: *Harry*. Everyone always said that he was the spitting image of his father except the eyes; *Lily's eyes*, they always said.

*No. He's right there*, Mia thought. The shape and the colour were all wrong, but she could see Harry kneeling in front of her in the visage of his father. All strength and sacrifice and boundless love.

"You have to fight, too," James insisted. "We're all fighting now. Each for the same reason—"

"The Greater Good?" Mia spat bitterly.

"What? No. Or, well, maybe. In the end, I suppose that's the goal isn't it?" James asked, looking torn. "I'm fighting for *you*. For Lily and Sirius and Remus and Peter and . . . and Mum and Dad," he said quietly. "I signed up, agreed to put my life on the line, for all of you. And I know Remus feels the same."

"What if none of us make it out of this?"

"Then . . . Then it's not a world worth sticking around for. But we won't let that happen. We're going to win this war. We're going to find Remus," he promised, rubbing the apples of her cheeks with the pads of his thumbs. "It's my job to make sure the rest of you get through this."

Mia rolled her eyes and grit her teeth, remembering that Harry so often had been the same way—all too willing to be Dumbledore's sacrificial lamb. The arrogance of a martyr. She recalled a furious Sirius Black storming through the Great Hall during the final Battle of Hogwarts, searching for Harry, who had run off to the Forbidden Forest to confront Voldemort:

*"Never thought I'd live to see the day when I'd agree with bloody Snivellus! Harry really is as arrogant as his father!"*

"Jamie?" Mia said her brother's name, looking into his sweet, devoted face. She wanted to tell him everything and prevent the awful future that awaited him.

He offered her a supportive smile, squeezing her hands in his own. "Yeah, love?"

She opened her mouth, knowing the words would not come out; Dumbledore had seen to that. But they continued to flow through her mind as though she could tell him—tell him everything: *Oh Jamie, if you only knew. If you only knew that you and Lily would sacrifice*

*everything for this war to save the ones you love. Some of whom don't deserve it. If you only knew that I'd lose you . . . would you still fight? Still let yourself die if you knew about Harry? Knew about the prophecy and Voldemort and everything that's going to happen on the thirty—"Thirt-t-ty—"*

Mia heard the word come out of her mouth, and her eyes widened slightly. *Did I actually say that?* she thought to herself.

"Thirty?" James repeated with a raised eyebrow.

Mia stared at her brother in a panic. "Thirt-ty-fir . . . f-f-fir—" She struggled, forcing the word out. *Thirty-first of October, 1981. Thirty-first of October, 1981. Thirty-first of October, 1981.* "Thirty-f-f-irst . . . Oct-t-tob-ber."

She fought against Dumbledore's spell and actually made progress for the first time since it had been cast on her. She felt a strange bit of relief that she was not completely stuck, helpless, or incapable of anything. She also felt the walls spinning and her vision blurring. The struggle of fighting off the Truth Spell was quickly draining her magic.

"Mia?" James whispered, a look of concern on his face.

"Ninet-t-teen . . . eight-t-t-y—" Mia grit her teeth tightly and forced out the words, her vision blurring, and her heart racing. "One!"

The world around her went black.

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When she opened her eyes who knows how long later, Mia could feel that someone had cast a Reviving Spell on her. What had happened? She had been talking to James, trying to communicate through Dumbledore's spell when she had . . . Had she blacked out? She groaned as a headache settled in firmly, the light in the room only making the stabbing behind her eyes worse.

"Welcome back, Mia."

The calm voice floated above her, and she snarled in response. He had no right to have such a calm voice. Not now. Not ever. She squinted her eyes and looked up into bright blue gaze staring down at her from the face of Albus Dumbledore, who had the nerve to be *smiling* at her.

"We were all quite worried when James informed us that you'd fallen unconscious."

"*Were* you? Maybe worry less about me and more about the wizard you sent into a den of savage werewolves!"

"I believe I sent a *werewolf* into a den of werewolves, though yes, Remus is also a wizard. I had hoped that perhaps he would find that in common with the other wolf packs," Dumbledore admitted. "You must understand that should the Dark Lord find the werewolves to be allies, it would mean the worst for us. Remus is our only hope to gather information on where they stand."

"The only wolf that'll have any effect on this war is . . ." *Greyback. Greyback. Fenrir . . .* "G-G-Gre . . . Greyb-b-back," she stuttered the word through clenched teeth; the moment she spoke, the headache worsened.

"Ah. Now I see what James was saying. You've found a way to fight through the Tacere Veritas." He was nodding, and the simple movement was enough to make Mia dizzy. "Much like fighting off Veritaserum actually. You use the same magic and muscles used with Occlumency, but you already know that. The same way you now know the pain that comes from fighting it. You do realise, I'll have to strengthen the charm."

His tone of voice indicated he was upset by the necessity of it, but Mia could not find it in her to sympathise with the man.

She let out another snarl as she forced herself to sit up, holding her head in her hands as she muttered, "Remus is missing. You sent him in unprepared—"

"I have faith in Remus's abilities," Dumbledore remarked, waving his wand over Mia's head, presumably strengthening the Tacere Veritas Spell.

"I didn't say *Remus* was unprepared." Mia glared as her headache began to fade and a thick magic settled over her that felt like warm water. "*You* were unprepared. You have no idea the danger you've put him in. You know nothing of how werewolf packs work. He'll be attacked. He's *been* attacked, and that's likely the reason you've lost contact with him."

"We expected that he would have to go through a physical altercation to prove himself worthy of joining the pack, temporarily at least," Dumbledore admitted, looking unphased by her panic. "Once properly infiltrated, Remus can gather the needed information and return to us. The pack we've sent him to is not Greyback's. He'll have no desire to permanently serve the current Alpha wolf."

"He can't join another pack!" Mia snapped. "Don't you get it? Remus *is* an Alpha!"

Though he did not react to her words, she could see that the twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes began to fade a bit at the declaration.

"Remus is an Alpha?"

"Yes! Remus has his *own* pack," she said as she stood up. "Which means that if he walks into another den, they'll smell it on him. Instead of being given the chance to prove himself worthy of *joining* them, he'll likely have been challenged by the current Alpha, surrounded by an entire pack of werewolves who may or may not be associated with Voldemort!"

As she screamed, the walls began shaking with her rage.

The door to the small guest room burst open, and in the frame stood a wand-drawn Alastor Moody, followed closely by Edgar Bones, Sirius, Frank, and Alice.

"Albus? Do we need to have another chat about the appropriate age for induction into the Order?" the old Auror demanded as he aimed his wand at Mia.

"I'm afraid, Alastor," Dumbledore said as he stood up, "that we've made a grave error." He moved around Mia and toward Moody. "Young Mr Lupin must be extracted immediately; wait for nothing. This takes priority."

"That wasn't the plan," Moody growled.

"New information has been made available to me. I'm aware that many lives will be lost in this war, but I will not allow that to happen needlessly. As of right now, Remus's life is of utmost importance."

"It wasn't *before*?" Sirius snarled from the doorway, grey eyes fixed on the old wizard.

"Find Remus," Dumbledore ordered Moody, ignoring Sirius's comment. "Next time we will be . . . prepared."

Mia felt her heart sink.

*Next time.*

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## October 16th, 1978

Seven weeks.

Remus had been missing for seven weeks, and Sirius was beginning to lose hope.

The werewolf pack that he was sent to infiltrate had been on the move a week prior to Remus losing contact with Moody, and tracking them down again was proving difficult. Not only was the pack exceptionally large, they were also being split into smaller groups during the move from county to county, always under the cover of darkness, generally Disillusioned, and violent when confronted.

Fortunately, when the Aurors finally caught up with *one* of the smaller groups, it had not been a full moon. As it was, three of them were sent to St Mungo's with clawed-up bodies. Luckily, so far, no one had been infected with lycanthropy.

*Unluckily*, they had yet to locate Remus.

The first few weeks, Sirius watched as Mia tried to move on. Prohibited from directly working on the mission for the Order, she returned to her job at the Ministry where she tried to distract herself with work. When that clearly failed, she tried to not-so-secretly assist with Remus's recovery by bringing home Ministry files on werewolf tracking patterns.

When she threatened to shift into her Animagus form and just go off looking for Remus, Sirius had to request that she take a temporary leave of absence from work and left her at the flat with Lily to keep watch over her.

After work one day, he was met at the fireplace by Lily. "How bad?"

"I don't know how bad it is," Lily admitted sadly. "I can't communicate with her."

"Can't—" Sirius raised a brow in confusion until a thought occurred to him and he sighed in understanding. "Full moon tonight. Has she been like that for long?"

"Since you left this morning. Should I be worried about James? Will I find him at home in *bed* or out in the *woods* somewhere?"

"If he's not at Potter Cottage, send him a Patronus and tell him to get his hooves home," Sirius instructed, tiredly running a hand through his hair as he removed his Auror robes and flung them onto the sofa, not caring much about where they landed or in what condition.

"Has anyone thought to do the same for Remus?" Lily asked. "If we can communicate through Patronuses, maybe he can send one back?"

Sirius saw the exhaustion in her eyes there mingled with worry. While Mia had taken Remus's absence the hardest, the rest of them were also handling the situation poorly.

"Since we don't know what's going on with Remus, if we sent a Patronus, we could endanger him if he's managed to actually infiltrate the pack."

"Any new leads?" Lily inquired.

"Not until tomorrow. With a full moon tonight, there's likely to be reports of sightings in the morning. We'll head out to wherever the reports lead us then," he said, repeating back words that Edgar had told him earlier that night when Sirius insisted on trying to find the pack during their transformations, despite the insane risk involved.

The truth was, the people involved who *could* be trusted to help track down the werewolves were sparse in numbers, and the Auror department was stretched as it was. There were still three split-off groups from the main pack, and not enough Aurors and Order members to cover each. One group had been spotted just south of Suffolk, another near the Forest of Avon in Somerset, and the last was rumoured to be around Cumbria.

"There's some food on the counter," Lily said as she wrapped her arms around him, pulling him into a tight hug. "I put a Stasis Charm on it. There's enough for Mia as well. I haven't been able to convince her to eat anything."

"Thanks, Lils." Sirius offered a small smile and watched as she disappeared through the Floo.

He sighed and made his way down the stretch of hallway, stopping in front of Remus's room, knowing there was no point in searching the rest of the flat. He slowly turned the doorknob and looked inside to find exactly what he knew he would find. There, in the centre of Remus's bed, was the little sleeping fox. Red ears twitched at the sound of his footsteps, and small amber eyes opened to look up at him, but she made no other movements.

"Hello, love."

Without another word, he shifted.

Padfoot gently leapt up onto the large bed, spinning once in a circle before lying down behind the smaller creature. He sniffed at her face and nosed his way beneath her, allowing for the little fox to rest her small head on his large muzzle.

## Chapter Eighty-Four

### *Alphas*

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*When the darkness tries to get me,  
There's a light that just won't let me,  
It might take my pride, and my tears may fill my eyes,  
But I'll stand back up*  
(Stand Back Up - Sugarland)

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**October 17th, 1978**

Sometime in the middle of the night, Mia opened her eyes and exhaled softly at the feel of Padfoot surrounding her fox form—the constant sense of safety. It was just the two of them, there on Remus's bed. Breathing in deep, she pulled the scent of Moony in as though she were afraid it would fade with time should he never return to them.

Closing her eyes, she remembered a time when they had not been a pack; when they had not even been proper Animagi yet. Long ago, in the Room of Requirement, where Mia dug her hands and bare feet into the dirt, closing her eyes and focusing on the faux full moon in the sky that connected her to Remus.

She recalled the feel of something pulling her toward the outside of the castle. The Familial Bond that tugged her toward James, the Soul Bond that pulled her always closer to Sirius—forever connected through their magic—and then, something she had not known at the time, an invisible string that took her to the Shrieking Shack then back into the Forbidden Forest. A connection she now knew to have been the unprovoked Pack Bond.

It had been invisible at the time, though now she could almost see it behind her closed eyes: a tight silver string that wrapped itself around her and tugged from behind her where Padfoot was sleeping.

She focused her energy, visualising her magic, and followed the string as it broke off, leading out of the flat and into Godric's Hollow. She could almost see Potter Cottage in the vision where she found a red-haired witch sleeping up against a large stag. A book on werewolves had fallen from her hands onto the floor, bathed in the moonlight seeping in through the window.

The silver string pulled and tugged violently again, and Mia followed it out of Godric's Hollow, over countryside hills, small villages, and bigger cities, until it disappeared into a small forest that did not look but *felt* familiar. The string pulled and tugged, and she disappeared through the trees, following the sound of howling in the distance.

When she stopped, she found herself facing something she had seen before: two large trees sat in an open area of woods across from a river.

One tree, an elderwood tree, stood tall and beautiful. Its only imperfection was a petrified-looking horn embedded in the trunk.

The other tree was lush and beautiful—hawthorn if she was correct—and she felt she had seen the tree before, somewhere in a book. But what book?

Torn between the images of her dream and the memories flooding through her of ancient tomes and old textbooks, Mia's mind was split in two as her Animagus spirit focused on the strange feeling of the hawthorn tree and why it was somehow important, while her human mind thought back to the image of the other tree, horn embedded in the trunk.

What was so important about this tree? For some reason, she thought of Harry and Draco. She remembered seeing something in a book about trees long ago that she thought was funny. One tree was hawthorn—the same wood of which Draco's wand had been made; the same wand that would one day become famous for destroying Voldemort. Then there had been the horn of a *hart* stuck in the trunk of the first tree, the elderwood tree. A hart—or stag—which, at the time, she associated with Harry.

Then she remembered.

The first tree, the elderwood tree with the horn in the trunk, was famous in the Muggle world. Called the *Harthorn* Tree because of the horn, she had once seen the image of it in a Muggle book which had stated the tree was named after a stag that had injured itself during a hunt, impaling the tree with its antler while being chased by a greyhound over a treacherous river nearby. The second tree was famous too, and the name of it was on the tip of her tongue.

Her mind closed briefly as she felt another tug on the silver string pulling her right between the two trees where her senses were overwhelmed with the smell of blood and sweat, but there was the lingering scent of parchment and grass as well.

*Moony!*

The moment she realised it, an image fell into her vision, and there, between the two trees, was a wounded and bloodied wolf.

As Mia's eyes opened, she shifted into her human form, shouting, "Remus!"

Turning, she spotted Padfoot staring up at her with wide eyes. "Sirius, get up!" she ordered, standing from the bed and vanishing out the door and down the long stretch of hallway.

"Mia?" Sirius said when he finally reached their bedroom in human form.

In her panic, she had practically destroyed their bookshelf looking for something, tossing books aside like rubbish. Under normal circumstances, she would never treat volumes in such a careless way. Under normal circumstances, she might have even used magic to delicately search for what she needed.

"Mia, what're you doing?"

She spun to face her boyfriend with a small book in her hand. "I know where Remus is."

Sirius's eyes widened dramatically and he snatched the book out of her hands, not bothering to look at what it was. "What do you mean you know where Remus is?"

"I had a vision," she explained as she stood and flipped open the book in his hands, frantically looking through the pages.

"A vision? Mia, I know we joke about you being a Seer, but—"

"Not like *that*," she answered quickly. "Remember how I told you that when I meditated in Animagus form I could see the bonds? How I used to be able to track you, Jamie, and Remus when I was in the Room of Requirement? How I saw the Pack Bond before we provoked it?"

"You can see it still? You really found him?"

"I think so." Her voice shook with emotion when she spoke. "Does Whinfell Forest mean anything to you?"

"It's in Cumbria, isn't it? That's where one of the pack groups was rumoured to be near," he said, running a hand through his hair. "Oh fuck. Are you sure? We need to be sure, Mia. There's a full moon tonight, and if I'm going to bring word to Moody, we need to be absolutely certain before sending in a group to retrieve Remus from a forest we already know is populated by werewolves."

"I saw two trees," she said, pulling the book into her hands.

Sirius's face fell when he looked to where she was pointing. "Mia, this is a children's book."

"No, it's the *Tale of the Three Brothers*."

"I know. I grew up on these stories, kitten. *Children's* stories."

"I don't care about the stories, I care about the pictures!" She tapped her finger on the drawing on the page. "Two trees sitting just on the other side of the river, the river that the three brothers used magic to cross before they came face to face with Death. One tree was an elderwood, from which Death supposedly carved the Elder Wand. It's a real tree, Sirius. Muggles call it the Harthorn Tree because there's the antler of a stag stuck in the trunk."

"So, you saw Remus in front of a tree with an antler stuck in it?" Sirius raised a brow. "How can we be sure it's the one in Whinfell Forest? Antlers get stuck in trees all the time. Even Prongs got caught, sixth year, in the Forbidden Forest." He reminded her of the time when they literally had to pry Prongs's antlers out of a tree trunk when he had run into a tree and ended up stuck.

"I *know* it's Whinfell Forest because of the *second* tree. I saw a large hawthorn tree next to the elderwood tree. Hawthorn. I'd know it anywhere. It's a landmark inside Whinfell Forest. I never put it all together until now."

"Wait, is it a harthorn tree or a hawthorn tree?"

"Harthorn is what the Muggles call the elderwood tree," she clarified, "but the other tree—the *hawthorn* tree—the one I *know* is in Whinfell Forest . . . it's actually called the Three Brother Tree."

She was trying to focus on the matter at hand: finding Remus. But a part of Mia could not help but be excited at knowing the location of a very important magical site: the river the Peverell brothers crossed, the elderwood tree—from which Death carved the Elder Wand—and the Three Brother Tree, named *after* the Peverell brothers. She wondered if Draco's wand had come from that very hawthorn tree in Whinfell Forest and, if so, had it always been destined to be the wand that would defeat Voldemort?

"Knowing *both* of these trees, these famous trees, I can pinpoint Remus's exact location. But we have to go now. He's injured."

"Mia, we can't," Sirius said, taking hold of her wrist as though he could stop her should she try to make a run for it. "I need to contact Moody. When the sun rises, we'll set up a rescue team to go and retrieve him."

He had the look of an Auror on his face, something she previously had seen in Harry, and it pissed her off.

"What if the wolf pack finds him first? What if they all transform back in the morning and drag him away before the Aurors get there? He's injured. They've already hurt him, Sirius, and he's managed to get away, but that can't last. I know where he is, and I'm going there now, with or without you."

"Fuck," Sirius growled and reached for his wand, flicking it forward and silently casting a Patronus. The silvery image of Padfoot emerged from the wand and turned to look at Sirius, waiting for instructions. "Lily, tell James that Prongs needs to meet us in the orchards behind the manor. Put up the usual *monthly* wards." He then added, "Do *not* follow him," to make sure that Lily would be protected. With a swish of his wand, the Patronus disappeared through the nearest window.

"I know what I'm doing," Mia promised. "Shift the very second that we land."

She gripped Sirius's hand tightly and closed her eyes.

*Destination. Determination. Deliberation.*

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When they Apparated into Whinfell Forest, Sirius shifted down into Padfoot instantly, turning on his paws to search quickly for the little fox who was running in the opposite direction. He spun around to follow her in the dark of the early morning. Looking up, he could see the brilliant colours painted across the sky as dawn began to approach, though the full moon still hung against the backdrop of the slowly lightening horizon.

The scent of blood filled his nostrils, and he sped to where, lying between two trees fitting the description Mia had previously given him, there was a bleeding and unconscious Moony.

Mia nuzzled against Moony's face. Slowly, his eyes opened—the gold in their depths was pale and did not sparkle in the moonlight like it normally did. His sandy fur was filthy, matted with dirt and dried blood.

As Padfoot slowly approached, he could see Moony's wounds, both fresh as of that night, and some not as recent—probably from the last full moon—which had been left untreated. He growled angrily at the sight of his friend in such dire need of help.

Sniffing the air, Padfoot turned to see three more wolves, blood dripping from their jaws in a way that reminded him of Remus's boggart during third year. The three werewolves snarled viciously as they approached the clearing between the two trees. Padfoot stood tall, growling defensively as he guarded Moony and Mia. The other werewolves, however, were not deterred in the slightest.

It was one thing to deal with Moony once a month, and another to have handled Greyback years ago—the entire pack against the vicious Alpha—but for Padfoot to take on three fully grown werewolves on his own was beyond the pale. It was mad. Regardless of what could be said about the Black family, not even Sirius was *that* mental.

He turned his large head and barked once at the fox, hoping she understood him when he gestured with his nose to Moony's hind legs.

Padfoot watched anxiously as she scurried behind Moony, and did quite possibly the riskiest thing he had ever seen: she shifted into human form while still touching Moony. Heart pounding in his chest, Padfoot rapidly looked between the small pack of werewolves and the injured Moony, who sniffed the air and turned to growl at Mia, held back only by his severe injuries.

The wolves in front of them, however, were strong, and their eyes glowed with hunger.

Padfoot let out another sharp bark, and Mia nodded, hopefully understanding him. She gripped Moony's back leg tightly and Disapparated.

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Mia Apparated into the large orchards behind Potter Manor, grateful that she could feel the wards accept her through, which meant that James had arrived in time and set them up around the perimeter. She jumped quickly away from Moony, who was struggling for breath due to being Side-Alonged. The second he recovered, his eyes turned a brighter shade of gold, and he viciously turned his head to snap at her.

"Jamie!" Mia screamed and then quickly shifted into her Animagus form just as Prongs leapt in front of her, separating her from the snarling werewolf. Moony was held back by bleeding wounds and a fence of antlers blocking his path.

Moments later, the cracking sound of Apparition was heard, and they all turned to see Sirius stumble out of thin air, hitting the ground with a thud. Prongs continued to hold back Moony while Mia sped over to examine her wizard, checking for scratches or bites to alert her to infection. Not smelling any wounds of his own, she curled her large tail around his leg in relief the same way a cat would.

"I'm fine," Sirius promised.

Moony fought against his containment, bleeding out more as he thrashed violently in an attempt to stand. His eyes were glued on Sirius, saliva flowing from his jaws. There was no sign of Remus behind those eyes. Without the Wolfsbane Potion, their friend was prisoner to the whims of the wolf.

To prevent Moony from further harming himself, Sirius shifted back into Padfoot and slowly approached the wolf, who instantly began to calm down once the smell of human had faded.

With Moony sufficiently calm and no longer moving, the pack surrounded him. Padfoot and Prongs each took a side, and Mia crawled up beneath his chin, all doing what they could to keep him warm against the morning chill as his wounds drained him of energy and magic. He eventually fell into a soft slumber while the other three remained awake and alert.

No sooner did the sun rise firmly over the horizon than they all turned their heads to watch, with nervous anticipation, as Moony shifted into a screaming man—naked, wounded, and soaked in blood.

Mia shifted into her human form and rushed forward to cradle his head in her hands. "Remus, love, can you hear me?"

"M-Mia? It . . . h-hurts."

"Jamie, go and get Lily," Mia ordered her brother, who stood looking down at the bleeding body of his friend, pale and horrified. "Then send a Patronus to Madam Pomfrey, and tell her to get here now. Sirius, report to Moody and tell him what we saw, but do *not* let *anyone* in the Order return with you. If Dumbledore or Moody show up in the

manor, I will put a fucking Fidelius Charm around the whole place and keep them out permanently!"

The men set off in different directions, a silvery stag Patronus following after James before darting away in the distance.

Mia's gaze raked over Remus's wounds before she pulled her robe off, transfiguring it mid-air into a large blanket to cover his shivering body. She cast a Warming Charm before wrapping her arms around him. "Hold on, love. This is going to hurt," she whispered before taking him Side-Along out of the orchards.

When they Apparated into Mia's old bedroom, she levitated Remus to her bed, wincing at his cries of pain. She forcefully wiped the tears from her eyes as she stared at her best friend, pulling the blanket down away from his body to look at some of the deeper wounds over his chest and stomach.

"Remus, are these all bites and scratches?" she asked him, knowing that they would be harder to heal.

"No. Took a good . . . couple of hits from a Gouging Spell and a Severing Charm," he admitted, wincing as Mia used her wand to syphon off the dried blood as best as she could without causing further harm. "They knew, Mia. They knew I was different."

"That you were an Alpha." Mia nodded, fighting back the tears again. She could spit-roast Dumbledore alive for this. "That's what I told Dumbledore when the Order was informed you were missing. He actually thought you could temporarily join a pack."

"I thought I could do it, too." Remus frowned, dryly swallowing through the obvious pain. "I just . . . just wanted to do something."

"Hush, love, hush." Mia turned, wand held tight at the cracking sound of Apparition.

The sight of Madam Pomfrey walking down the hallway gave her such relief that she nearly collapsed to the floor in tears, although the gasp that came out of the mediwitch's mouth was disheartening.

Finished with her one faltering emotion, Madam Pomfrey straightened and looked to Mia as she set to work. "Are you going to assist?"

**November 10th, 1978**

"What'll happen when he transforms?"

"I . . . I can't say," Madam Pomfrey replied, "but it's likely that he won't surv—"

"Thank you, Poppy," Sirius quickly interjected.

The torture received at the hands of his own kind had devastated Remus physically and magically. He had gone into the werewolf pack as Dumbledore instructed, seeking out the comforts and security offered by their numbers. Most had accepted him in quickly, noting that he seemed harmless to their rather large pack. He had lived among the other wolves in their human forms until the full moon approached and they all began to shift within a secure forest outside of Suffolk. Without the Wolfsbane Potion to keep him in control, the Alpha in Moony had taken over completely, and the *current* Alpha of the large pack picked up on his scent. The two wolves fought brutally for dominance. While Moony had been the stronger of the two, the sheer number of sired progeny gave the older Alpha the advantage.

Remus had woken, brutally wounded and beaten, covered in bites and scratches deeper than he had ever given himself over the years. In his weakened state, he had been chained and starved, then tortured for information.

*"The only thing that offered me any hope in the success of my mission,"* Remus told them, *"was that the pack believed I had been sent by You-Know-Who. It made all of the wolves suspicious of the Dark Lord. They said they won't deal with Death Eaters now."*

With Remus denying any and all affiliations with *any* group, the pack had become nervous and split off into smaller groups, the Alpha taking charge of his own heading south, while three other groups headed in the other directions. Remus was dragged to Whinfell Forest, where he had been cursed and then attacked post-transformation. Left to die, he had managed to get away when the other werewolves went hunting for food, and eventually he collapsed between two trees on the bank of a nearby raging river.

Madam Pomfrey declared it a miracle that Mia and Sirius had found him at all. Alastor Moody declared it suspicious and suspended Sirius from his Auror duties pending further investigation.

The bite wounds from the other werewolves had bled Remus out, and the lack of food and poor living conditions prevented him from properly healing—

even *with* lycanthropy. He was weak, pale, and running a fever that they could not lower. Worst of all, in an attempt to fight off the infections during his imprisonment, Remus had lethally depleted his magical core, making it that much harder to cope.

The closer the full moon came, the more worried everyone was for him.

The worst moment came days earlier when, after giving him his first dose of weekly Wolfsbane Potion, Remus had a seizure. The pack—now including Lily due to her Familial Bond with Mia and Sirius—kept as close to Remus as possible knowing that even an *unsealed* Pack Bond would offer him strength. Unfortunately, it was not enough.

When Peter came to visit, he ended up on the wrong end of Sirius's wand. A duel had broken out between the two over the fact that Sirius blamed Peter for Remus's condition.

"Had you not been a bloody coward and gone into the fucking forest with us to deal with Greyback, *you'd* have been a part of the pack, and we might have had enough magic to save him now!"

It had taken James, Mia, and Lily to subdue Sirius enough to allow Peter an escape, though Mia had only been helping in order to prevent Sirius from accidentally murdering the little rat and ending up in Azkaban years early, actually guilty of the crime for which he eventually would be framed. At least in *her* future, Sirius was innocent of Peter's death.

"Thank you, Madam Pomfrey," James said as he escorted the mediwitch to the boundaries of the manor where she could safely Disapparate away.

Anti-Apparition Wards had been stretched and erected around Potter Manor at Mia's insistence when Dumbledore had visited, requesting some time alone with Remus. She had fought it tooth and nail, but Sirius and James both insisted that she let their former headmaster help if he could.

When, instead of offering help for their dying friend, Dumbledore left nothing but riddles and words of "hope," James agreed that it was best to keep the entire Order out of the manor until Remus recovered.

*If* he recovered.

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"Sirius? Sirius, wake up."

"What is it?" He groaned as he rolled over, blinking up into the sad face of his witch. Looking at her red-rimmed eyes, he sat up quickly. "Is it Remus? Has something changed?"

"No. He's still . . ." She slowly inhaled a shaky breath. "It's four days until the full moon."

Sirius frowned. "I know."

"And Madam Pomfrey said—"

"I *know*," he repeated sharply.

"Do . . ." she began but then hesitated. "Do you know that I love you? Do you know that I love you more than anything else?" She leant forward, taking his face into her hands and kissing him briefly, before pulling away, stifling a sob.

Sirius paused and looked deeply into her eyes, searching for whatever it was that she was hiding behind her tears. He knew that she loved him; some days he did not know how or why, but he knew. Merlin, he knew it every time she touched him and kissed him. Anytime he was inside of her, he could feel the tug of the Soul Bond between them, but more than that, the way she stared deep into his eyes as though she could lose herself in them.

He knew.

"What's going on?"

"What would you do to save him?"

He contemplated her words for a long moment, already knowing where her thoughts were going. She looked terrified, and he wanted to console her, but more than that, he wanted to empower her and give her everything he knew she needed. He had always known that, despite how much she loved him, she would always need Remus.

"I would do *anything* to save my friends," he promised her with complete sincerity.

"Sealed bonds amplify our magic. It's the reason witches and wizards live longer than Muggles, and why, when we're injured, we can tap into our magics and our bonds to heal ourselves," Mia said, tears spilling onto her cheeks. "Mum told me that when she . . . when she was explaining about Soul Bonds."

Sirius waited for the jealous feelings to burst inside his chest. When that did not happen, he swallowed hard, feeling uneasy as they treaded into untouched waters.

"You're going to seal the Pack Bond. That's your plan to save him?"

Slowly, she nodded.



## Chapter Eighty-Five

### *Invigoration*

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*It's only half past the point of no return  
The tip of the iceberg, the sun before the burn  
The thunder before the lightning and the breath before the phrase  
Have you ever felt this way?  
(Glitter in the Air - Pink)*

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**November 10th, 1978**

And there it was.

Sealing the Pack Bond.

It had been something discussed over the years, usually in jest, though Mia knew it had *nearly* been completed on several occasions during her relationship with Remus. There had been more than one tryst that ended up with Remus thrusting inside of her, teeth bared against the long expanse of unblemished shoulder, but he had always held back and refused to bite her. And now, when they *needed* the bond, a properly *sealed* bond to keep Remus alive, they were not even dating. Worse yet, Mia and Sirius had been together less than a year, and a good portion of that time was spent handling several insecurities between them.

*What if we can't survive this?* Mia wondered as she stared into the grey eyes of her wizard, her lover, the other half of her soul. But if she did not do something drastic, Remus would die, and then what? He would never become the Future Remus who had given her the Time-Turner, and she never would have been sent back in time to begin with. So something clearly needed to be done. No, something already *had* been done—at least in the future. Remus was alive there.

"Please say something," she whispered nervously, terrified that Sirius would be angry and demand that she choose: him or Remus. Her soul wanted Sirius, forever and always, but she needed Remus to live, and she had determined that *this* was the only solution. A part of her hated herself for thinking of the ritual like this, such a dire necessity, but it was just that.

"Don't suppose we can see if *Prongs* wants to do it instead?" Sirius suggested with a short laugh.

She ignored the attempt at humour; the stress of the moment was too great.

He stood from the bed, making his way to a large, wooden cabinet in the corner, opening it to reveal a bottle of firewhisky and two small tumblers. Filling the crystal glasses with the amber liquid, he closed the top of the bottle and walked back over to the bed, holding one drink out to her.

"Cheers, kitten," Sirius said and swallowed the drink down quickly before returning to the cabinet. All the while she watched him with trepidation. "Let's go save Moony."

"Let's?" she asked, raising a brow. "Let's as in 'let *us*?' Us as in me, and Remus, and—"

Sirius refilled his glass from the corner of the room. "Well, I'll need a few more drinks first, but yes, I'm coming with you." He sighed before tossing the second drink down his throat.

"Sirius—"

"I may be a better man these days, a little more capable of sharing than I used to be," he conceded with a shrug of his shoulders. "But I know very few wizards who would be entirely fine with knowingly letting their witch fuck their friend down the hall."

"I was actually thinking the orchards," she whispered, ignoring his crass phrasing.

"That's . . ." he began slowly, "strangely appropriate, actually." He refilled his tumbler one last time, draining it swiftly. He set the glass down on the table and turned around to look at the one in her hands, still full. "You going to drink that?"

She looked down at the firewhisky, swallowing nervously before bringing the crystal rim of the glass to her lips and slowly savouring the burning liquid.

"We should have done this years ago," she said after swallowing. "I should have made sure it was done. Then we wouldn't even be in this mess." She sucked in a breath of air and tried to hold back her tears. "With a sealed Pack Bond, he wouldn't have been seen as a threat. He might have been welcomed as an ally instead of the spy that he was."

Sirius sighed and stepped between her thighs, placing his hands on her shoulders where he attempted to rub the stress from them. "Well, I can understand why Remus wouldn't want to. And maybe it should have happened when you two were together, or maybe we should have done this when Lily found out about the Pack Bond and bloody suggested that we seal it. It needs to be done. *I'll* be all right," he promised her. "But you

need to get your shit together. Stop crying, because you can't go into his room and bring up this subject with tears in your eyes. He'll see it as a pity fuck."

Mia wiped the tears from her face and reached for her wand, casting a Cooling Charm on her skin to take the swelling and blotchiness away from her eyes.

"You're right, it should have been done a long time ago," Sirius continued. "Frankly, I blame Prongs's prudish tendencies rubbing off on the rest of us." He smirked, and Mia actually found herself laughing in reaction. "Plus, I'd be lying if I said I haven't been a little curious."

Before she could think of how to reply to *that*, he tugged on her hands and lifted her to her feet. He pressed his cheek to hers, his hands roaming over her hips to cup her arse.

Mia began to panic as thousands of thoughts simultaneously intruded her mind. "How is this even going to work? I've always assumed that when it needed to be done, it would just be me and Remus. Or maybe two of you would get drunk and experimental. But with three of us—Oh Merlin. *Three . . .*" She breathed in deep as she felt herself begin to hyperventilate.

"Relax, kitten." Sirius smirked. "I can count, too. I'm pretty sure we can figure out the logistics as we go."

"That's easy for you to say, do you plan on being the one in the middle?" she demanded, her voice cracking a bit as the firewhisky threatened to make a return trip.

"Well," Sirius began with a dark chuckle, squeezing her arse again, "it's not as though we're entering totally undiscovered territory here, kitten."

"Never simultaneously," she anxiously argued. Sirius was right, the two of them had little mystery left when it came to the bedroom, and she enjoyed all of their activities. However, while she had only ever been with Sirius and Remus separately—and had no one else to compare them to—she had never before had reason to complain for size *or* stamina; and what had previously been something that left her feeling just a bit smugly pleased now had her mind reeling with logistic issues regarding positions and whether or not her body would even be accommodating for such a feat.

Sirius, however—whether thanks to the firewhisky or his own desires—seemed much more relaxed. Perhaps it should have unnerved her to see the glint in his grey eyes, but, in reality, he was right. She could not go into Remus's room looking like she was a

virgin being sacrificed to stop the world from ending, and she was strangely grateful for the curiosity and arousal coming over him.

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A very quick, very hot bath and a few drops of Calming Draught later, Mia stood at the entrance to Remus's room—her old bedroom—where he had been resting since she and Sirius saved him almost a month earlier. Sirius stood behind her, toying with the sleeves of her green and black robes. They were long, simple, and had been kept in the back of Dorea's closet, reminiscent of robes often worn during ritual magic. Mia found them to be tastefully appropriate for the situation.

When they entered the room, Mia and Sirius made their way to the foot of the bed where Remus slept. The fact that he did not stir at the intrusion gave her insight to his condition. Though his wounds had all healed, it was the drained magic that was killing him. Given a few months—had he not had lycanthropy—Remus would have recovered fully, but with the approaching full moon, he would not have enough magic to survive the pain of one final transformation.

"Remus," Mia whispered his name reverently, doing her best to follow Sirius's advice and keep her worries and anxieties away for the moment.

Soft green eyes slowly opened, and Remus looked toward the foot of the bed where they stood. He looked back and forth between the two of them, the corners of his mouth turning down. Mia winced, realising that he must have noticed the unease in her stare.

"What's wrong?"

"Are you in any pain?" she asked.

Remus shook his head, straining as he forced himself to sit up. "No, just . . . tired."

She knew that he had been awake off and on during his recovery—if it could even be considered that anymore. The pain had gone away a week or so earlier, save for the momentary lapse when his Wolfsbane Potion basically poisoned him. He had told her that the fatigue had been the hardest—almost as if he could feel his own magic slipping away from him. The thought terrified her.

"Drink *this*," Sirius said, stepping forward and placing an open phial into Remus's hand.

"What is it?"

"Invigoration Draught. Concentrated," Sirius replied. "Trust me, mate, you're going to need it."

"For what?"

Sirius smirked as he walked back to stand behind her. "A get-well-soon gift."

Mia kept her gaze trained on Remus, willing her pulse to slow to something resembling excitement rather than panic.

Remus watched with a curious expression, looking confused when Sirius wrapped his arms around her body where her robes were tied at the front.

With long fingers, Sirius tugged at the strings and then very slowly pulled at the fabric, letting it slip away from her bare skin like water. He revealed the valley between her breasts and the hint of her stomach and navel.

Remus's lips parted, and his breath quickened.

As Mia and Remus kept eye contact, Sirius had his chest pressed against her back tightly, lips mouthing the side of her neck while arms wound themselves around her waist, one hand palming a breast while the other slipped south and dipped into the apex of her thighs.

When Sirius's finger brushed against her clit, Mia gasped and arched her back a little, still staring at Remus with her mouth open. She imagined that, had he not been so ill, he might actually have said something or even tried to leave, embarrassed. Instead, he sat there, looking shocked as though he were wondering if he was hallucinating.

If their display had not been clear enough, Sirius pulled his hand away from her breast and used it to tilt her head to the side, revealing her bared shoulder.

Remus's eyes widened in perfect understanding, and he shook his head. "No. Absolutely not."

"Absolutely *yes*," Sirius countered. "I'd like to think I'm being *very* mature about this right now, Moony. Don't make me resort to less than honourable tactics in order to save your fucking life."

"You can't be honestly thinking—"

"Get over yourself," Sirius snapped. "It needs to be done. *You* want it to be done; *we* want it to be done. The only thing standing in our way is your fear of taking the first bite—literally. You won't hurt her."

Remus shook his head again. "You don't know that."

"I do," Mia said, her eyes meeting Remus's. Unable to speak a word of the truth, she tried to convey what she *could* by going around the loophole in Dumbledore's spell. A part of her wanted to force the real words out of her mouth, but after collapsing at Tuts Tower months earlier, she was finding it more and more difficult to break through the Tacere Veritas. "Remus, I *know* you won't hurt me."

"It's not just . . ." Remus began, refusing to make eye contact with Sirius, who lingered just behind her, continually touching her.

"It's not just *you*, Remus," Mia said. "We put you in danger by letting you go off spying on other werewolves without a sealed Pack Bond. It left you vulnerable, and we're at war. What happens if one of us has to face another pack? We'd be left similarly. It'll increase our magic and our ability to heal. Most importantly, right now, it'll save your life."

"Mia—"

"We can't lose you," she said, wishing the tears in her eyes would retreat.

Sighing, Remus turned his attention to Sirius. "And *you're* all right with this?"

"If it bothers you that much, I could always send the witch away and take care of things *myself*," Sirius challenged, and Remus actually snorted a small laugh in response, looking not overly inclined to tempt his friend.

"Do you trust me?" Mia asked softly.

"Yes," Remus replied right away. "More than anyone."

"Do you *want* me?"

Before he could answer, Sirius pinched her clit unexpectedly, and she let out a shaky whimper.

The noise, likely mixed with the heady smell of arousal, caused Remus's eyes to flash gold, and he nodded.

"Drink the potion," Sirius instructed him. "Don't want you blacking out before it's done then, yeah?"

Remus threw back the Invigoration Draught, which kicked in without delay. While the colour had not returned to his ashen complexion, his eyes were brighter, and he moved with speed that seemed uninhibited by his ailments.

Kneeling on the bed, he faced Mia, who had climbed onto the mattress with him, her silky robes pooled around her knees. Still looking apprehensive, Remus glanced over Mia's shoulder again where Sirius was breathing hot against the shell of her ear.

"Kiss him, kitten," Sirius whispered.

As if drugged by his instruction, Mia leant forward and gently brushed her lips against Remus's, taking in the familiar flavour that was distinctly him. Remus seemed hesitant at first, but he fell into the kiss all too easily, groaning when her tongue swept across the seam of his lips, requesting entrance.

Before she even had a chance to, Remus delved his tongue into her mouth, kissing her greedily. The approaching moon, the Invigoration Draught, and the prospect of death on the horizon likely added to his lack of inhibitions.

Mia let out a breathy sigh as a shiver ran up her spine. Sirius's fingers had never left the swell between her thighs. His free hand snaked down to his unbuckled trousers, where he was already a step ahead of her and Remus; she could feel the motions of him stroking his length.

When Remus's gaze drifted to Sirius, Mia slipped her hand between them to rub against the growing hardness in his pyjama bottoms. Remus growled hungrily in response, but he looked like his mind was racing.

"Tell me," Mia whispered.

"I'm . . . I'm trying to find a word to describe this."

"The French call it—" Sirius began, but Mia reached back and pinched his thigh.

"Complicated?" she suggested.

Remus laughed softly, running his palms up her arms. "Certainly, but not the right word. Stressful?"

She leant into his touch as his palm moved from her shoulder to her cheek. "A bit, but not for the reasons I suppose it should be."

"Uncomfortable?" Remus asked, looking worried.

"*I'm* feeling pretty fucking good," Sirius muttered.

Mia rolled her eyes, smiling. "Oddly enough, no," she told Remus. "I'm not uncomfortable."

They stared at one another, heat radiating between their bodies. Awkward silence threatened to overtake them until Sirius reached under Mia's arm, took hold of Remus's wrist and slowly dragged it down until Remus's hand cupped a breast.

"Inevitable," Sirius said.

"Yes," Mia said breathily. *Inevitable*. Yes, that was the word. Somehow, this moment between the three of them was just that: inevitable.

Remus seemed to silently agree, and he returned to her lips, kissing her deeply, and nipping at her lower lip.

Suddenly, Mia found herself wrapped in his arms and being lifted away from the foot of the bed. Slammed down into the mattress, a golden-eyed Remus hovered over her. Any previous hesitations about whether or not he would be consenting were dashed away, and a familiar heat pooled in her belly when his mouth lazily breathed against the skin of her shoulder.

She froze up in anticipation of the approaching bite, and she could hear Sirius chuckling from the side of the bed where he stood, staring down at her.

"Not *yet*, love." Sirius smirked, his gaze slowly trailing down her body, likely following the coloured flush of warmth she could feel working its way from her cheeks to her neck and across her breasts. "Don't go running to the finish line. You let Moony and me have a little fun first."

Remus pulled back, smiling down at her as she shifted her thighs beneath him.

Staring up into the faces of the two men, she felt suddenly intimidated by their combined presence, both looking at her with familiar gazes of love and desire. Feeling inadequate for the task at hand, Mia turned her head away from them both only to feel her chin being tilted back by Remus, who stared down at her intensely. She swallowed, realising her mistake and remembering that if the two shared any one thing in common, it was that they both insisted she look at them when they pleased her. They wanted to burn the moment into her eyes so that when she reflected on it in the future, she would never forget that it was *them* who had taken her to such amazing heights.

Remus's gaze pulled away from hers as he slowly moved south, lips and teeth grazing over the hills and valleys of her flesh. He licked a circle around her navel before nipping lightly at her pelvis and settling comfortably in the open hollow of her thighs.

She felt him growl, and it made her jump in concern. Her confusion only deepened when Sirius chuckled. Sitting up on her elbows, she looked down at Remus and saw the problem: there, on her otherwise perfect flesh, she had been marked: *Sirius*.

Remus—or rather Moony—instinctively growled at the tattoo.

"Get over it, mate," Sirius gloated.

Mia's attention was drawn to movement at her side, and her gaze turned to Sirius's face, his eyes dark with lust as he stared down at her, stroking his cock as he watched the scene before him. It was only then that she realised he had shed his clothing.

Eager to level the playing field for all three of them, she tucked her toes into the waistband of Remus's pyjamas and pushed them down around his hips but stopped her movements when she felt a firm tongue dip into her soaking heat and then drag slowly upward to circle around her clit with teasing precision.

Convulsing under Remus's licking, back arched, Mia's gaze was still on Sirius's face. She noticed he looked to be curiously amused at her reactions. She had worried he would observe with jealousy, comparing the way she moaned with Remus to the way she moaned with *him*—something that would certainly cause a fight in the future. Instead, Sirius watched diligently with entertained interest that reminded her of the way he would pay attention in class while learning a new charm.

*Oh Merlin, he's taking notes for later*, Mia thought with a roll of her eyes.

"How does she taste, Moony?" Sirius whispered huskily as he leant down by the side of the bed, hovering his bare chest over Mia, silver-grey eyes boring into her with an intensity for which she was not yet emotionally ready.

"Like honey," Remus mumbled from below.

"I know," Sirius agreed with a dark grin. "Not to call into question your talents there, Remus, but she'd be screaming by now if *I* was down there. You going to need a hand, mate?"

In reply, Remus growled fiercely, his mouth still on her.

Reacting to the vibrations, Mia let out a loud cry as her body tightened in response. Her eyes narrowed up at Sirius who was beaming with excitement, laughing at her reaction despite the glare she was giving him.

"Oh, it's all right, kitten. A little healthy competition is encouraging, and it certainly looks as though *you're* reaping the benefits," he said smugly before leaning down, tonguing

the peak of one breast. He never took his dark eyes off of her face as he lapped at the nipple before pulling it into his mouth and sucking eagerly.

She felt the hot, tight coil inside of her twisting and twisting as the heat between her thighs grew hotter, scorching under Remus's mouth while Sirius continued to lavish attention upon her breasts with his lips. She let out a stifled, whimpering noise, a warning that she was on that delicious edge of oblivion.

Sirius pulled away from her breast, leaving it wet and wanting in his absence. He hovered above her, lips barely grazing her own as he stared into her eyes with inquisitiveness. She felt her face began to flush the closer she came to shattering.

"I wonder . . ." he whispered, eyes blazing with lust, as her body began to shake beneath them both. "Do you think you taste different when *he* makes you come?"

Mia whimpered, finding herself nearly incoherent as he spoke. Normally Sirius switched between speaking and moving, teasing her with his words before satisfying her need with his body. But now, shared between the two men, she was being tended to by both at once, and—*good Godric!*—it was almost too much.

As Sirius spoke, Remus thrust two long fingers into her, and the combination of every touch, lick, and whispered word had the coil inside of her snapping, breaking, unfurling in a violent storm of pulsating pleasure. The resulting noises that escaped her mouth were claimed by Sirius as he licked them from the tip of her tongue, capturing each cry as though he were testing his most recent theory, grinning triumphantly over the results.

As each man pulled away from her quivering body, she was panting—quaking in the aftermath. Remus looked smug but still hungry, while Sirius looked elatedly pleased with the turn of events.

That elated look vanished rather quickly into one of curious concern as he asked, "So, did either of you remember to throw up a Silencing Charm?"

Mia's eyes widened and, before either man could move—or even worse, before James could burst through the doors—she Disapparated them out of the manor and into the orchards, where she had originally planned to complete the ritual.

They landed on the soft grass beneath the large trees. With her wand in the robes that were still pooled around her body, she cast a Warming Charm around the three of them.

She looked skyward where, in the blackness of the night sky, the waxing moon shone down on them. Then, there, just between the branches of two intertwined trees, Mia could see it: the brightest star in the sky. *Inevitable*, she thought again recalling a time spent years ago in the Room of Requirement.

*"You're the sky, Mia,"* Remus had once told her.

She was the sky. The endless, timeless creation that was equal parts light and darkness. The sky . . . filled with bursting stars, and the glowing swell of a risen moon.

"Distract her, Moony," she vaguely heard Sirius mutter.

Suddenly, Mia felt hands in her hair and lips descend upon her own. She could taste herself on the tongue that slipped between her lips as Remus deepened their kiss.

Her hands rubbed up Remus's bare, scarred chest; his skin felt like beautiful Braille, spelling out the history of his heroics. Mia grinned through the assault on her mouth when she felt Remus growl against her as she brushed her knuckles across one of his nipples. Eager to see how else he would react, her hand dipped low and lightly touched his straining erection. He was hard and hot to the touch. She gripped him tightly and felt a surge of power when he groaned in reply.

Not to be outdone, Remus brought a hand down from her hair and punished her teasingly by plucking at a tightened nipple.

"Stop moving so much," Sirius snarled from behind her, and Mia gasped when she felt his hand dip between her thighs, gathering the leaking moisture from her cunt and using it to lubricate his chosen entrance.

Knowing what was coming, Mia did not resist when Sirius pushed her forward onto her hands and knees. She looked up and watched Remus as he observed Sirius's movement from over her shoulders. Sirius teased her first, using the fingers of one hand to rub between her folds, circling around but never touching her sensitive clit. The fingers of his other hand began gently working her open. She tried to relax, but the invasion of her body paired with her nerves was making it difficult. Inadvertently, however, Remus began distracting her by thrusting his cock into his open fist, his eyes hungrily watching everything that Sirius was doing.

"Good kitten," Sirius whispered as she relaxed, overly aroused at the feel of him touching her and the sight of Remus reacting to it.

Then, Sirius lined himself up, slowly pushing his rigid length inside of her.

She winced at the intrusion at first; it never exactly felt good until she built up a tolerance—and even a desire—through the discomfort. When she felt his fingers move around to her front and tease the tender flesh he found at her centre, she both relaxed and tightened at the same time, her body welcoming every thrust of his hips.

"Oh fuck. We really need to do this more often," Sirius hissed. Instead of driving into her with abandon, he took instead, slow, calculated moves, creating a sensual pull and push that felt like it was set to the beat of her heart. "You're always so fucking tight." He groaned loudly as he wrapped his arms around her waist, lifting her from her hands until her back was flush against his chest. Still buried to the hilt inside of her arse, he used a knee to spread her thighs from behind, putting her on display for the wolf in front of them, who was watching the couple with heavy-lidded eyes.

"Are you ready for this, love?" Remus asked with no hesitation in his voice as he took her face gently into his hands, looking into her eyes with adoration.

She felt completely dominated and yet safe at the same time; trapped and held in place tightly by the lover at her back who was offering her up as a consenting sacrifice to the predator at her front.

Remus's golden eyes looked her over with a visible hunger and want.

Unable to coherently speak with Sirius slowly pushing and pulling behind her, Mia only nodded.

Remus took his cock in hand and placed the tip of it against her entrance, all the while maintaining eye contact with her. "Stop moving, Pads."

Sirius halted immediately, though the whine he made let her know that he was a bit put out by the need to pause.

Slowly, Remus entered her inch by excruciating inch.

Her eyes widened and her lips parted, inhaling sharply with every new depth explored by his cock. She pressed her hands against his chest, digging her nails in for purchase as she leant her head back on Sirius's shoulder. It was too much. It was uncomfortable and amazing at the same time, and she was not sure if she were about to shatter into another orgasm or have the breath knocked out of her from being so incredibly full. The heat coming from all around her was stifling, but she yearned for more.

When it felt like she could not take another centimetre—let alone another inch—Remus growled deep in his chest and thrust upward, stretching and filling her completely. She cried out as discomfort gave way to unbearable pleasure, her limbs shaking.

Remus stared at her—no, *Moony* stared at her—the wolf inside of him pacing behind his eyes with a needy lust. She could feel it, as though their physical connection linked her closer to him than ever before. She could feel the pulsating desire, unaware whether or not it was her own yearning or theirs. It was not just sex or the inevitable orgasm that was quickly building for each of them. No, she could feel the *hunger*—Moony's primal need to dominate, to bite and claim and mark, sealing the pack together.

The stillness was almost unmanageable, and Sirius must have agreed because he shifted his cock inside of her, and Mia gripped onto Remus's shoulders to balance herself. The small movement from behind her, *inside* of her, nearly tipped her over the precipice of sanity.

At the small flutter of her walls and tight passages, both wizards bucked forward simultaneously groaning out an array of swears and gasping breaths at the clenching tightness around their cocks.

Remus groaned. "Bloody hell."

"Oh fuck. We need—oh fuck—coordination," Sirius mumbled inarticulately.

At his words, Remus nodded his head against Mia's shoulder. Slowly, the two found a rhythm that had them pistoning in and out of her, while she writhed between their sweat-soaked bodies.

"So good," Mia heard Remus moan as he thrust hard into her eagerly, eliciting deep gasps from her as she grew more and more overwhelmed by the multitude of sensations overtaking her.

Somehow, her usually filthy-talking boyfriend had been brought to silence, save for deep, feral grunting as he continually drove into her from behind, breathing hard against her back where he paused every few moments to kiss and lick at the skin between her shoulder blades.

"I . . . I can't . . ." Mia cried, feeling her body beginning to break down. It was too much—too powerful. The additional pull of magic around her only made everything that much more sensitive. "I need . . . Please, Remus."

He stared into her eyes, his golden irises nearly glowing in the dark.

"Do you . . . ? Do you feel that?" Sirius moaned from behind her, and both she and Remus nodded in reply.

A magical silver cord wrapped around them tightly—squeezing, binding, and pulling them.

*The Pack Bond.*

"Remus . . ." Mia whimpered again.

Sirius tilted her head to the side once more—presenting her neck and shoulder to Remus—while he captured her lips with his own in a soul-searing kiss.

The magic was building and building around them, and it hit them all at once. Remus's body tightened viciously as his cock swelled and then stilled within her as he came. He thrust forward once more, hard and deep inside her tight heat before sinking his teeth into the flesh of her shoulder, breaking skin.

The silver cord of the Pack Bond tightened almost painfully before releasing them simultaneously.

The moment that Remus bit down, piercing her shoulder, Mia felt the hot spring inside her body burst, and she clamped down, pulsing hard as she came. The strength of her climax gripped Sirius, who followed both Mia and Remus over the edge, spilling himself inside of her and shouting out his release as his fingers dug into her hips.

In the aftermath of their ritual coupling, Mia hissed as each of the men pulled their softening cocks from her sore and swollen body. Knees buckling, they collapsed into a pile against the grass, legs intertwined. Wiping blood from his mouth, Remus stared into Mia's eyes. His colour had returned to his face almost instantly, as well as the sparkle to his green gaze. He grinned and leant forward, kissing her soundly.

"Thank you," he said to her as he broke the kiss.

Mia smiled, pleased to see the life returning to him.

Remus looked over her shoulder, and she shifted to follow his line of sight to Sirius, who was exhaustedly spent behind her, lazily picking at the fresh scar on his shoulder that magically matched her own.

"Thank you, Pads."

Sirius sluggishly waved Remus off, turning onto his side so that he could nuzzle into the nest of Mia's hair, chuckling deeply as he muttered, "No thanks needed. I should share more often."



## Chapter Eighty-Six

### *Perfect Match*

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*I set out on a narrow way many years ago  
Hoping I would find true love along the broken road  
But I got lost a time or two  
Wiped my brow and kept pushing through  
I couldn't see how every sign pointed straight to you  
(Bless the Broken Road - Rascal Flatts)*

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**November 10th, 1978**

The physical exertion, lack of sleep, and overwhelming surge of magic had drained the trio. They slept soundly on the grass in the orchards behind Potter Manor, limbs tangled together in a mass of pale skin.

Remus's eyes opened slowly at the first flutter of morning light that broke through the trees. He stared down at the witch in front of him, curled with her hands against his bare chest, pouty lips slightly parted as she took slow, shallow breaths in her deep slumber.

Overwhelmed by his unconditional love for the girl, he smiled and placed a kiss on her forehead, letting the tips of his fingers roam over her cheeks, marvelling at the magic that she had been able to summon. There was no denying the truth: she had saved him; she always saved him.

Suddenly remembering that it was not just *Mia* who had come to his rescue, Remus looked over her shoulder and came face to face with Sirius, who was awake and looking at him, arms wrapped around Mia possessively as though he were suddenly afraid that Remus would take away his prize in the aftermath of the previous evening.

"Relax, Pads. If I was planning on stealing her away, I would have done it while you were sleeping."

Sirius snorted as though he were silently saying, *I'd like to see you try.*

"I thought you'd admitted that sharing was nice," Remus teased.

Sirius huffed indignantly. "In my defence, I'd just had the best sex of my life. It's relaxing not having to do all the work," he admitted with a slight chuckle.

Remus smirked at his friend, glad to see that the awkwardness between them was minimal, if not missing entirely. "Lazy arse."

"The aftermath, however, is a little . . ." Sirius looked like he was struggling for the words as the chuckle all but disappeared from his voice. "Jarring."

Remus looked down at the witch in Sirius's protective embrace. He smiled fondly at her, and then at the couple in general, before he glanced back to his friend. "I still can't believe you were willing to seal the *Pack* Bond before your *Soul* Bond."

Sirius raised a brow. "We both had sex with Mia last night, at the same time, and what you can't believe is that she and I haven't sealed our Soul Bond?"

"You're supposed to be with her," Remus said with a smile, once again grazing the curves of Mia's face with his fingers.

Sirius leant over, watching closely as though he were trying to see if Mia reacted in her sleep to Remus's touch. When she did not, he sighed in relief. "Well, if we *had* sealed our Soul Bond you'd probably still be lying in bed all sickly grey and dying, wouldn't you?"

Remus shook his head. "She still would have sealed the Pack Bond." He did not return his gaze to Sirius, whom he knew was probably questioning the truth of the statement. Remus knew Mia. She was his best friend and would sacrifice anything for him. Even if she had not wanted to save Remus, she would have sealed the Pack Bond to secure the future. "Last night wasn't about sex."

Sirius chuckled. "Sure felt like sex to me."

"Bonds are all about intentions, Sirius. You know that. She came to me with the intention of sealing the bond, cementing the pack. If it had been about signing a document or sacrificing a chicken, she would have done it."

Remus's focus settled on the healing wound on Mia's shoulder. When he had imagined this moment, he had worried so often that he would see that mark and feel disgusted with himself. But now, looking at the wound, he felt possessive, powerful, and an all-consuming responsibility not just for her, but for everyone connected to the pack. Sirius, James, and Lily—not to mention the few glimpses of the future Mia had allowed him to be privy to—his own future mate, and Harry.

"It just so happens that sealing the Pack Bond involved sex. Wish Soul Bond sealing was that easy."

Remus shrugged his shoulders. "Werewolves, mate."

"Yeah, bloody werewolves." Sirius chuckled.

The two shared a knowing look, as though each were hesitant to say what they were thinking.

Remus had been scared of never coming home—he was grateful to be alive, but he was concerned that the means used to save his life meant that he would sacrifice some part of his friendship with Sirius.

Sirius, on the other hand, had been just as terrified of losing Remus but had been forced to try and keep his shit together in order to be strong for Mia. When she came to him with her plan of sealing the Pack Bond, Sirius had not needed to think about doing what was necessary to save his friend. While he likely would not admit it under sober and non-sarcastic conditions, had she been too anxious or hesitant to complete the ritual herself, Sirius would have gone through with it on his own. He loved Remus like a brother and would do anything for him. Even if he did not have that motivation there, he knew that Mia's heart would break were she to lose Remus, and Sirius would have saved him for that reason alone.

It was not jealousy that stirred in his chest at the thought, only a mild discomfort. Something that told him maybe he should have been jealous. But then he knew that Mia needed Remus the way Sirius always needed James. He could not begrudge her that emotional dependency. Sirius would do whatever it took to keep Remus around forever, if only for her. The thought of losing his own best friend was . . . well, it was unbearable to think about.

Despite the non-jealousy blooming in his chest, Sirius grinned when Mia rolled over in his arms, turning away from Remus and snuggling against *him*. He took a sharp breath, letting the moment wash over him as a warmth settled in his heart. She could not have known what her sleep-ridden movements meant to him—that in the aftermath of such an intense night, she had unconsciously chosen him.

"So, why haven't you done it?" Remus asked, breaking the long silence. "Why haven't you sealed your bond?"

"If it was just sex I'd have no problem with it," Sirius admitted. "But marriage? Merlin, I'm surprised I can put pants on every morning. Sometimes, I don't even bother with *that*; just ask Lily and Prongs. Besides, there's still this . . ." The non-jealousy took on a sharp edge, trying to define itself. When it vibrated in irritation at not having a name, it

shifted into something feeling a smidge closer to jealousy. "I have this fear, illogical or whatever, that even after sealing it, she'll want . . . you."

"She doesn't love me," Remus said. "Not like that. It's always been you."

"Are you mental?" Sirius raised a sceptical brow. "You were her first boyfriend—"

"Because *you* walked away," Remus argued.

"She lost her virginity to *you*—"

"Because *you* were busy sleeping with every Ravenclaw in the castle."

"Anytime she and I . . . for whatever reasons." Sirius sighed, holding her tighter as though admitting these fears would let her slip away from him. "She went back to *you*. It's *always* been you, Moony."

"Until it wasn't," Remus said with an understanding smile. "In the end she chose you. She *really* chose you, Pads. Not because it was fate or destiny, but because she loved *you* more."

"Well, it sure took her long enough." Sirius pouted.

"She was with me because I was safe," Remus said. "She and I both knew that we weren't mates. I'm the person that she could trust with her life and her heart while she waited for you to get your shit together. While she waited for you, she wasn't lonely with me, and we both took advantage. Pads, we've been through this before. Why do I have to constantly repeat myself?"

"Because I saw her last night, and I can't help but feel a little . . . inadequate." Sirius sighed shamefully at the admission. "Don't get me wrong, I'm not jealous. I've never really been jealous, strangely enough. Not with her. Not with you. I don't know what it is, but I would have stepped aside, you know, let her be with you forever."

Remus nodded. "I know."

"Moony, she'd do absolutely anything for you. And that's kind of what scares me."

"Yes," Remus agreed. "But she would do *everything* for you."

Sirius scoffed. "And you know this because you know all her secrets?"

"Don't be bitter. I'm getting up. I'm in desperate need of a bath. I bet my magic's strong enough again I could wandlessly cast a Warming Charm over the river," he said with confidence, the colour in his cheeks signifying a level of health that Remus had not experienced since before he had been attacked by the werewolf packs.

When Sirius moved to get up, Remus shook his head. "No, you stay with her. She needs to wake up next to you. She needs you to tell her that you were okay with what happened last night. That you don't think badly of her, and that you're not going to run out on her. You need to take care of her now. She needs to know how you feel, Pads."

"I'm not good with feelings, Moony," Sirius said, groaning as he pressed his forehead against the shoulder of the warm witch as though he could hide from his problems.

"Deal with it. That's an order if you can't take the hint. All official now, Alpha approved and everything."

Sirius cocked a brow when he felt a strange tingle in the scar on his own shoulder. He narrowed his eyes at his smirking friend. "You going to hold the whole Alpha thing over my head forever now?"

"Only if I have to." Remus grinned and then sauntered off toward the river.

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Mia's eyes opened to the light of the morning. The warmth of the body next to her was comforting, and she snuggled into the sweet embrace. She breathed in parchment, grass, and firewhisky. Without looking up at him, she placed a kiss to the hollow of Sirius's stubbly throat, smiling when she felt him nuzzle into her hair.

"Did it work?" she whispered.

"Yes. Either that or Remus has decided that skinny dipping in the river is his dying wish." He chuckled, and she laughed softly, wrapping her arms tightly around him.

Suddenly, the previous night came back in flashes, and Mia swallowed hard. A delicious ache had settled between her thighs, acting as a quick reminder of their activities; she blushed in response. Unfortunately, the potential consequences of said activities began listing in her head in alphabetical order: *Anger, Brawling, Contention, Disputes* . . . By the time she reached *Pregnancy* and remembered that Sirius had cast a Contraceptive Charm on her before they had gone into Remus's room, she had driven herself to what she was certain were three separate panic attacks.

"Stop worrying, love."

Mia looked up into endless, silver-grey depths.

"I can hear your brain working itself into a frenzy. Sounds like the lifts in the Ministry."

She wanted to pinch him for his comment, but worry was sinking into the pit of her stomach like a rock. She brought her hand up to gently touch his cheek, smiling softly as she rubbed her thumb across the bit of early morning stubble there.

"Are *we* all right?"

Sirius leant down and kissed her warmly. "We're perfect, kitten."

"Are you sure?" Mia asked nervously. "I don't want you to think that last night was anything but—"

"It was magic."

Mia could not help but agree.

Having slept with both wizards in the past, she thought she had known what she was getting into when she suggested sealing the Pack Bond. As much as her body was now reminding her of their activities, she remained focused on the magic of it all—the feel of the Pack Bond solidifying around them. The way the wound in her shoulder did not hurt but tingled and made her feel connected. The silver string she had seen so often during meditative states was now palpable inside her consciousness, and she could follow it easily.

"But it was also more than just a ritual to save Remus," Sirius continued. "I *know* that."

"No, it was . . ." Mia tried to argue, not wanting Sirius to think that she had lingering amorous feelings for her best friend.

"It was goodbye."

Mia's eyes widened. "What?"

"The two of you needed closure, one final moment, and I think I needed to see it," Sirius admitted with a slight frown, as though he were embarrassed. "See for myself the connection between the two of you, and . . . and understand that what *you and I* have is stronger. I know I'm not good with words unless I'm using them to make people angry or, frankly, to get you off." He chuckled as she flushed pink. "Which, for the record, is incredibly easy."

She narrowed her eyes. "Sirius—"

"I know I've only said it casually, and never with the intention you deserve." He took in a slow and deep breath and then stared into her eyes. "But . . . I love you."

Mia audibly gasped at the announcement.

Staring into his eyes, she could see the vulnerability and openness that Sirius had never been known to display. A part of her briefly understood how he could be terrible at Occlumency. When his walls broke, they shattered, and she knew that there would be no resistance whatsoever if she attempted Legilimency on him right then; but she would never do such a thing, especially not in that moment.

"It's bloody terrifying and painful," Sirius said, putting a hand over his bare skin where her name was visibly inked into him over his heart—a drunken joke turned permanent romantic gesture. If she had not known him better, she would have thought he had planned it out all along. "And most days when I look at you, I feel like my chest will cave in on me unless I say something, but I still usually choose not to say anything."

"Why?" she asked with a frown, tracing the edges of his lips with her finger, smiling softly when he paused to kiss the tip.

"Stubborn pride?" Sirius suggested.

"I love you too, Sirius."

"More than Remus?" he inquired in a light, teasing tone.

"Prat." Mia rolled her eyes, slapping his chest.

That only prompted him to grasp her hands and flip her onto her back. He grinned down as he positioned himself above her, slender wrists caught in his much larger hands, and that typical smug smirk on his face that was silent praise to himself for catching his prize.

"So, was last night a thing of poetry?" He leant down to place open-mouthed kisses along her collarbone. "Isn't *that* how sex with Remus is supposed to be? I have to admit, I'm feeling a little let down. I wasn't romanced in the slightest."

Mia blushed a bit at the memory of Remus and Sirius surrounding her body—*inside* of her body—pressing her tightly between them. She recalled years earlier in the basement of Grimmauld Place when she first had seen Sirius's Pack Mark. He had shown her, Harry, and Ron while they all argued with Remus over the fact that only a fully transformed werewolf could pass along lycanthropy.

*"You want proof? Moony, if saliva, semen, or blood transferred your furry little problem to others without a full moon, then I'd have a furry little problem of my own! Oh, uh . . . blood,"* he clarified when

*everyone gaped at him. "Fifth year we did a whole . . . And then after Hogwarts, it was . . . It was like a blood brothers thing. Like Muggles do. Not with semen. You know . . . nothing with that."*

*Fucking liar*, Mia thought smugly. "I think last night was a little more rock and roll than poetry."

Sirius grinned. "I'm good at *that*. Can't quote Lord Brian to save my life."

"Lord *Byron*," Mia corrected him.

"See? I'm rubbish." He smiled and pulled a few fallen leaves from the tangles of her hair. "But give me some good lyrics, and I could make your skin sing if I wanted to."

She raised a delicate eyebrow. "Is that so, Mr Black?"

He narrowed his eyes. "You doubt me, Miss Potter?"

"I *challenge* you," she said with a defiant grin. "Make my skin sing."

Suddenly, Sirius was hovering over her body. His pale frame was glowing with the empyrean light of the sunrise behind him, his ebony hair a stark contrast to the surrounding illumination and the very colour of his skin, tainted by ink as black as his locks and a variety of pink and silver scars. He no longer looked at the blemishes on her body caused by Dark Magic, unfortunate distractions, and miscalculated Apparitions with horror and guilt in his eyes. Now, especially with identical werewolf bite wounds to their shoulders, they matched more perfectly than ever before.

*"Night visions of fantasies are laying in bed with me,"* Sirius sang quietly to her, his voice husky to the point where she could feel the vibrations in the air and on the breath that brushed against her ear and down the side of her neck. *"In the dark, I can see you smiling."*

Her mind drew a blank at the variety of poems, proverbs, and quotes in her head that described how he made her feel. It took her less than a minute to remember that his love was not delicate poetry—it was lyrical, callused, and unyielding.

*"You touch my body and set my soul on fire."*

Mia could feel his mouth hovering just beneath her ear, not kissing—despite how badly she wanted him to—and his hands drifted south, every so slowly, as though he meant to set her skin aflame the way he proclaimed that she ignited his very soul.

*"I can see morning light, the sun is rising, shining in your eyes."*

And then he kissed her—finally kissed her—and somehow everything was different in that one kiss. They had shared a thousand by that point. From that first—and second—kiss in the caved-in passage on the fourth floor leading up from Hogsmeade, to his

bedroom at Potter Manor, the fifth-floor corridor of Hogwarts, to the copper clawfoot bathtub they shared at their flat.

But this one . . . this one was different.

The golden string of their Soul Bond, which was normally alight whenever they touched, was vibrating, tugging, pulling on her from somewhere deep inside, but it was no longer the musical equivalent of a fiddle with some invisible force—most likely Fate—plucking at the string to elicit sound.

Rather, someone had gently, but purposefully, taken a bow and was sliding it across the string like a properly wielded violin and played, tuning to sound the variety of shades of grey in Sirius's eyes, the exact scent of grass, parchment, and leather she smelled when she breathed him in. Somehow, in the back of that song in her soul, she could taste the lingering burn of a well-aged firewhisky.

*"Suddenly, you're gone, and I'm left here all alone."*

Somehow her heart was so full that she had almost forgotten where his hands had travelled. Instead of someone playing the golden string of their Soul Bond, *he* was playing *her* like a Stradivarius—performing Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake" while simultaneously whispering punk rock lyrics in her ear, from an all-girl band at that.

His teeth found her lip the very same moment that his fingers brushed against her clit.

She writhed. He chuckled. She whimpered. He groaned.

*"I know you're here, I can feel your presence."* He kissed a trail along her jawline to her ear. *"And that sound you're making. It's getting me so hot."*

They both hissed when he slid himself inside her, right where he belonged.

Her nerves lit on fire, her body throbbing and aching and still responding with eagerness to his touch. Every thrust looked to be her complete undoing, and every withdrawal left her nearly in tears.

*"Am I dreaming? Were you really here?"*

Music was not needed for his lyrics, though she wondered if the beat to the song was harder, rougher than the rhythm with which he was currently thrusting. Somehow, Sirius found just the right line between soft and hard, and he was perfecting it.

*"Is it just a fantasy? Or am I dreaming?"*

She was pulled suddenly from the ground, into his arms as he sat back on his calves. Her legs wrapped around his waist, chest pressed against chest with leaves scattered in their hair. She imagined that they looked like woodland nymphs. Or maybe just her. She was the wood nymph Echo, and the beautiful man driving into her with abandon was her Narcissus. Only instead of sorrow and heartache, they had changed the story and cursed the gods, and suddenly she understood. *This* was what they had always meant to be. *Knowing. Willing. Loving.* Requirements for the Soul Bond were so specific, and they had never both been completely on the same page until now. When she was still Hermione, only Sirius was fulfilled on his end. When she came back to the past, it was only her that was aware and accepting of the bond. Finally, given a choice, they chose one another, and Soul Bond was merely a label that defined this feeling, this moment.

Sirius shouted his climax against the hollow of her throat, and Mia clung to him with all her might as she undulated around his still-thrusting hardness, never wanting him to part from her body.

In the aftermath, she could hear nothing but the sound of his breath, the beat of his heart, and the rushing of the river in the distance.

"I love you, witch," Sirius said in between catching his breath.

Mia smirked and kissed his temple. "I love you, mutt."

"So, this is what I've got to look forward to?"

Post-coital bliss interrupted, Mia looked over Sirius's shoulder and laughed into the crook of his neck at the sight of Remus staring at them with a raised brow, freshly bathed from the river and looking amused at the position in which he had caught them.

"The two of you unashamedly going at it in broad daylight?"

"To be fair, Moony," Sirius replied as he pulled away from Mia, but just enough to still cover her nakedness—not that it was needed. "It's nothing you haven't already seen."

"Are the two of you all right, then?" Remus asked, averting his gaze as best as he could while the other two did the same, considering they had Apparated into the orchard with no clothing save for Mia's now-torn robes.

"We're great, Remus, thank you," Mia said honestly and leant in to kiss Sirius as though sealing her words with a promise.

"No, thank *you*, love," Remus said, his eyes meeting hers, filled with nothing but gratitude. His gaze lingered over the wound on her shoulder and there was only a brief

moment of what looked like regret. "Does it hurt? I'm sorry that you'll have to let it heal naturally."

Mia waved him off. "I don't mind."

"Others might. If people see it, they won't understand."

"I don't need them to. I wear this mark proudly, Remus."

Sirius smiled, angling his head to look at his own scar. "I like mine as well. And I didn't have to even get bit."

Mia rolled her eyes. "It's a reminder that what happened was a ritual. A magical binding, something powerful and sacred. These scars are a reminder of how loved by us you are."

"No, thank *you*, Sirius," Sirius sarcastically interrupted her revered thoughts. "You're such a wonderful lover and so very generous when it comes to sharing your witch. What? You saved your best friend's life? How noble and handsome you are! The songs people will sing about your legend will be legendary!"

Mia laughed, shoving at his chest. "Ugh, get dressed. We need to inform everyone that Remus isn't dying."

"Dressed with *what*, kitten?" Sirius looked around, and smirked when he caught the look in Mia's eyes as she realised just exactly how naked the three of them were, and in broad daylight—as Remus so kindly had pointed out moments earlier.

Quickly rediscovering her inhibitions, she squeaked before trying to cover her exposed bits, causing both wizards to laugh at the unnecessary display.

"Remus, tear up my robes." Mia gestured to the black pile of fabric at the foot of a nearby tree. "I'll transfigure something for each of us, I suppose."

Minutes later, the trio made their way to the manor, Sirius wrapped around Mia. She was draped in a transfigured bit of black cloth that looked like the leather skirt she had worn to the Black Sabbath concert a year earlier, her top resembling one of Mary's bikinis. Remus and Sirius each wore a set of loose, black and green pants, but there had not been enough fabric to create shirts, so the wizards remained bare-chested.

"Do you think Lily and Jamie are awake yet?" Mia asked.

Before either man could reply, they came face-to-face with an annoyed-looking Lily and James, who looked quite a bit *less* irritable than any of them imagined he would after waking to discover his sister, best friend, and dying mate gone from the manor.

"Oh, I think that's a distinct possibility," Lily answered Mia's question, arms folded angrily over her chest.

"Why are you three naked?" James questioned warily.

Mia shrugged. "These are technically clothes."

Groaning uncomfortably, James rubbed his palms against his eyes. "Oh Merlin."

"Remus, are you . . . You're *all right*?" Lily asked, her green eyes alight with hope, sparkling like emeralds in the light of the risen sun.

Remus grinned at her. "Never been better, Lils."

"Thank God," she said, breathing a sigh of relief. She rushed forward, hugging him tightly. "I can't tell you how happy that makes me. We were all so worried."

James focused intently on his bare feet.

Remus frowned as Lily pulled away, tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. But now you're better, and I suppose seeing you healthy, and the three of you looking, well, like you do . . . that explains a lot."

"Explains *what* exactly?" Sirius asked as Lily returned to James's side, looking annoyed once again.

"*This*," she said and tugged on James's shirt, baring his left shoulder, now blemished with the silvery-pink scar of what looked like a healed bite wound.

Mia's eyes widened at the sight, and she instantly felt her face flush. She and James avoided eye contact with one another. Somehow, in the worry of figuring out how to save Remus's life as quickly as possible, Mia and Sirius had forgotten that their original pack consisted of not three but *four* members, and, when properly sealed, they were all connected—not just those present for the actual sealing ritual.

Sirius's smug face was not helping the awkward tension coming off of James and Mia in the slightest. Nor was his excited declaration of, "Hey! Look, Prongsie! We match!" as he gestured to his own Pack Mark with delight.

## Chapter Eighty-Seven

### *Understandably Bitter*

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*I knew I loved you before I met you  
I think I dreamed you into life  
I knew I loved you before I met you  
I have been waiting all my life*  
(I Knew I Loved You - Savage Garden)

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**December 13th, 1978**

Initially, Mia wondered if the sharing of magic amongst members of the pack would mean that some would be left depleted. As a stark contrast, however, they somehow *fuelled* one another. Mia, James, and Sirius had better focus of their magic, and Remus had never looked healthier.

Unfortunately, the circumstances surrounding his sudden leap away from Death's door left the Order members suspicious of Remus, not the least of whom was Moody, who agreed to take Sirius back as an Auror only to put him through hell for keeping secrets. To compensate for his sacrifice at work, Sirius was greeted at home each night with a plate of chocolate-covered éclairs from a Muggle pastry shop that Mia found whilst browsing for Christmas presents.

It was not, however, the *only* gift that Sirius had been given by the suddenly insatiable witch.

Peter's absence went beyond Remus's health crisis. When Remus inquired as to Peter's whereabouts, Sirius's reply was, "Fuck *him*."

Mia had to be coy about rewarding her wizard for the crass verbal assault against the person she hated most in this timeline, and though Sirius did not question the reason he found his girlfriend wearing nothing but his leather jacket in their bed one night, the tattoo of his name on her upper thigh prominently displayed, he seemed to appreciate the gesture regardless.

Somehow, despite the war, despite the stress of suddenly being adults in a world where they all wanted to cling a little longer to the innocence of adolescence, the Marauders and Mia—or well . . . the pack—had never been happier as a whole.

James and Lily rarely found their way outside Potter Cottage, and no one had the interest of disturbing them by Flooing in at random without prior notice. Unfortunately for Remus, he lived with another disturbingly amorous couple. Mia often apologised, but avoidance was nearly impossible when Sirius Black had little to no shame and even less understanding of what "shared living space" should *not* be used for.

"The least the two of you could do is reverse positions so I have a better view," Remus said with a yawn, making his way into the small kitchen and stepping over the two bodies that were wrapped around one another on the floor. "No offence, Pads, but I've seen enough of your pasty pale arse to last me several lifetimes."

Mia laughed, glad that she was at least mostly dressed. "Sorry, Remus."

Grinning as he stood, Sirius pulled his jeans back up around his hips and watched with amusement as Mia sighed with satisfaction at the sight of him. "My deepest apologies, Mr Moony," he said as he made a low, dramatic bow of remorse, "but I simply couldn't help myself." He swiftly pulled Mia to her feet and planted a kiss on the side of her neck just over her Pack Mark. "The little witch seduced me by saying 'good morning.'"

Mia replied by rolling her eyes at him and kissing Remus good morning on the cheek before moving to put the kettle on the stove.

"Well, if *that's* all it takes," Remus said as he dug a clean mug from the cabinet, "I'm shocked that *you and I* haven't been shagging for the past eight years."

"I also poured him a cup of coffee." Mia tugged down the red and gold Quidditch jersey that served as her night clothes, grateful in this moment that it at least covered the upper half of her thighs.

"Ah, and therein lies the secret key to unlocking the famous chastity belt of one Sirius Black," Remus said sardonically, holding his cup out to Mia, who snorted in amusement as she dropped an Earl Grey bag in it. "I'll be certain to avoid offering him coffee in the future lest I be shagged in the kitchen. Maybe just stick to tea?"

Sirius barked a laugh, stretching his arms above his head as he followed them into the attached kitchen. "No can do, Moony my friend, offering me tea implies a blowj—"

"Hush!" Mia hissed as she leapt at Sirius, wrapping her hand tightly around his unfiltered mouth.

"Merlin, don't even tell me what *pumpkin juice* might signify." Remus laughed before setting the kettle to boil and then digging around in the cooling cabinet for something to eat. Suddenly, he sucked in a sharp breath and winced, grabbing at his side.

Instinctively, whether by their own will or driven by the Pack Bond, Mia and Sirius found themselves closed in on Remus, offering support and magic should he have need of it. The full moon was the following night, and it would be only the second one since the bond had been sealed. They all still worried about his transformations, especially since he had come so close to death.

"How are you feeling?" Mia asked with a frown, brushing hair from Remus's forehead affectionately. Sirius was busying himself behind her, pouring their flatmate a tall glass of pumpkin juice while they waited for the kettle to boil. "Do you want me to make you some breakfast?"

"No, thank you, love." Remus smiled at her, kissing her forehead and accepting the glass from Sirius. After drinking it down quickly, Remus knelt down in front of the cabinet under the sink where Mia knew he kept an emergency stash of chocolate for the bad days. "Feeling a bit under the weather. Let's save the big meals for *after* the moon. I might just take some Sleeping Draught and go back to bed, to be honest. I hate pre-moon symptoms. If it's not the agitation and jitters, it's the bloody headaches."

"Go and take a hot bath in the big tub in our bathroom," Mia insisted, all but shoving him out of the kitchen and down the hallway. "It'll help relax you. One of us will bring you a cuppa when it's ready."

Remus made a face at the suggestion. "When was the last time your tub was Scourgified?"

"Go." Mia narrowed her eyes at him, but her pinched look softened when he laughed at her. "I'll run down and get you some of that Christmas fudge they've been selling over at Sugarplum's Sweets Shop."

"And some pumpkin pasties?" Remus asked, his eyes suddenly bright.

She nodded. "And some pumpkin pasties."

"And some Cauldron Cakes?" Sirius shouted from the kitchen.

"Do I look like a house-elf to you?" Mia snapped back at her boyfriend as she rounded the corner.

"You're getting *Remus* a bunch of treats," he said, pretending to pout. "I just shagged the daylights out of you, quite well I might add if the noises you were making were any indication. What do *I* get for all my hard work?"

"You got coffee."

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Mia stepped into Sugarplum's Sweets Shop and looked around, glad that she had come alone. Fully grown men, and yet Remus and Sirius would eagerly empty their Gringotts vaults to buy out the entire sweets shop. If she did anything these days for the boys, it was to act as their impulse control monitor.

Loading her basket with Christmas fudge, pumpkin pasties, and Cauldron Cakes, Mia paid for her treats, took her bags in hand, and headed for the door when a shocking sight had her stopped in her tracks. There before her was a generously-curved woman pushing a large pram, followed behind by two young boys, and another on her hip, all with familiar, flaming red hair.

"Pleeeeee Muuum!" The eldest boy dragged his feet as though he were ready to throw a tantrum at any moment should his mother give a proper signal. He was tall for his age, which Mia guessed had to have been about eight. When his mother refused to look at him, he flung himself to the ground. "If you get me a Chocolate Frog today, I won't ask for anything else for Christmas!"

"William Weasley." The witch turned around and put one hand on her waist, the other adjusting the toddler in her grip. Firm eyes settled down at her whinging son, William—or Bill as Mia would later know him—and set her mouth in a resolute line. "You get up off that floor right this second, young man! I will not reward poor behaviour!"

"Told you it wouldn't work," muttered a younger boy, who could only be Charlie. He stood with a pout on his face, dirt on his cheek, and a dragon on his hand-me-down shirt.

"Muuum . . ." Bill wailed.

Molly Weasley continued to ignore her son's plight.

"If you don't get me a Chocolate Frog, I'll . . . I'll . . . I'll never cut my hair again!"

Mia snorted, recalling a future long-haired and *pierced* Bill Weasley. Even with how much Mia knew Molly to hate Bill's hair in the future, she seemed unlikely to bend to this tantrum. She even shrugged her shoulders, looking nonplussed, which Mia was unaware Molly could do.

"Fine. I've always wanted a daughter, and you'll make such a pretty little girl," Molly cooed at him. Bill recoiled in absolute horror, and the grin that settled on Molly's face was so reminiscent of Ginny that it made Mia gasp.

"Now, the two of you behave yourselves while I order your father's Christmas gift," Molly insisted as she turned, pushing the pram ahead of her toward the counter.

Mia subtly leant around a nearby shelf, pretending to examine a tin of chocolates in order to peek into the carriage where she spotted two sleeping identical babies.

"How come *Dad* gets sweets for Christmas?" Bill demanded, continuing to press his luck.

"Because one sweet deserves another," Molly answered with a mild blush.

Mia grinned at the sight. Being friends with Arthur in this timeline and knowing the love he had for his wife was adorable, and seeing her reciprocate that—to her children no less—was nothing if not enlightening.

"If you behaved yourselves for once, you'd learn that good behaviour is rewarded. Now stand right there and don't move," Molly ordered her sons.

Mia watched closely as Fred and George slept soundly in their pram. The quiet toddler-version of Percy sat obediently on his mother's hip, thumb stuck firmly in his mouth. Mia's gaze drifted down to the two older boys, who were whispering conspiratorially to one another. Bill was clearly the ringleader, as Charlie just grinned and eagerly nodded to everything his older brother suggested.

The sight was too surreal, and Mia was not certain if she could handle a face-to-face meeting with Molly Weasley should she stick around, so she headed for the door.

Just as she made her way close to the exit, she felt a small tug on her robes and turned to see the two little ginger boys with sad looks on their faces, playing the part of the proper paupers that Draco had always accused the family of being.

"Scuse me, ma'am," Bill said, batting his big eyes up at her. "Could you spare a few Sickles for two starving orphans?"

Charlie wrapped his arms around his stomach as though suffering from starvation and let out a pitiful sniff. "We're *ever* so hungry."

*You have got to be shitting me*, Mia thought, stifling her laughter.

She knelt down in front of them and frowned. "Orphans, you say? How awful. Perhaps I could help you find a new family," she suggested and watched with a glint in her eyes as both Bill and Charlie seemed to see the flaw in their plan.

"I see you've both a lovely shade of red hair, perhaps that kind-looking ginger witch over there with the three other children would like to adopt you," she said, gesturing to Molly who was haggling over the price of what sounded like some imported Muggle sweets from America.

"Oh, no, ma'am, she seems *quite* awful," Bill insisted.

Charlie nodded emphatically, his tiny hand clinging to Bill's shirt. "Terrible, really."

"Looks like a right wicked one, she does," Bill added emphatically.

Mia wanted to burst into laughter at the way they finished one another's sentences, much like their younger brothers would do one day in the future. She wondered if Ginny, had she been a boy, would have been closer to Ron like each set of brothers—save for Percy—was.

"Tell you what? Even though I know you're lying little monsters, I'll give you a few coins on one condition."

"Really?" Bill asked, looking shocked.

Charlie stared suspiciously at Mia. "That worked?"

"Hardly," Mia replied, rolling her eyes. "But it *is* Christmas after all. Here." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small stack of Sickles, handing them over to Bill, who eyed the coins greedily. "It's enough for three liquorice wands."

"Or one box of Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans."

"Three liquorice wands," Mia insisted, pursing her lips in disapproval. "Give one to that little brother of yours—" She gestured to Percy, knowing that it was rare for him to get any type of special treatment from his brothers. "—and also promise to behave yourselves for the rest of the day. Your mum looks a bit tired, and good little wizards take care of their mums, right?"

Charlie shrugged as though the thought had never occurred to him. "I guess."

"What my little brother means to say is, 'thank you,'" Bill said, eyeing Charlie with mild disdain as though he were aware that Mia could snatch back the gifted coins as easily as she had given them away.

"You're welcome." Mia smiled brightly down at the boys. She could almost envision the Burrow and smell the wonderful aromas coming out of it. Molly Weasley's cooking was high on a list of things she missed most from 1998. "Happy Christmas."

She left the shop, lost in thoughts of the other timeline—summers at the Burrow, and the family that had all but adopted her into the Wizarding world—and was not paying attention to where she was going. Unfortunately, neither was the child that crashed right into her.

"Whoops, sorry!"

Mia braced herself against the brick wall of the building, looking down at the back of a small head of black hair belonging to a little girl who was now kneeling on the ground.

Leaning down, Mia offered a hand to the girl. "Are you all right?"

"Sure am," the little girl answered, taking Mia's extended hand and then releasing it upon standing to dust off her clothes. She smiled up at Mia with a toothy grin; the middle front two teeth were presently missing.

"When you're dead clumsy you learn to be res-res-resilient. That's what my dad calls me. Says I got enough scar tissue to make myself a good set of armour. See?" she proudly declared, gesturing to the patches of scars on her knees. Just as she looked away, her head of black hair quickly turned brown and then blond in an instant.

Mia's mouth fell open. "Tonks?"

The little girl's eyes brightened excitedly, but before she could speak, she was tugged protectively into the embrace of what could only be her mother. "Do we know you?"

The woman looked at Mia with deep-set eyes, though these were kind as opposed to angry and insane like her older sister. She wore a long black dress beneath her robes, her hair pulled back in a tight knot with perfectly set curls that reminded Mia immediately of her late mother, Dorea. Andromeda Tonks was the picture perfect image of what a pureblood witch should be, save for the half-blood child now dangling off of her arm, sticking her tongue through the gap in her teeth, clearly bored and easily distracted.

Mia smiled softly. "You must be Andromeda."

Andromeda raised a questioning brow, her attention turning briefly to her daughter before a protective blaze reflected in her eyes as they returned to Mia. "Do I *know* you?"

"Sorry, umm, I recognised you because . . . well . . ."

"Ah, you must be acquainted with my sister, Bella." Andromeda sighed. Clearly, she spent a great deal of time being mistaken for her crazier sister.

Mia snorted, her mouth turning down in a grimace. "*Acquainted* is such a strong word."

"Is there a better one?"

"Well, she once threatened my life at a wedding."

"And how did *you* respond?" Andromeda asked, apparently unaffected by the comment.

"I reciprocated her *kind* offer," Mia admitted casually with just a hint of smugness.

The wary look on Andromeda's face fell away and she chuckled softly. "You're Mia Potter, aren't you? Call me Dromeda, please," she said calmly, before reaching forward and pulling her daughter up and away from accidentally tripping over the uneven cobblestone. "We're practically family, after all."

"We *are* family, in fact. My mother was Dorea Black."

"I know. I'm sorry to hear about your parents. The Wizarding world is much worse off without them in it. Your mother was always very kind to me, especially after . . ." Her gaze drifted down to her daughter, who was now sporting a familiar shade of pink hair.

"And you must be Nymphadora." Mia smiled as she looked down at the child, who turned and snarled at her like an animal. Briefly taken aback, Mia stood up tall, casting a confused glance to Andromeda who was rolling her eyes, clearly embarrassed.

"Ignore the growling; it's a strange phase she's going through. She prefers to be called Dora."

Mia chuckled in immediate understanding. "And what finds you in Diagon Alley this fine day, *Dora*?" she asked the tiny Metamorphmagus, a part of her heart clenching a little, reminding her just how much she had missed little Teddy Lupin over the years.

"We're going to go see my cousin!" Dora said brightly, her hair shifting to black once more.

"Oh?" Mia rose a brow. "You're coming to see Sirius?"

"Did he not say?" Andromeda frowned, looking uncomfortable, as though she were now imposing on Mia's day. "It's been much too long since we've had a visit, and he mentioned he was living in Diagon Alley."

"Yes." Mia gestured down the street. "It's just down the way. He didn't mention anything. I'll walk with you both if you don't mind. It'll give me a chance to slip into the flat and make sure it's company appropriate. Living with two wizards can make cleaning a little difficult."

Andromeda relaxed and let out a small laugh. "I can imagine."

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Mia burst through the front door of the flat, pulling the bag of treats away from Sirius as he dove for them. "Your cousin is downstairs!"

"Oh, shit. I forgot Dromeda was stopping by today."

"Yes, a little warning would have been nice," she hissed and pulled out the Cauldron Cakes for Sirius, leaving them on the table so he would be forced to share with Dora if the little girl requested.

"It'll be fine," he said casually as he moved to open the door. "The place looks great."

Mia rolled her eyes and tossed him one of his plain white t-shirts that was hanging over the back of a chair. The shirt fell midway between them, but she was too panicked to be concerned about picking it up and left that to Sirius. "At least put on a shirt before you let your family in. I need to go and check on Remus."

"He's still in the bath," Sirius said as she made her way quickly down the hall.

"Yes, well, better *me* see him than him accidentally walking out here naked like *you* have a habit of doing!"

She burst through her bedroom door and shut it behind her, setting strong Locking and Silencing Charms. Throwing the bag of treats onto her and Sirius's bed, she stormed toward the bathroom, ready to break down the door just to get as much of a head start on this problem as possible. She really regretted not telling Andromeda that today would be a bad day to visit, but the truth was, she sorely missed Tonks. She also knew that Sirius could use what little of his family deigned to speak to him.

"Remus!" Mia screamed as she flung open the door. She almost laughed at the way the water splashed about when he jumped, yelping in surprise. It was not easy to ever startle the man, and she felt smug about the fact that she had done it so seamlessly without even trying.

Seeing her, his eyes narrowed. The look might have been more intimidating had there not been a clump of bubbles perched on his left eyebrow.

"Mia, I know that we've reached a comfortable level in our friendship," Remus said in a clipped tone. "But really, I think Sirius might take issue with you watching me *bathe*."

She briefly considered that, and her gaze raked over Remus's body in amusement. He was still aesthetically pleasing, especially when he blushed a bit at her staring. She found it interesting that despite knowing what his body was capable of, she felt nothing. No lingering stir inside bringing up nostalgic moments of past passion. He was just Remus. A *naked* Remus who was quite pleasing to look at, but not quite so pleasing as Sirius was these days. Torn from her thoughts by the uncomfortable growl coming from her best friend, Mia remembered why she had stormed in.

"I need you to remain calm." It was probably was not the best choice of words considering the anxious look that crossed Remus's face.

"I don't like that look in your eye," he said nervously as he reached for a towel.

When he missed the first grab for it, Mia rolled her eyes and handed over the fluffy bathrobe that was hung up behind the door.

"The last time you looked at me like that you took me into a Pensieve and showed me a future where I have grey hair, and you were—" He paused mid-sentence as he climbed out of the tub, the bathrobe hanging limply in his hand. His eyes shifted to gold faster than she had ever before seen, and his nostrils flared wide.

*Uh oh*, Mia thought to herself as she slowly backed away from him, reaching for her wand.

"What's . . . ? What smells so good?" Remus asked, his eyes dilating. "Did you bring me fudge?"

Mia let out a sigh of relief. "Yes, it's in the other room," she said without clarifying which other room she meant.

"I'll go get it," Remus said, dropping the bathrobe as he made a dash for the bedroom door without pausing to reflect on the fact that he was naked and dripping water everywhere.

Mia put her hands up against his bare chest, briefly looking away and praying that Sirius did not try to walk in at that moment. Thank Merlin she locked the door when she first came in the room. "Remus! You're naked."

"Nothing you haven't seen . . ." Remus scoffed, having lost all shame and sensibility in that flash of gold. He kept moving forward, his eyes set, his jaw tight, and Mia could tell he did not even realise he was doing it. "I need . . . I *need* to go out there. Something smells—"

"Remus!" Mia snapped. "You cannot go out there! Especially naked."

"Why? I mean, not the naked part, that's fairly obvious." Almost as if the words reached his own ears for the first time, Remus realised that, yes, he was indeed still naked, standing soaking wet in the middle of her and Sirius's bedroom. Flushing crimson, he snatched a pillow from the bed and covered his groin with it.

Letting out a sigh of relief in thanks for him coming to his senses, Mia let her shoulders relax. "Sirius's cousin is here with her little girl."

"Andromeda?" Remus asked, raising a curious brow. "Isn't she supposed to be the *good* one?"

"She is."

"Then why are you—?" His nostrils flared once more and a glazed look fell over his still-golden eyes. "Is it *you*? You smell . . ." he whispered, leaning forward to actually sniff at her.

Under normal circumstances, the gesture might have earned him a smack to the head, but she was feeling slightly sympathetic to his plight, especially since he did not even know what it was yet.

"But not *you* . . . Your hands." He took one of Mia's hands, dropping the pillow covering himself, and brought her fingers up to his face to sniff. "What were you—?"

"*Colloportus!*" Mia yelled, the wand in her free hand aimed at the door as she added another, stronger Locking Spell on top of the general one she already had thrown up.

Almost as though he suddenly realised that she was keeping something from him, something important, something necessary and life-sustaining, Remus rushed to the door.

"What's out there?" he demanded, desperately clawing at the wood with his bare hands. "I need it!"

"Remus, I will stun you," Mia threatened, wand aimed at her best friend's back.

"Why?" He turned to her wide-eyed, looking the picture of a scolded animal.

"What're you hiding?"

"Your . . ." Mia hesitated. "Your mate."

The colour completely drained from his face, and he collapsed on the ground in front of the door, gaping at it as though he could see through it, a confused and yearning look on his face. "You mean she's . . . ? Andromeda? Isn't she married?"

"No."

"She's not married? But Sirius said she eloped with that Tonks fellow, and they—"

"She's married," Mia said anxiously. "But . . . it's not her."

"I don't underst—"

Mia could see him process the information. She was keeping him locked away because his mate was outside. But if not Andromeda then . . .

"Wait. No. That's . . . Oh fuck . . ." Remus groaned, thrusting his face into his palms. "Oh Merlin. Oh buggering *fuck!*"

"You have to stay back here, love. I know you'd never do anything . . . inappropriate." She winced as the word left her mouth, and yet Remus still reacted worse, leaning forward and actually smacking his forehead dramatically into the wooden door as though he could knock himself unconscious and forget the past few minutes. "But this close to the full moon, it would be a little difficult to, well . . . play stupid."

"Fu-cking hell and Mer-lin's sag-gy boll-ocks." Remus punctuated every syllable with another pound of his head against the door. "How old?"

Mia grimaced. "I don't think you want to know."

"How *old* is she?" he asked again, looking panicked.

Mia sighed through her nose and pressed her lips together. Out of the corner of her mouth, she muttered, "Five. Maybe six?"

"Oh *fuck!*" Remus stood up and began pacing around the room, hands drawn in his own hair, tugging hard in obvious frustration and shock. "And you're sure? I mean, I know *you* know who she is for certain, but . . . but . . . you're . . . you're certain?"

She nodded, placing a hand on his arm to hopefully help stop him from pacing. "Yes. I told you, I know you *both* in the future."

Something in him snapped. "And you couldn't have mentioned until now that I'm fifteen years older than her?!"

"Thirteen years actually," Mia corrected him.

"Oh, that's bloody well and good! Two years less makes a big difference when my bloody mate is—!"

"Hey! Are you forgetting that I might at some point have to deal with my *own* age complication?" she snapped, referencing her past—or well, *future*—relationship with a much older Sirius Black; that is, if she ever got the chance to go back to 1998. "And nineteen years is a little more of an issue than thirteen, thank you very much, Moony!"

"Don't '*Moony*' me, Mia!" Remus growled. "I just found out my mate is a toddler! She won't even start Hogwarts for six years. I'll be . . . oh Merlin, I'll be th-th-thirty by the time she's even . . ." He fell back on the bed, eyes wide and panic-stricken.

Briefly, Mia wondered if she had broken him, but she could see his chest rising and falling even through the apparent panic attack.

Suddenly, his nostrils flared again, and his pupils dilated once more. All the stress had vanished, and he looked practically, well, high. "Do . . . ? Did you happen to bake biscuits?"

Mia rolled her eyes in frustration. "No."

The moment faded rather quickly, and Remus suddenly realised something important. "She smells like *biscuits*?! This is the worst day of my life."

"Do you want a Calming Draught?"

"I'm fine." He fell back onto the bed, covering his face with a large pillow. Mia wondered if he was thinking about smothering himself with it. "I'm just . . . understandably bitter, I suppose."

"I'd like to point out that you've always fought me on the fact that you'd *ever* find her," Mia said smugly.

"Fair point," he conceded from beneath the pillow.

"I'm still going to lock the door when I leave this room."

He removed the pillow, sitting back up and narrowing his eyes at her. "Do you honestly think I'd go out there and . . . what? Assault a *child*?"

"No, of course not!" Mia hissed at him, offended that he could think she thought so poorly of him. "But you're a little intense right now, Remus; your eyes are practically glowing. And the girl is a bit . . . clumsy," she admitted, trying to be somewhat vague.

A look of panic crossed Remus's face at her words.

"You're *worried*? Already?"

"Well, I . . . I'm . . . I'm very confused right now. I don't know what's happening, my brain is running a mile a minute, and did you . . . did you bake biscuits?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Mia threw her head back and groaned. "It's the protective instinct. Moony knows that she's your mate, that she's out there, and even though there's nothing . . . romantic—" She watched as Remus recoiled in horror at the thought. "—there's still the instinct to protect what Moony perceives as yours. I'm honestly afraid that if she tripped and fell—which knowing her, is very likely—your inner wolf might try to play knight in shining armour. Honourable intentions or not, that's going to freak the hell out of her mother. Blood-traitor or not, the Blacks are not exactly known for their calm demeanour."

"*You're* a Black."

"Technically, yes. And do I bloody look like I'm to be trifled with right now?"

"Sirius's cousin." Remus sighed, running a hand through his still-damp hair. "So we're . . . we're *family* in the future then?"

"We're family now, love." Mia offered him a kind smile, and Remus looked like he tried to reciprocate but could not find it in him to do so. "So just stay here, and I'll tell Sirius that you're still feeling really sick. There's Calming Draught in the cabinet. Take it immediately."

"Mia?" Remus called after her as she approached the bedroom door. "In the future . . . how does her family react to me being . . . a werewolf?"

Mia smiled brightly, glad to bring him good news. "They *love* you."

He looked suspicious but relieved at the same time. "And Sirius?"

She laughed, remembering how often Sirius used to take the piss out of the couple. "Will tease you mercilessly. But he doesn't find out until h-h-he—" *He escapes from prison and the Order of the Phoenix is reformed.* Her smile faded only to be replaced with a bitter scowl. "Fuck!"

"Spell?" Remus winced on her behalf. It had been a long while now, and he had been able to suss out every now and again when she tried to confess something important, only to be thwarted by Dumbledore's spell.

"It's not like I'm changing anything! Just . . . Fine, let me work around it." She took in a deep breath and thought for a moment. "Don't tell Sirius you've found her until it's appropriate to do so. There, I'll leave it at that," she said and reached for the door. "Oh, there's the fudge and treats in the bag right there." Before she even put her hand on the doorknob, she could hear him digging through the small sack.

"Mia?" Remus called once again and frowned when she made eye contact. "What's her name?"

She smiled. "Nymphadora."

"That's . . ." Remus paused, letting the name roll over in his head a few times. "That's . . ."

"Beautiful?"

"Ridiculous," he said with a laugh.

"You two really are perfect for each other."

With a sigh of relief, Mia left the room and locked the door once again, double-checking her Silencing Charm. She took three steps forward and looked back to throw up a few personal wards before turning around and returning to the small living room where her eyes widened at the sight of shattered glass on the floor, what looked like broken ceramic, and a scorch mark on the carpet. She also smelled smoke.

"Hey, where's Moony?" Sirius asked innocently as he leant back against the sofa, a nervous-looking Dora cuddled into his side whilst Andromeda sat opposite them both looking positively mortified and exhausted.

"Sick," Mia replied warily. "I've given him a few potions to help him relax. What happened in here?"

Sirius looked positively joyful. "Mini-Tonks hadn't been here for five minutes before she broke that ugly vase Lily gave us as a housewarming gift, two of my crystal tumblers, and she also accidentally stepped on your stupid cat's tail. Rotten thing's hiding under the sofa now. I should have my family over more often!"

## Chapter Eighty-Eight

### *Socks*

---

*Say what you wanna say  
And let the words fall out  
Honestly I wanna see you be brave  
With what you want to say  
And let the words fall out  
Honestly I wanna see you be brave  
(Brave - Sara Bareilles)*

---

**December 20th, 1978**

Infuriated. That had been a good word to describe how Alastor Moody looked the moment they told him about Remus's recovery only to deny him the details of *how*. The old Auror demanded that a report be given about what occurred a month earlier at Potter Manor. Not a single member of the pack was willing to speak until Sirius's job was put on the line, which Mia thought had been a low blow, even for Moody. Sirius angrily pouted while Remus sat looking guilty. Meanwhile, James and Lily were both in an uproar over the attempted manipulation. Alice, Frank, and Mary all came to their defence, while Peter sat on the far side of the room, still being shunned by Sirius.

Mia rolled her eyes at everyone screaming and very dramatically pulled aside the collar of her robes to reveal the mark on her neck. Complete silence filled the entire room. One by one, Sirius and James followed suit, revealing their matching marks, leaving Remus looking ashamed as Moody stared at him.

The rest of the meeting erupted into chaos.

"I knew it! I knew we shouldn't have let him in the Order!"

"I'm sure there's a perfectly good explanation for this!"

"Give them a chance to explain."

"I thought werewolf bites looked bigger . . . that looks almost . . ."

"Dumbledore! Aren't you going to do something?!"

Everyone was screaming except for the pack in the back of the room. Remus looked decidedly uncomfortable at the attention being given to them, likely knowing full well that he was the reason behind all of it. Sirius lazily sat between Remus and Mia with his arms

draped over their shoulders, looking bored. James's shoulders were tense as though he were waiting for any of their fellow Order members to attack. Lily quietly huffed with her arms folded across her chest, glaring at anyone who dared to make eye contact with her. Though the boys missed it, Mia laughed when she caught her friend flipping off Marlene McKinnon.

Mia was almost amused by the turn of events; though she was smart enough to hide her smirk, considering Moody was still glaring.

Alastor Moody's problem had not, in fact, been Remus biting Mia to save himself, or so he later claimed. Nor was his issue with the bonding ritual the pack had undergone, merely the *secrecy* behind it all. He had also been incredibly—and, to Mia's great amusement, vocally—displeased with Dumbledore, who had been the one to send Remus into a dangerous situation without knowing all of the details.

By the end of the hour, the Order got a large education on werewolves, though some were insistent that James, Sirius, and Mia be examined for traces of lycanthropy. Mia acquiesced just so that she could rub it in the faces of those who were too ignorant to take her word for it.

Once a few charms had been cast, proclaiming them infection free, the meeting continued with Moody pacing back and forth, his hands behind his back looking like a General in an old war film.

"We've got reports that Death Eaters are on the move again. They're back in Britain, and slaughtering innocents during the holidays would be just the type of thing those rotten bastards would do," Moody snapped angrily as he moved around the small room, dishing out commands and instructions. "We're splitting off into teams to monitor activity in highly dense spots. Black, Longbottom, you'll both be doing patrols around Diagon Alley on Christmas Eve with Bones, Shackbolt, and other Longbottom."

"*Other* Longbottom. Hear that?" Alice whispered to Mia, smirking. "Got my own title now," she said sarcastically, and the pair stifled their laughter.

"Potter." Moody turned his attention to James, who sat up straight at the sound of his name. "You'll be paired with Evans, Fenwick, and Dearborn, doing the same in Hogsmeade."

Mia raised her hand as though she were back in Hogwarts. "What about *other* Potter?" she asked with a grin.

Moody responded by glaring at her, still clearly uneasy about having her involved at all, considering it had been *her* plan to secretly save Remus. "You'll be babysitting Lupin."

Remus crossed his arms over his chest defiantly. "I'm perfectly capable of doing Order work, and I do not need a babysitter."

"*Pet* sitter?" James suggested with a grin.

"Shut up, Prongs."

Moody let out an indignant huffing noise that sounded like indigestion. "Until you get proper medical clearance from Pomfrey, Lupin, you're barely allowed in the meetings. I'm still not too happy about your *miraculous* recovery."

Remus narrowed his eyes. "Thanks."

Kingsley chimed in, quickly saying, "What Alastor means is that while we're happy you've survived your ordeal, some are less pleased with the *way* in which you've recovered."

The Auror had finally been brought into the Order a few months earlier when he had overheard Moody and Edgar Bones talking at the Ministry about Remus's disappearance.

Mia had counted Kingsley as an ally and vouched for him to Dumbledore immediately, recounting the events that took place at St Mungo's the week that Dorea had passed. Kingsley had defended Remus to an entire group of Aurors who had their prejudiced minds set to take him down, and Mia would never forget that.

"Can I just point out that I'm *not* a werewolf?" Mia offered, slightly annoyed that Remus's recovery was still being held against him. "*Not* infected. Zero furry little problems."

Sirius chuckled under his breath. "She did get a little irritable during the last full moon, but that could have easily been a hormonal coincidence."

"Shut up, Sirius."

Moody cleared his throat loudly to regain the attention of the room, pinning Sirius with a look that Mia was certain could curdle milk. "As for Diggle, Pettigrew, Macdonald, and the rest of you lot, you'll be given the name of someone to keep eyes on over the next few months. We need to know who for certain has the Dark Mark, who else is in the company of known Death Eaters, and potential wizards who might be swayed into switching sides—"

"Not possible," Sirius interjected. "Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater."

Lily frowned at him, looking uncomfortable.

Moody bristled at the interruption. "This isn't a place for your opinions, Black. If you've got a problem with it, then you can joyfully take it upon yourself to be the one to tell us who the actual Death Eaters are."

Sirius growled at the tone that Moody had taken with him. "I can give you a bloody list right now: Lucius Malfoy, Bellatrix, Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrangle, Crabbe, Goyle, Mulciber, Wilkes, Avery, Alecto and Amycus Carrow, Regulus Black, and Severus bloody Snape! Would you like it in alphabetical order next?"

Lily visibly recoiled, and Mia reached out to take her hand, offering a sympathetic smile. She knew that her friend had long since cut ties with Snape, but it had to be a sad reminder to hear how far the man had fallen. A part of Mia desperately wanted to tell Lily that Snape would redeem himself one day; that, despite all his flaws—and there were many—he would die a hero.

"Proof, Black! We need *proof*!"

"At least half of that list has tried to kill one of us at any given point in the past few years!" Sirius replied angrily. "I suppose we'll just let the bodies start piling up instead. Would you prefer I tagged the corpses as 'proof' or 'evidence,' sir?"

---

The meeting was adjourned the moment that Sirius and Moody began screaming in one another's faces. Sirius, the unstoppable force, met Moody, the immovable object. Before any blows were exchanged, Edgar and Kingsley had taken Moody into another room to calm him down, while James and Remus physically removed Sirius to the front porch so he could let himself cool off in the winter air.

While the boys handled a fuming Sirius, Mia and Lily began solidifying plans to celebrate Christmas a few days early since they would all be too busy on Order missions to enjoy it on the actual day. Lily, who had finally begun to feel at home in Potter Cottage, had apparently bought boxes upon boxes of decorations, a giant Christmas tree, and a goose that she was planning on cooking for their whole family—which unfortunately included Peter. When James returned, he questioned whether or not Lily knew how to actually cook a goose. Out of all of them, Lily was likely the most qualified to cook anything

since she had not grown up with a house-elf. Even Mia had lost what few domestic skills she might have had—though she had never exactly been as talented with a cooking pot as she was with a cauldron.

Mia decided to step away before Lily ended up hexing James. She greeted Dumbledore with a stiff nod as he stood in the corner of the room, admiring a shiny, red package in his hands.

"Socks," Dumbledore said with a bright smile. "Minerva knows me so well, every year she gives me socks for Christmas." When she did not return his smile nor participate in the small talk, he cleared his throat and set the box down on a nearby table.

Mia stared at it, watching as the light reflected off of the shiny red wrapping paper, reminding her of the box that Future Remus had given her for her birthday. *Socks*, she thought to herself. *Not a Time-Turner. Not a Portkey*. She stuck her hand into her pocket, rubbing the Tele-Portkey she kept on her at all times. For some reason, it settled her nerves. She wondered how bad the consequences would be if she were to give one to Dumbledore.

"I am glad to see, my dear, that you are doing well, considering Remus's recent recovery."

She squeezed the Tele-Portkey hard, pinching it between her fingers until it hurt. "I'd prefer not to talk about Remus, sir," she said, her voice laced with a manipulative sweetness that her mother would have been proud to hear. "I've been told that any threat to his person or character tends to make me react a little . . . violently."

Her gaze flickered across the room, where she spotted Marlene McKinnon scowling at the back of Remus's head as he tried to hold back an enraged, redhead. James stared on in amusement, an enchanted look on his face that so reminded Mia of the way Harry often looked at Ginny when she went into a fury about something.

"It's a character flaw I've been working on."

"I understand."

Mia turned her attention back to Dumbledore with an excited smile. She let go of the coin in her pocket and laced her fingers together in front of her. "I've actually come to give you a Christmas gift, sir."

"Oh?" Dumbledore raised a brow. "I hope you didn't go out of your way, my dear."

"Oh, no need to worry yourself, sir. I didn't purchase a single thing. I've actually been working on it for a few weeks now and have put in a great deal of effort. I hope you enjoy it."

After several moments of utter silence while she concentrated, Dumbledore looked at her with concern. "Miss Potter?"

"D-Diary," she stammered out. "R-Ring. Lock-ket. C-C . . . C-Cup." Sweat beaded on her forehead as she spoke, expelling the words from her mouth by force as she used her skills in Occlumency to break through the *Tacere Veritas*. The very brief shock on Dumbledore's face was like a shot of adrenaline through her body, and she inwardly grinned at the euphoric feeling.

"Miss Potter," Dumbledore cautioned, his normally light-hearted tone of voice taking on a reproachful sound.

"D-D-D . . ." She continued on, trying to say "diadem" but the word was catching in her throat in a way that the others had not. She knew she was pushing herself too hard but moved forward regardless. "D-D . . ." *Oh, fuck it.* "Tiara. S-Snake."

She felt her cheeks flush and then the blood rush from her head at the concentrated effort. She purposely left out Harry's name. She could clue Dumbledore in on the Horcruxes if only to spite him, but she would never willingly assist in his plan to kill Harry, no matter how well it had worked out in the end.

Mia felt victorious at having been able to say the words. Her perfectionist nature had her set with determination, and she had been practising for weeks trying to get the words out of her mouth. It was physically draining and magically exhausting to fight the effects of the *Tacere Veritas*. Once, she had actually blacked out while at work. She was extremely grateful that none of her superiors had walked into her office, and that it had, instead, been Arthur Weasley who stumbled into her workspace to find her unconscious at her desk. When he had woken her, she played her passing out off by saying that she had been up late the night before. Arthur had replied by waggling his eyebrows, blushing red to the tips of his ears and saying, "Me, too," causing Mia to burst into laughter.

No matter how difficult it was to fight the spell—especially since she understood that anything she did manage to "change" would only set the future on its intended course—she found that fighting the effects was actually helping her to increase her Occlumency abilities, something she felt could one day come in handy should she ever be

required to leave her position at the Ministry and jump into the fray of war with her family and friends.

Despite self-righteously preaching the perils of playing with the future, Dumbledore looked as though he was taking note of the specific words that Mia had spoken, trying to connect them in some way. Mia smirked, knowing that he would not be able to do it. Not until 1993, when Harry would provide him with a destroyed diary and a basilisk fang to put the pieces together.

"I don't understand," he said with a frown.

Mia leant her body against the weathered door frame, bracing her weight against it to prevent herself from collapsing. She exhaled, still trying to catch her breath from the exhaustion of fighting through the spell. "No, sir, I don't imagine you would—yet."

He allowed her several minutes of silence to regain her senses before speaking once more. "It appears the truth spell needs to be strengthened once again," he stated calmly, as though expressing something as simple as "Hogwarts starts on September the first" or "I really like socks."

Mia boldly met his gaze. "I look forward to it, sir."

Dumbledore looked less than pleased with her attitude. "May I ask, what do you mean to accomplish by hurting yourself this way?"

She thought for a moment and coldly replied, "We're not just weapons and tools for you to move around at your leisure."

Her jaw was tight as she bitterly remembered the broken look on Harry's face when he realised Dumbledore had been keeping so many secrets from him, never telling him the full truth of anything. She recalled the anger in his voice when he had recalled to her that he at least partially blamed Sirius's death on their headmaster because of his manipulation and lies.

At the time, she knew there was no use sitting and pondering the reasons or her own reactions to it, but, years later, Mia found herself bitter that Dumbledore had essentially sent three *children* into a battlefield with no instructions or guide, and only a torch, a golden ball, and fairy tales as weapons.

"I could tell you exactly why your manipulations are a problem, sir, but I'd probably fall into a coma if I even tried." She took note of the way that Dumbledore nodded subtly as if agreeing with her theory. "You should have become Minister for Magic instead of

Headmaster of Hogwarts. At least then your pawns would have been bureaucratic adults and not innocent children eager to prove their worth to you."

"Am I really so terrible in the future?" Dumbledore frowned, looking genuinely sad and concerned for whatever actions had caused her to speak to him in such a way.

Mia shook her head in exasperation. "With all due respect, sir—" Which she did not think was very much at this precise moment in time. "—you're not exactly that terrific in the present." Before speaking again, she tried to work in the loopholes of the spell so as not to exert herself further. "When the guilt over the losses you've accumulated from this war becomes too much for you, please remember this feeling. Remember what it feels like to . . . to be alone." She thought of Harry. "To not have all the information available to you and still feel the weight of the world on your shoulders."

He looked to be contemplating her words deeply, and he silently nodded in agreement before reaching for his wand. "If you don't mind."

Mia rolled her eyes. As though she had a choice. Dumbledore waved the Elder Wand over her head, and she felt a slow tingle drift through her mind as the truth barriers that were in place strengthened.

Once the magic settled, she stood tall once more. "Breaking your spell has given me something to do all day other than file paperwork," she admitted with a shrug of her shoulders, not wanting to show him how much energy she lost just by uttering those few earlier confessions. "Happy Christmas, Albus."

Mia pushed her way through the crowd and followed the scent of tobacco to the small porch outside the back door. She smiled at the sight of Sirius leaning over the railing with a cigarette in hand, his long black hair hanging over his shoulders. Lily had recently insisted that he cut it, and Mia had threatened to duel her friend over the slight. Sirius was beautiful and perfect, and if anyone had anything to say about how a wizard wore their hair, it was not Lily Evans, who was often caught staring at the cowlick on the back of James's head.

"You all right, kitten?" Sirius asked as he turned, watching her approach. He offered her a cigarette which she silently refused. She only tended to smoke in moments of great stress and nagged him, more often than not, the rest of the time for his terrible habit. *Hypocrite* was becoming a term of endearment.

"Fine. You?"

Sirius shrugged his shoulders. "Better."

She leant against him affectionately and smiled when he wrapped one arm around her, cradling her in the soft leather of his jacket. She pressed her cheek into the fabric that covered his chest, breathing in deeply the scent of parchment, grass, and leather. Slipping her hand beneath his shirt, she pressed her palm against his skin and sighed softly as she ran the pad of her thumb absentmindedly against a small scar on his back. Her free hand was gently resting against his chest while his was running small circles over the inside of her forearm.

They never talked about it, their individual tortures at the hands of Death Eaters. Mia could not, even if she tried, but Sirius just as greatly kept to himself about his life at Grimmauld Place. However, it was quiet moments like this—moments where they would run their hands over old wounds, taking note of each other's sacrifices—that motivated them to move forward and keep fighting.

"You shouldn't provoke Moody like that."

"Fucking git. You'd think, being as paranoid as he is, he'd take my bloody word for it that I know who Death Eaters are."

"If you're going to constantly come to blows with your superior, you might want to rethink your career choices," Mia offered with a chuckle as she watched smoke come out of Sirius's nose in a huff.

"Fine. I'll quit my job, buy an island, and we can go and live away from all this mess."

"I thought you didn't want to just sit around and live off of your money like a lazy arse," she teased.

Sirius grinned at her, flicking the end of his cigarette over the rail. "We won't live off of *money*, we'll live off of *coconuts*. Merlin, witch, don't you know how islands work?"

She smiled as she thought about going on holiday far, far away with him. "Apparently not."

"We'll certainly have to fix that, then."

Sirius kissed her hard and deep in a way that warmed her all the way to her toes. Her heart hammered in her chest at the sensation, and she grinned against his mouth while wondering if it would always be like this. Would his voice always send shivers down her

spine? Would his touch always leave a delicious burning sensation in its wake? Would his kiss always make her toes curl and her heart race and her head just slightly dizzy?

*Yes.*

"So, what shall we bring with us to our island?" he asked as he broke away from the kiss, rubbing the pad of his thumb against her bottom lip as she pouted at the sudden lack of his mouth on hers.

"Suncream," she suggested with a chuckle.

"Yeah, I imagine Lils would burn right up."

"Oh, are we bringing Lily to this island with us?" She arched a brow. "Care to tell me exactly what fantasies you've got running around in that head of yours?"

Sirius blanched. "With Lily? Merlin, never. That blond friend of yours from the Ministry on the other hand—"

She pinched him. Hard.

He laughed, jumping away from her far enough to grab her hand. "You can stop the assault on my person and wipe that judgemental look off your face if you please," he said with a smirk as he touched the Pack Mark on her shoulder. "Potters shouldn't call Blacks kettles."

"Pots shouldn't call kettles black," she corrected him.

"I like my version better."

Being reminded of the Pack Bond ritual, Mia frowned as a thought occurred to her. "I think we should have a word with Dumbledore about Remus and how he's being treated in the Order."

Heels clicked on the porch behind them, and both Sirius and Mia turned to see Marlene McKinnon, reaching for a pack of her own cigarettes and smiling at Sirius as she lit one, as if she were silently pointing out how much they suddenly had in common.

*Yes, well done, you share a vice. Certainly, he'll want to run away with you now,* Mia thought as she rolled her eyes.

"Well, considering the fact that the entire Order was kept in the dark about his . . . *condition*, I think we have a right to our reactions," Marlene said, disgust evident in her tone. "Especially since he's *clearly* not in control of himself." She gestured flippantly to Mia's shoulder, where only a small part of the scar could be seen beneath the collar of her blouse.

"Jealous, McKinnon? You don't seem to be looking at my mark like a scar, rather like an *engagement ring*." Mia laughed at the look of shock and irritation that came over Marlene. "I bet you'd *love* to have a good-looking man like Remus sink his teeth into you." She wiggled her shoulders just a touch to allow the fabric of her blouse to slip down, revealing the mark in its full glory. At the look of repulsion on Marlene's face, Mia bit her lower lip and moaned. "You'd just love it. He sinks in *hard* and *deep*."

Sirius pressed himself against Mia's back, wrapped his arms around her waist, and leant his face down to place an open-mouthed kiss to the mark on her shoulder. Even without seeing him, Mia knew that he was staring at Marlene as he did so. She could feel his chest rumble in pleasure and amusement.

"Merlin!" Marlene fumed. "You actually speak that way about another wizard in front of your own boyfriend? You're disgusting."

Mia shrugged her shoulders, ignoring the feel of Sirius's hardness being pressed against her through his jeans. "Well, what can I say? Sirius has never really had very good taste in witches." She smirked knowingly at the woman who glared at her in reply. "You should have seen the slags he fucked *before* me."

It took every ounce of effort Mia had not to respond as Sirius stealthily ground his erection against her arse, though his hands drifting south to sit on her hips was not subtle in the slightest. When Marlene stuttered in reply, turning red in the face, Mia spun around to face Sirius in order to hide her grin from the blonde.

"I'd rather be a slag that sleeps with *wizards*," Marlene began, clearly not catching the sudden expression on Sirius's face as he silently cautioned her from over Mia's shoulder, "than one who spreads her legs for *monsters*."

Mia's reaction was slow. Not a burst of rage like the look on Sirius's face said he was preparing for. Instead, she turned around and smiled at Marlene as she took a few steps forward, sticking her hand into her pocket. Marlene began to reach for her wand, preparing for an attack, but when Mia's hand came out of her pocket seemingly empty, the blonde hesitated and lowered her weapon.

"McKinnon, can you swim?"

"Oh fuck," Sirius muttered from behind her.

Marlene narrowed her eyes. "What the hell does that have to do with anything?"

---

Sirius walked back into the house, rubbing the cold out of his arms as he scanned the room curiously, searching for McGonagall or Dumbledore. When he could not see either of them over the crowd, he cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Is anyone headed back to Hogwarts sometime soon?"

Several people turned to him, but it was James who spoke up. "Wasn't planning on it. Why?"

Sirius chuckled nervously, running a hand through his hair. "No reason. There just might be something that needs to be fetched from the lake."

## Chapter Eighty-Nine

### *The Habit of Hexing*

---

*I'll unfold before you, what I've strung together  
The very first words of a lifelong love letter  
Tell the world that we finally got it all right, I choose you,  
I will become yours and you will become mine, I choose you  
(Choose You - Sara Bareilles)*

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**December 23rd, 1978**

"I'm just saying, it would make a lovely Christmas gift to me, James," Lily declared with a sweet smile on her face, the one she used when she was trying to get something. The sweet smile she tried to model after the one Mia used, the one that *Dorea* had used.

Unfortunately for Lily, she did not actually have a single ounce of Slytherin in her, no matter what Sirius had accused her of in the past. *Fortunately* for Lily, James was in love with her *just* enough to usually forget that and fall for her trickery. Just not *that evening*.

"The room is just big enough to put in several shelves for books and a little desk in the corner," Lily said, taking a hold of the glass of champagne in front of her and watching with interest as the lights from the Christmas tree in the corner danced off of the flute in her slender hand.

James and Lily had been politely arguing about the issue of the empty upstairs guest room since they had shown it to Mia and the others hours earlier. Everyone had arrived hungry, excited for an early Christmas dinner—goose, cooked by Lily without the aid of a house-elf. Said house-elf was pouting in her quarters after Lily insisted on keeping Mia's tradition of letting Tilly have the holiday off of work. Tilly argued that it was not *actually* Christmas and, therefore, should not count, but Lily refused to let up—and generally, whatever Lily said, James echoed.

Except when it came to the empty upstairs guest room.

"I agree with you on the shelves, just not the books. I think it's the perfect place to hold all of my Quidditch trophies," James said teasingly, grinning as Lily threw him a threatening glare. "Let's put it to a vote. Those who agree that the room at the end of the hall upstairs should be a James Potter Honorary Museum, raise your hands."

No one moved.

James eyed them all. "I see how it is. See if I get *you* anything for Christmas."

"We can see our presents from here, Prongs." Remus gestured to the large tree.

The tree had been covered in fairy lights, large round baubles, and a winged human at the top instead of a star which Lily and Mia explained to the boys was an angel. Sirius and James had argued that it looked like a Valentine's cherub, which they said had no business being included in additional holidays, and then accused the girls of attempting to romanticise Christmas. In addition to the fairy lights and Quidditch ornaments that actually flew between the branches, Lily had decorated the tree with Muggle traditions; tinsel and popcorn that had been threaded on a string was wrapped around the large branches.

"Next Christmas, then," James declared triumphantly as he reached for his glass of firewhisky, toasting to no one in particular as he downed the entire serving at once.

Mia smirked at the sight of the two arguing over the one room left in the cottage that had not been filled with a purpose. It was obvious to her what they should do with it—what they ultimately *would* do with it. Mia excitedly imagined how James might look holding his son in his arms, the perfect replica of himself except for the eyes—because Harry had *Lily's* eyes. She could see a version of the future where Harry grew up in this beautiful cottage, spending Christmases gathered around the large tree in the corner with both parents dotting upon him.

She struggled to ignore the vision in her head she knew would never come to pass. Instead, she closed her eyes and tried to think of another future, a potentially *real* future. One where she would spend Christmas at Grimmauld Place with Sirius, Remus, Tonks, and little Teddy. A future where the Weasleys would run in and out of the large kitchen with Molly yelling after them, threateningly shaking a wooden spoon in her grip. The smells would be pleasant, and the sights would be soothing. Sirius would sing Wizarding versions of Christmas carols, his arms wrapped around her waist as they watched Teddy tear into a pile of presents. In the corner, beneath a non-screaming mistletoe, she would find a young wizard with messy black hair kissing a feisty ginger witch. Harry instead of James, Ginny instead of Lily.

Mia reconciled the great future loss by reminding herself that, somehow, the essence of James and Lily would not disappear forever. Even without being raised by his parents, Harry would grow to emulate them entirely.

"You okay?"

Mia sighed in relief as Sirius's whisper drew her away from her thoughts.

She smiled up at him, nodding as she snuggled into his side. She breathed in the leather scent of his jacket that filled her body with warmth and comfort. The bit of facial hair he had decided to let grow was reminiscent of her older Sirius Black, and the sight of him only further warmed her heart as her future began to merge with her present.

At the other end of the sofa, her fuzzy-sock-covered feet rested in Remus's lap. He dug into his annual bag of Honeydukes supplies, while Peter sat on the floor near his feet. Mia did her best to distract herself from the sight of the rat—who, as far as she was concerned, had no right to step foot inside this home—but she had resolved, for now, to silently work through her personal issues regarding the future when it came to him. It was Christmas after all, and she was not going to ruin the memory of this day by violently mauling Wormtail.

After opening most of the gifts and throwing back one more glass of firewhisky, James stood, garnering the attention of all eyes in the room. "All right, time for my gift for Lily," he insisted with a nervous smile. "You ready, Sirius?"

Mia arched a curious brow at her boyfriend, who shifted behind her to stand up. He had a devious grin on his face. She knew that look all too well. Unfortunately, Lily had turned to stare at James the moment that Mia caught Sirius reaching for his wand. *Uh oh*, she thought.

"What's going on?" Lily nervously inquired, stepping quickly away from Sirius as he advanced on her.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Sirius shouted, capturing the willow wand as it flew out of Lily's pocket.

Emerald eyes blazed in fury. "Sirius!"

Mia sat up straight, ready to lend assistance—though she was not quite sure to whom—but she felt Remus's hand on her foot. She looked up to see him shaking his head, smiling.

"Give me back my wand!" Lily snapped.

While she was distracted and unarmed, James took her hand. "Not just yet, love." He tugged, spinning her around until she was facing him. His eyes were dark, and he ran the fingers of his free hand through his hair while he repeatedly licked his lips.

"Why can't I have my wand?" Lily demanded. "James, why does you giving me a Christmas gift entail Sirius disarming me?"

James laughed nervously. "Because, frankly, love, you've developed a pattern of hexing first and asking questions later."

"Oh God." Lily grimaced and brought her hands to her mouth. "Is my gift alive? Does it bite? Did you buy something off of Hagrid?"

At that moment, Mia's cat, Snuffles, attacked a low hanging Christmas ornament, and it fell from the tree, shattering on the floor. The noise—mixed with anxious nerves—caused Lily to scream and jump a good foot in the air.

James laughed sweetly at the look of horror on her face but recaptured her hand and tried to draw her attention back to him. "You see this?" He pointed to a large silvery scar on his elbow. "This is from the Stinging Hex you hit me with in fourth year after you found out I wrote 'Mrs James Potter' all over your books."

Lily raised a slow eyebrow. "I remember. You used some sort of permanent jinx and I had to buy all new books because I couldn't get it off. Alice and Mary kept teasing me. Not to mention several *other* people," she added as her narrowed eyes turned to glare at Sirius, Remus, and Peter—only the latter two looked ashamed.

"And this one here," James went on, redirecting her attention once again, pulling up his robes and trouser leg to show the scar on his shin, "was from the Incendio incident in third year when I nicknamed you 'wife' for three weeks."

Lily rolled her eyes and folded her arms across her chest. "I know. I maintain that actually setting your trousers on fire was an accident, even though you had it coming. And I've apologised for it. I hardly see the point of bringing it up years later."

James ignored her comments entirely and proceeded forward. "This here is my favourite." He gestured with a grin, pulling back a section of his hair to show a lined scar just behind his right ear. "It's where that Static Charm hit me fourth year."

"You deserved it! You proposed to me in front of the entire school! It was embarrassing!"

"Which is exactly why I had Sirius disarm you." James grinned and looked over Lily's shoulder to where Sirius was beaming at the couple, Lily's wand firmly in his grip.

Mia scooted closer to Remus, gripping his hands in excitement, eyes wide with anticipation of something Lily had clearly not quite figured out yet.

"You, my fiery Lily flower," James said with a smile, leaning down to place a kiss on the inside of her palm, "have a terrible habit of hexing me anytime I bring up the *fact* that you're going to marry me one day."

As though the pieces suddenly fit together, Lily's face reddened. "James—"

"I'd like to trust you, and would request that you promise that you won't hex me," he pleaded with her, running the pad of his thumb over her knuckles as they gripped his hand tightly.

Lily gasped. "Oh my god."

"Lily, your word," James insisted.

She smiled, tears filling her eyes. "I-I won't hex you. I promise."

When Sirius slipped Lily's wand into his hand, James took a deep breath and fiddled with it for a few moments. "Good to know. Here's your wand back, love."

Instinctively—and likely because Sirius had held it for those few minutes—Lily looked down at her wand, examining it carefully. She gasped when there, circled around the centre of the wood, was a thick gold-banded ring holding up a large ruby stone that was surrounded by a halo of small diamonds. Lily instantly pulled the ring off of her wand and brought it to her eyes to inspect.

Mia shifted from Remus to Sirius as he re-joined them on the sofa. She smiled when she could hear Lily mumble "*Animo et astutia*," under her breath, recognising the heirloom for what it was.

"Oh goodness . . ."

"Lily Evans," James said, dropping to one knee.

The Christmas lights behind them illuminated the entire moment, sealing it in Mia's memories forever like the magical version of a camera flash.

"I've been asking you this question since I was eleven years old. And even if you say no—*again*," he muttered, and Lily laughed as she wiped tears from her eyes, "I'll keep asking because you have a history of giving me the wrong answer. Something you're not usually known for doing, considering how brilliant you are. Will you marry me?"

Lily did not wait a single second before shouting, "Yes!"

"Finally!" James rejoiced loudly, swooping the witch into his arms and spinning her around in a circle.

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The celebration went on for hours.

Firewhisky, champagne, and wine flowed in abundance. James summoned Tilly to share in the joyous moment, and the little elf took it as an invitation to bake a celebratory cake, two treacle tarts, and a large trifle soaked in brandy. The trifle had been what tipped the scales, in the end, causing Lily to declare all desserts sinful and apparently in the same category as James's lips.

Mia was grateful that Lily passed out shortly after. She was in no mood to hear the details of her brother's sex life.

"She sure can't hold her liquor can she?" Mia laughed as her brother flung a small blanket over his sleeping fiancée, who had curled up like a cat on the large rug in front of the fireplace. Snuffles snuggled into the curve of Lily's waist, falling asleep.

Across the room, Remus snoozed quietly up against a large armchair that Sirius was haphazardly passed out in—a garland of stringed popcorn wrapped around his throat like a necklace. Peter was unconscious in the upstairs bathroom after getting sick from overindulging in sweets and liquor.

Despite partaking themselves, James and Mia had enjoyed the night mostly by watching their friends and loved ones drink themselves into stupidity.

"I like that about her." James grinned, falling into the empty space of the large sofa next to Mia and leaning against her. "Lily's innocent compared to the rest of you delinquents."

Mia snorted, shoving him with her shoulder. "Speak for yourself. I'll have you know *I* am an upstanding citizen of Wizarding Britain. I even work at the Ministry, did you know?"

"How's that going, by the way?"

Her smile faded, and she grimaced. "I hate it. I contribute nothing and basically just sit back and file papers, watching while the *actual* influential people create horrible laws that set us all back centuries."

Her gaze flickered to Remus for a split second, knowing that many of the laws she was hoping to fight against were in regards to werewolf rights.

James nodded in understanding and took her hand as a gesture of comfort. "Once the war is over, maybe I should take up the Potter seat on the Wizengamot. If women were allowed to do it, I'd just pass it over to you. It technically doesn't exist, but it should. Dad never raised a fuss, and I've never thought much about it. But you're right. People we love are being discriminated against. I could have the power to change that."

Mia rolled her eyes dramatically. "It's ridiculous that a woman can be Minister for Magic, but she's not allowed on the Wizengamot." *Yet.*

She knew that several women sat on the Wizengamot in the future. As honourable as her brother's intentions were, she also knew that the Potter seat would not exist under his hand. No such seat existed in the future, except that she recalled Kingsley and Sirius talking to Harry about rectifying that. Harry had balked at the idea and had come to her for advice since he knew nothing about how the laws of the Wizarding world worked, and he was worried that if he did take up a Potter seat, he would accidentally make things politically worse.

James shrugged his shoulders. "It's all ridiculous. The whole thing is just made up of the Sacred Twenty-Eight for the last century or so."

"How did we not end up on that, by the way? Potters are purebloods. Grandfather Black wouldn't have allowed Mum to marry Dad otherwise," she said, recalling the story of how Charlus and Dorea fell in love. Cygnus Black the second had loved his daughter to the point of allowing her to marry outside an arrangement, and to a family of known blood-traitors at that. Had the Potters been anything *but* pure, however, Mia knew that Dorea could have just as easily ended up a Malfoy, a Lestrangle, or a Crouch.

James chuckled. "Oh, that's an old family tale. Apparently, Cantankerous Nott began his book on the pureblood families when he was still in Hogwarts. Some sort of personal project, I suppose. Well, naturally, he was a Slytherin and, as you know, Potters are *always* Gryffindors."

Mia rolled her eyes. "A rivalry? Seriously?"

"Great-Grandfather Titus Potter pissed off the author of the *Pureblood Directory*, and when the Notts gained political standing, the so-called 'Sacred Twenty-Eight' included everyone except the Potters," James informed her, using air quotes in reference to the supposedly "sacred" pureblood families.

"I'm surprised they left in people like the Weasleys, Prewetts, and Longbottoms," she said thoughtfully as she reached for her wine glass, swirling the remaining contents around casually.

"Maybe we should start our *own* directory."

Mia laughed. "*Sacred Blood-Traitors*. It'll be bigger than the *Pureblood Directory*."

"Thank Merlin."

Mia looked over at her brother, watching him as his focus drifted to the sleeping witch in front of the fire. "You're getting *married*, Jamie."

James turned, his eyes twinkling like the fairy lights on the Christmas tree. "I am," he said while grinning. "How weird is that?"

"Incredibly so. It seems like only yesterday Lily was slapping you in the face."

James sighed happily. "Ah, the good old days. Back when we were rotten little first years causing mischief," he said as he put his arm around her. "Soon, it'll be our own kids off to Hogwarts."

Mia paled at the thought of having children of her own, but the strange look on James's face had her smiling once again as she thought about Harry.

"Do you and Lily have news that you're keeping to yourselves?" she asked with a raised brow though she already knew the answer since she knew Harry's birthday and could easily do the math.

James laughed and shook his head. "No. But I wouldn't mind it if she was pregnant," he admitted, smiling when Mia widened her eyes in response. "I know. Merlin, can you imagine me with kids?"

"Yes," Mia whispered, glad that James did not catch the sad note that her tone had taken.

"Knowing my luck, I'll end up with all girls. And I'll have to put up with awful little berks like myself, running after them all like I did Lily."

"No." Mia smiled, shaking her head. "You'll have a son."

Her eyes widened slightly as she realised she had just essentially confessed to James that Harry existed in the future. Had Dumbledore's spell failed? She had not struggled to get the words out. Or maybe, like she had been told, it had everything to do with intentions; since she was not intending on speaking to *change* the future, she was allowed to speak.

*I just want him to know about his son, Mia thought to herself. Jamie deserves to know about the man that Harry becomes.*

"Think so?"

"I *know* so."

"I'd like that. A little *me* underfoot, but with Lily's hair," James said thoughtfully.

Mia laughed and shook her head. "He'll have *your* hair."

She recalled the first time she had ever set eyes on an eleven-year-old Harry Potter: he had been sitting in a compartment at the back of the Hogwarts Express with Ron. Black, messy hair stuck up in several directions, half of it covering his forehead, which she assumed he had done on purpose. He wore clothes that were two sizes too big for him, and his glasses had been broken as they shielded his bright green eyes.

"*Lily's* eyes," Mia whispered. "But he'll have your smile and your good heart. Lily's fire and passion, and your sense of honour and courage." Tears began building in the corner of her eyes, and she struggled to wipe them away before James could see them.

She turned her head away from her brother and spotted a flickering light across the room where a pair of soft green eyes were staring at her. Mia frowned as she saw Remus awake and obviously listening in on the conversation. He gave her a sympathetic smile as she brushed fallen tears from her cheeks. She offered a sad smile in return, grateful that, at least in part, *someone* understood why she was so upset about speaking of the future. Remus knew that she missed Harry deeply.

"What about my sense of fun?" James asked, interrupting Mia's momentary grief.

"He'll have your *arrogance*," she declared with a laugh, recalling an older Sirius Black storming through the Great Hall during the final battle, screaming about how Harry had hexed him in order to slip out undetected to meet Voldemort in the Forbidden Forest. "And he'll have Sirius's reckless nature. Remus's talent for Defence," she added, smiling at her best friend, who cocked an eyebrow in reply.

James grinned. "*My* Quidditch skills? The youngest Chaser in history!"

"Seeker," Mia corrected.

"Spoilsport," James said, sticking out his lower lip. "Fine, since we're *all* raising my kid apparently, what'll he get from *you*?"

*Oh, he'll get Chocolate Frogs that Ron will eat, an eagle-feather quill he'll barely use, a homework planner he'll secretly hate, a birthday cake that will feed him when Lily's sister won't, a Broomstick Servicing Kit, a Sneakoscope—Oh, and assistance in destroying the darkest wizard in Wizarding history.*

"Love. Friendship," she said aloud with a smile. "Maybe a little wisdom if he's patient enough to listen to me." She left a pregnant pause in the conversation before she summed up the courage to whisper, "I . . . I'll take care of him, you know?"

James yawned. "My hypothetical kid?"

She nodded, squeezing her brother's hand tighter. "I just want you to know that. When you and Lily *do* start a family, you should know that I'll *always* take care of him. I will make sure that he's happy and healthy and . . ." Her words stuck in her throat, pent up behind the dam of emotions.

"Should I promise to do the same for your future hypothetical kids with Sirius?" James asked with a raised brow.

Mia laughed loudly in response, looking over at the large armchair where Sirius was lightly snoring. Remus, still awake, kept his eyes closed, but she could see his chest shake with silent laughter. "Oh, Merlin, don't even talk like that! Could you imagine me and Sirius having—"

"Puppies?" James snickered.

She lightly hit him on the back of the head. "You're awful. And they'd be half mine so they could equally be kits."

"Is *that* what little foxes are called?" James inquired. "What about deer?"

"Fawns," Mia answered.

James frowned, unimpressed. "That sounds stupid. I guess we're all just going to have *human* children," he conceded aloud with a sigh, as though a human child was the most horrible thing in the world.

"How utterly ordinary of us."

"We're very boring."

"Jamie . . ." Mia hesitated. "What if the war never ends? What if we lose?"

"We can't." The mirth all gone from his voice as he spoke. James looked ever the confident leader, fighter. He looked like Harry on the battlefield. "It's too important. It *has* to end, and we *have* to win, there's no wiggle room for doubt, Mia. I'll . . . I will do *anything* to win this war."

Mia frowned, knowing that he spoke the truth. "Even die?"

"Even die," James affirmed without a single moment of hesitation.

"And the rest of us?" *How are we to go on without you? How am I supposed to go on without you?*

James gave an irritable sigh. "I just got engaged Mia, why are we talking about depressing things?"

"Answer the question, Jamie," she pleaded.

He took a moment to really think about it, clearly not wanting to leave his answer open to interpretation and thus furthering the pessimistic conversation.

"Mum always said that it's the *content* of the years that you're given to live, not the *length* of those years. I want my content to count. I want *your* content to count. I'll do whatever I have to do to prevent losing those I love most." His eyes flickered to Lily. "Are any of us more important than the entire Wizarding world? The entire *world*? I don't love you any more than the wizard down the street loves *his* sister. I don't love Lily more than any other man loves *his* wife. Though I do try."

Mia flung herself at her brother, wrapping him tightly in her arms, refusing to let go anytime soon as she buried her nose in his mess of hair. She breathed in his scent, memorising it. Despite all the firewhisky he'd had in celebration of his engagement, he still smelled like treacle tart.

"Have I ever told you that you're a good man, James Potter?"

James shrugged his shoulders as though being a good man just came naturally to him. "I do what I can."

"That upstairs bedroom?" Mia looked at her brother with a knowing smile. "It should be a nursery."

James smirked. "I'll think about it."

"Happy Christmas, Jamie."

"Happy Christmas, Mia."

Several streets from Charing Cross Road where the Leaky Cauldron sat between a bookshop and a record store, stood a small, newly purchased home belonging to a young Muggle couple eager to celebrate their wedding anniversary.

"Helen? You home?"

The husband stepped through the front door, tossing his keys onto a nearby table and grinning when they did not fall off the edge.

"In the bedroom, love!"

He made his way toward the solid door at the end of the hallway. "Getting started without me?" he asked as he peeked his head through the cracked door.

"Hardly." A head of honey-brown curls was buried in the pages of a well-worn book.

Snatching the book from his wife's hands, he laughed when her slow reflexes failed to grasp it back from him. "Helen, it's our anniversary, and you've read this bloody thing a thousand times."

She huffed at him as he placed her book on the nightstand, thankful that he at least left it open on the page she had been reading. "Yes, Richard, but it's my very favourite. I happen to love that book almost as much as I love you."

Richard clutched at his chest in mock heartbreak. "Five years of marriage, and this is what it's all come down to? Me or the book?"

"I'm good at multitasking." Helen grinned, leaning forward to kiss him. "I can love you both."

Richard chuckled, returning the kiss and smirking when he found his wife had not yet dressed for the night. They were already running late, but he could not help being pleased with the way his hand met the bare skin of her thigh beneath the sheet. "And when we have children? Will you love us all or will the book and I need to fight over you?"

"Children?" Helen pulled away from him, her chocolate brown eyes looking anxiously excitedly as she stared at him. "So, you've thought about it?"

Richard nodded. "Makes sense. It's good timing. We're both out of school, have good jobs—"

"The practice is doing well," she said, interrupting him.

Richard smiled at her. "The practice is doing *very* well. I guess my answer is yes. Let's start our family."

"I knew you'd say yes!" Helen shrieked with delight and flung her arms around him.

"Of *course* you did." Richard laughed softly and leant close to kiss along her neck.

"Well, no time like the present."

Helen sighed happily, leaning into his touch. "We're going to miss our dinner reservation."

"I blame the book."

There on the nightstand lay the open, well-worn book. At the very top, written in faded lettering read, *A Winter's Tale*, and there on the open page was a passage that had been read by Helen Granger at least one thousand times:

*Who hast the memory of Hermione, I know, in honour,  
O, that ever I had squared me to thy counsel!  
Then, even now, I might have look'd upon my queen's full eyes,  
have taken treasure from her lips.*

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### **December 23rd, 1978 - 11:03 PM**

The empty flat remained silent in the late hours of the evening, its residents far away in Godric's Hollow, snuggled together in the drawing room of the ground floor, sleeping off the effects of firewhisky, brandy soaked trifle, and the euphoria of celebrating a new engagement.

Deep in the Hogwarts trunk of Mia Potter, locked in a Muggle jewellery box with a strong Notice-Me-Not Spell, lay an old Time-Turner. The blue sand was inside a carefully constructed hourglass, wrapped in a silver casing with a thin chain hanging off of it like a necklace. The bottom was engraved with a rune which meant *predestination*. All three hundred and eighty-eight thousand, seven hundred and thirty-seven tiny, blue grains of sand inside the Time-Turner sat frozen, just like they had for the past seven years, four months, twenty-two days, one hour, and four minutes.

A single tiny blue grain of sand unfroze and fell to the other end of the Time-Turner.

Three hundred and eighty-eight thousand, seven hundred and thirty-*six* remained.



## Chapter Ninety

### *Fire and Ash*

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*There's a history through her  
Sent to us as a gift from the future, to show us the proof  
More than that, it's to dare us to move  
And to open our eyes and to learn from the sky  
(Chasing the Sun - Sara Bareilles)*

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**December 31st, 1978**

*377,670 Grains of Sand Left*

Mia had not even *thought* about the New Year until Lily asked her what her resolutions were going to be. She thought about the potential resolutions for those she loved: Sirius, who drank and smoked too much, Remus, who had become a proper hoarder with his chocolate these days, and James, who had put on a few pounds due to lack of Quidditch. Even Lily was resolving to try and reach out to her sister in an attempt to stay connected to her only living blood relative and Muggle roots.

What was the one thing Mia felt she needed to focus on?

*Live your life. Enjoy your life.*

It was becoming harder each day and, though she had long given up trying to change the past in order to alter the future, Mia could not help but focus on the approaching years, letting the feeling of helplessness bury her. She had thought about it logically, she had done the Arithmancy calculations, and she reread Remus's letter often to try and convince herself that she was doing the right thing by trying to move on.

A large part of her needed one last reminder. She needed *someone* to tell her that what she was doing—or *not* doing—was, in fact, the right thing.

So she summoned her Gryffindor courage and Apparated to Ottery St Catchpole. Instead of directing herself down the familiar path to the Burrow, she headed toward Rookhouse—aptly named due to its resemblance to the chess piece.

As she approached the strange-looking home, a soft smile crossed her face as she was met outside by her friend. The witch's pale blond hair now hung down to her waist, and Mia chuckled as she noticed that dandelions had been woven into the plait.

"Hello, Mia Potter."

"Hello, Pandora Maestro. I suppose it's Pandora *Lovegood* now, isn't it?"

Pandora nodded thoughtfully and then, instead of inviting Mia in for tea like most social protocols would call for, she took a seat there on the open grass in front of her house and let down the apron she had been clutching. A few small apples fell to the ground; she shined one off on the cloth of the apron and offered it to Mia with a smile.

"I'm sorry you weren't invited to the wedding. But the little patch of forest that we were bonded in was fairly small. A perfect circle, in fact. Quite rare to find one in the woods naturally, and we didn't want to disturb the area by making it bigger. Plus, we were naked. Traditions, you see. I didn't know how many friends followed the old ways of doing things."

Mia smiled, wondering how she would have reacted years ago, had Luna said something similar to her. She—or well, *Hermione*—would have likely blushed furiously, nervously asking Luna questions to try and suss out whether or not her friend was being pressured by pureblood customs, archaic laws, and a potentially deviant fiancé. Being raised by Dorea Potter, however, Mia had been taught the "old ways" that Pandora referred to and found them beautiful and infused with ancient magics that she eagerly wanted to explore. She did, however, want to see Lily's face when she told her that Pandora had been married naked.

"You've no need to apologise. I'm very happy for you both. For the record, I would have *loved* to have attended. Although, bringing Sirius as my date might have made things awkward." Mia chuckled at the thought.

Pandora rose a pale eyebrow. "Oh? I thought he was raised in the old traditions."

Mia nodded but then explained, "Pureblood traditions don't always equal *old* traditions. Besides, he's a bit of a rebel when it comes to following the guidelines of his youth."

Pandora smiled thoughtfully. "Yes, he is that. I suppose that's why you fit so nicely together." She took a bite of the small green apple in her hands. She shrugged her shoulders, and with a mouthful, muttered, "Well, *that* and the Soul Bond."

"Of *course* you knew." Mia shook her head and then frowned as another thought crossed her mind. "How much *do* you know?"

Pandora sat in silence for a moment, finishing her bite before speaking again. "I know more than *you're* allowed to say. It's quite sad, to be silenced. Unfortunate that Professor Dumbledore finds it difficult to believe completely in destiny and personal choice at the same time. You can't put pure faith in destiny and then not trust it all to work out in the end, you know."

"Aren't I doing the same?" Mia inquired.

"Professor Dumbledore wants to believe he's doing the right thing for the right reasons, but his heart is lying to him. It's more selfish than his mind tells him. You're suffering more than he is because your wounds are still open. I feel more sympathy for you than for him."

Mia was not sure how she felt about someone feeling sympathy for her.

"Are you a Seer, Pandora?" She blurted out the question, getting straight to the point of her visit. She felt she already knew the answer, but at the same time, Luna had never been clear on the matter either. Despite the many ways that she had changed over the years, Mia had a rough time when it came to Divination. Yet, there was no denying Luna had been gifted, and clearly, her mother was as well.

"I thought you didn't believe in Divination," Pandora said with a knowing smile.

Mia sighed irritably; she could just hear Ron's voice in her head, teasing her for this. "I have a hard time putting faith in tea leaves and dream journals," she specified, thinking of Sybil Trelawney and the effect that the woman had on Lavender and Parvati. "But there are some magics that I can't deny. Bonds for instance, and . . . traits . . ." she began, gesturing to Pandora and wondering if the witch had foreseen her own future. Her *daughter*. Her *death*.

"Traits that can be passed down from mother to daughter?" Pandora asked with a smile, unconsciously twisting the stem of the apple in clockwise and then counter clockwise motions. Mia wondered if there was a pattern. "Did you know my mother was a Seer? She died when I was nine. Tragic accident, really. My grandmother died similarly."

Mia furrowed her brows as she recalled hearing a comparable story from Luna. She frowned thinking that so many generations of these brilliant witches had suffered so

much—growing up without their mothers. The thought left a stinging pain in her chest reminding her of how much she missed Dorea.

"Is *that* what triggers it? Witnessing death? Your Sight?"

The blonde nodded her head.

"Pandora." Mia sighed, feeling drained and defeated already. "What if your mother didn't *have* to die?"

"But she did die," Pandora replied, apparently unaffected by the question. "No one lives forever."

"But . . . what if she didn't *have* to die when you were nine?"

Pandora simply shrugged her shoulders. "Then she would have died when I was ten or fifty, perhaps seventy-four and a half. Dying when I was nine made her no less my mother."

"Yes, but . . ." Mia began, already feeling a similar frustration that she used to get when trying to converse with Luna. "But you would have had her for *longer*."

"Or not," Pandora countered. "Maybe if she hadn't died when I was nine, she would have been kidnapped by fairies. Mischievous creatures, really," the witch said with a smile as though they were not currently talking about her mother's death. Just when Mia was pressed to interject another argument, her friend added, "Or she could have been murdered by Death Eaters."

The words sucked the breath right out of Mia's lungs, so forcefully that she clutched her hand to her chest. She thought of her mother's stance on changing the future. While their words were not the same, Dorea and Pandora's meanings were similar. Her mother had been firm about her feelings in regards to the future. Saying that Death would always take something if something was taken from him. Advising that if Mia prevented a tragic but painless passing, Death could easily reclaim that same person, only to make them suffer for it in the end.

Pandora's voice brought her out of her silent reflection. "Did you know that not everyone can see thestrals? Not unless they've seen death."

Mia nodded, recalling the first time she had seen the beasts. "When *you* saw death you started seeing more than just the thestrals, didn't you? Can you . . . can you see the future?"

"Do you not *remember* it?" Pandora inquired, confirming the fact that she knew where and when Mia was from, at least vaguely. "You should drink juice made from jobberknoll feathers. Unless you've ingested Swooping Evil venom. I don't know the cure for that."

Mia frowned. "My memory is, unfortunately, quite intact."

"So you've come for me to be your conscience then?" Pandora asked, a bright smile crossing her face at the new prospect. "I've never been a conscience before. You'll let me know if I'm doing well, won't you?"

Mia forced herself not to roll her eyes. "Can I change *anything*?"

Pandora seemingly ignored the question, something that would have provoked Mia to irritation a long time ago, but now she understood that her friend had listened to the query and was, in fact, answering it in her own strange way.

"A phoenix is a beautiful creature, don't you agree? Tiny little birds born from fire and ash only to grow and die in fire and ash, and then be reborn in fire and ash. Phoenixes change constantly."

"Yes, but they don't die."

"*Don't* they?" The blonde tilted her head to the side, looking like a confused creature herself. Her wide doe eyes only furthered the comparison. The perfect picture of innocence. "I don't know if *I* could burst into flames and survive it. Come back from it maybe, I've never tried before. But phoenixes can do it. Marvellous creatures. They grow and they change."

"They suffer when they burn. What if the phoenix didn't *have* to burn?"

What if she could change the future? What if she really, really tried? Would it work? She knew Future Remus's letter by heart. She knew what Dorea had told her, what Dumbledore continued to remind her. She had done the calculations herself. She knew the outcome. But Mia was also humble enough to admit that she did not know every area of magic. Certainly, there had to be some sort of . . . miracle stored away somewhere?

Pandora placed a hand on her arm, drawing Mia from her thoughts. "Then it wouldn't be reborn. The phoenix would die and stay dead."

"*Everything* dies," Mia argued.

"And everything changes. Death doesn't mean the end."

"Not everyone can be a phoenix."

"No," Pandora agreed. "But there is always rebirth."

Mia nodded in understanding. Harry was proof that there was rebirth in the world, and not just in the "coming back from the dead" kind of way he seemed to excel at, much to her anxiety. Harry was James and Lily but also himself. The future was a reflection of the past mixed with progression toward a better world. She felt selfish for wanting to change the good that the future held, all to prevent the pain of the past. But was it James's pain? Lily's pain? Or was she trying to prevent her own grief?

"Is the suffering necessary, though? Can't there be rebirth without the burning? Without fire?"

Pandora's eyes lit up as though she suddenly had something exciting to share. She took Mia's hands within her own. "Fire isn't something to fear. It cleanses better than water, did you know? And ash can be very beneficial. Ash gives life to phoenixes. And look how strong they are. They can carry heavy loads, their tears can heal the most fatal wounds, and their song gives courage to the good and strikes fear in the heart of evil. Would we have that song without the burning? Without the fire and the ash?"

Mia felt tears forming, and she did her best to hold them back. She could not quite tell if this meeting had been a wise decision—if Pandora's words were helping. She could not change the future. She could not change *anything*. She felt helpless and hopeless and completely incapable of making a difference in anything.

"I wish I were a phoenix," Mia confessed sadly, letting tears fall down her cheeks. "Then I could heal the wounds that are being inflicted on this world."

Pandora leant forward and affectionately touched Mia's cheek, a sweet smile on her face. "The phoenix can't stop itself from burning," she whispered as though it were a secret—or maybe because it was sacred. "It will always burn. If it doesn't burn on Sunday, it will burn on Tuesday, or Thursday if it's inclined to. But it will always burn, and then rise, reborn from the ashes. No matter how painful the fire, it still sings for those who need it to."

With the last bit of hope for changing the future gone, Mia bent forward and sobbed. Pandora wrapped her arms around her and held her tight, rocking her back and forth as she cried.

"You're not the tears of the phoenix, Mia Potter. Don't you see? You're the *song*."

"Because I don't bloody want to!"

Mia stepped out of the fireplace, having used Pandora's Floo to get home to the flat, where she walked in on her wizard and her best friend staring one another down in the middle of their living room. Sirius looked confused and annoyed. Remus looked irritable and desperate. She surveyed the situation, taking note that each of them turned to look at her, Remus seeming suddenly embarrassed at the intrusion.

Sirius, on the other hand, was clearly delighted to see her and rushed to her side, pulling her into a searing kiss that caught her off guard. When he finally broke their lip lock, he smiled down at her. "Kitten, tell Remus he's a boring sod and should come celebrate the New Year with us."

"Remus, you're a boring sod, and you should come celebrate the New Year with us," she said with a smirk. "What *are* we doing by the way? I thought you had a plan that involved starting 1979, the same way you wanted to end it. Your shopping list included chocolate syrup, whipped cream, and oil."

"It was actually *motor* oil for the bike," Sirius admitted with a smirk. "Unless—"

"Sirius," she said, taking his face into her hands. "Try to focus."

"Right. Prongs and Lily are doing that fancy party over at Frank and Alice's . . ." he reminded her.

Mia nodded thoughtfully, remembering the invitations that Alice had sent out weeks ago for a proper dinner party for couples only. She would have agreed to attend until Sirius discovered it was dress robes attire and decided to complain for a good hour before she agreed that they could do something else for New Years.

"So I was looking around for something for the *three* of us to do," Sirius said, gesturing to Remus, who scowled at him.

"Which is unnecessary. I'm not a child who needs you to set up a *play date*."

Mia frowned at the bitter look on Remus's face—not to mention his tone, which she did not appreciate at all—wondering what on earth could have gotten him into such a mood. The full moon was not for another fortnight.

"So what're the plans?" she asked again.

"Andromeda invited us all over," Sirius told her. "I thought it would be nice to be around family is all."

Mia sighed in understanding, and she did not even need to see the look on Remus's face to know why he had refused to attend. Though she *did* turn her gaze in his direction and was met with his wide stare, lips set in a tight line of frustration, and a look on his face that was pleading for her to get him out of the arrangement. Suddenly Remus's mention of a "play date" was painfully, ironically accurate.

"I don't know what his fucking problem is," Sirius snapped. "All I said was, 'Let's go to my cousin's,' and the bloody git just lost his fucking mind."

"Don't talk like I'm not standing right here," Remus snarled. "Just because I don't want to go to your cousin's house isn't some slight against you, Pads."

"What the fuck else are you gonna do, mate?" Sirius fumed. "Sit around and feel sorry for yourself?"

"Whatever the hell I want!" Remus yelled. "Just . . . Fuck. Can't you just leave it?"

"Remus, will you excuse us?" Mia asked, interrupting the verbal sparring match that neither man was clever enough to make interesting with their tempers so heated. Remus nodded brusquely before grabbing his winter cloak and vanishing out the door, presumably not to return until the following morning. Mia felt sad to know that her best friend would likely bring in the New Year with a pint down at the Leaky Cauldron, alone.

"I don't know what his fucking problem is," Sirius grumbled as the door slammed shut. "Arsehole."

"Love." She kissed him. "I know you're just trying to look out for him, but maybe it would be hard for him to be around us and family. It's one thing to spend the holiday with us and Jamie and Lily, but just the three of us and *your* family? It might just be a harsh reminder that he has no family of his own."

Sirius was obviously offended at the suggestion. "*We're* his family. My family is his family."

She smiled at his declaration, knowing that Sirius had no idea how spot on his statement really was. "I know that, but even if that's *not* his problem, it's also New Years. When the clock strikes midnight, what will you and I be doing?"

Sirius nodded in sudden understanding. "Shagging."

"Snogging," she corrected him. "I refuse to shag you at your cousin's home. Don't be weird."

"Moony could just find a date," Sirius said, ignoring her. "That way he'd have someone to kiss at the end of the night. He could bring Mary. It might bother Peter, but—"

Cringing, Mia felt her hackles rise up. She regretted that she had not done more to keep Sirius and Peter at odds. James, unfortunately, was all about friendship and loyalty and had done his level best to patch things up between the Marauders.

"Peter needs to stay away from Mary. She never had any interest in him at Hogwarts, and she says that she wants him to stop sitting next to her during Order meetings."

"Ah, give the boy a break," Sirius said with a chuckle. "It's hard for a bloke to get over his first crush. Besides, Mary's better than that Slytherin bitch he was dating."

"Of course she's better. Mary is amazing, which is why she deserves better than someone who *breathes* on her during meetings when he should be paying attention to his orders."

Grimacing, Sirius nodded. "Fair point. I'll have a talk with the lad. Maybe if we set up Mary with *Remus* . . ."

"I really don't think Remus wants to bring a date to your cousin's house and snog her in front of . . . everyone," she said, cutting him off. "I know you want to see your family, but I was hoping, now that Remus is probably gone for the night . . . We have the entire flat to ourselves."

"Like company has ever stopped us before," Sirius said, his voice suddenly husky. He surged forward and gripped her by the waist and lifted her into his arms, throwing her high over his left shoulder with a laugh before carrying her off toward the bedroom.

Mia chuckled, feeling victorious in distracting him. "What about Andromeda?"

"She'll get over it. I'll owl her later." He smacked her arse with his open palm. "I've decided to send 1978 off with a bang."

They did not make it more than a few feet closer to the bedroom door before Sirius apparently remembered that they were now alone in the flat without Remus there to accidentally walk in on them. In a flare of eagerness, he pulled her down from his shoulder. Before her feet had a chance to touch the ground, he pinned her to the wall, his hands gripping her arse tightly.

Mia laughed and wrapped her legs around his waist, letting a small sigh escape her lips as he pressed his swelling hardness to her core while simultaneously devouring her neck with his sinful lips.

"It's been awhile since we've done it like this." She moaned as he pressed against her harder, and she recalled those moments of rebellious adolescence in the fifth-floor corridor of Hogwarts that were eventually followed by re-enactments there at home. When his hand shifted, she gave a yelp and fisted her hands in his hair. "Sirius, if you drop me again—"

"It was *one time*. And that was *your* fault. You dug your bloody heel into my back. I'm still not entirely certain that that kidney is working properly," he mumbled against her collarbone, shifting his position which allowed his hands to freely tear away at her blouse without—as she had warned him—dropping her.

Upon the realisation that she was wearing jeans, he did have to at least set her down in order to fumble excitedly with the button and zipper before he looped his thumbs on either side of her hips. In one fell swoop, he pulled the trousers and knickers down together. He knelt before her to help her feet out of the tangled mess of clothing and grinned, looking up at her from his position on his knees.

She looked down at him expectantly, watching the way his eyes flashed and how the pale grey colour shifted slightly silver as he leant forward and placed a kiss just beneath her navel. She groaned at the teasing sensation and shakily whispered, "Lower."

Sirius's chest rumbled in reply as he stood up to pull her back into his arms while muttering, "Later," just as his lips recaptured hers in a rough kiss. One hand tangled itself in her hair, holding her head firm against him as he drank her in. The other hand flew to the buckle of his jeans, adeptly manoeuvring out of them as quickly as possible, while Mia distractedly tugged at his shirt. Sirius took his firm length in hand, stroking it several times to tease himself.

"Fuck me," Mia whispered as she broke the kiss, allowing him to lift her once again and shove her back hard against the wall behind her.

"If you insist." Sirius grinned darkly, his eyes heated with desire and intensity. He slipped his hand between their tightly-pressed, naked bodies. She shivered at the sound of him growling in pleasure when he found the damp lust between her thighs. "Your responsiveness is a never-ending ego stroke for me, kitten."

A groan tore from his throat as he surged into her with one quick thrust. Her walls gripped his cock with the same intensity that her arms had wrapped around his neck, holding tightly as though she could not bear to be parted from him in this moment.

She moaned against the shell of his ear, teasing him by saying, "You feel so good," and "I've been wanting this all day."

He bucked hard, pinning her to the wall with his hips, grunting each and every time his cock vigorously slammed forward to fill her cunt. Her body trembled, her parted lips releasing the tiniest of gasps each and every time he thrust.

Mia's back arched against the wall as she undulated around his length, crying out at the overwhelming feel of him still pounding inside her as she climaxed. She let out a sigh of smug relief when she felt him stiffen, growling against her throat as he spilt his warmth inside of her.

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Several hours later, they snuggled in their bed, Sirius watching Mia drift in and out of sleep. He traced the soft curves of her face in adoration, mentally reminding himself how unbelievably good his life was due to the very fact that she was in it. He leant forward, brushing his nose along the curve of her neck, inhaling the sweet aroma that reminded him of a rainstorm.

Her eyes briefly fluttered open, and she smirked up at him, twirling a lock of his long black hair around her finger and mumbling, "Sorry we didn't get to go to the party."

"I didn't need a party."

She laughed sceptically. "*You* didn't want to get pissed drinking firewhisky on New Year's Eve?"

"I don't *always* need firewhisky you know," he said before very sweetly brushing his lips against hers. He closed his eyes and tugged her toward him, enveloping the girl in his arms before deepening the kiss just as fireworks burst in the sky outside the flat above Diagon Alley.

*Don't always need liquor*, Sirius thought to himself as he drank in the taste of his witch. Her lips were soft, but her kisses were scorching. The sweetness of her every moan and whimper warmed his lips and tongue and burned down his throat, setting his soul ablaze.

*She tasted how firewhisky felt.*

*377,160 Grains of Sand Left*

## Chapter Ninety-One

### *Just Desserts*

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*Pour some sugar on me  
C'mon, fire me up  
Pour your sugar on me  
Oh, I can't get enough  
I'm hot, sticky sweet  
From my head to my feet, yeah*  
(Pour Some Sugar On Me - Def Leppard)

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**March 18th, 1979**

*266,809 Grains of Sand Left*

Despite Dumbledore's original intention of keeping Mia *out* of the Order meetings, she had somehow become entangled in many of the missions, especially since Remus's attack six months earlier. She assumed that she would be given minor missions and tasks to accomplish as Dumbledore had promised her. What she did *not* expect was her former headmaster to inform Alastor Moody that she was an accomplished Occlumens with a proficiency for Legilimency.

Her sudden usefulness to the ornery old Auror was the reason that Alice and Frank were currently in her flat expecting Occlumency instruction. It was also the reason that Sirius was sitting on the sofa, glaring up at her.

She was going to get Moody and Dumbledore back for this.

"So, as you obviously already know, Occlumency is the act of magically closing one's mind against Legilimency," she began to explain, pleased to see both Alice and Frank giving her their complete attention. "It's a very difficult practice of magic where—Sirius, *really?* You're just going to sit there and pout the entire time?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Are *you* going to keep keeping secrets?"

"You're being a child."

"Forgive me, I'm still adjusting to the news that my girlfriend of over a bloody *year*, and the witch I've known since I was *eleven*, is a bloody *Occlumens*." He said the word with disdain as though she had cheated on him with Occlumency.

"I'm a Legilimens too," Mia said smugly, deciding to ignore his piss poor attitude. "Which is why we're here today."

It had been suspected for a while, but when it was confirmed through an anonymous source that Voldemort was a skilled Legilimens, the entire Order was scheduled to be put through the wringer in order to learn at least the basic skills to keep as many of their secrets as possible from Death Eaters.

Unfortunately, the only known Occlumens or Legilimens—aside from herself and Dumbledore—that Mia knew about were, in fact, all currently Death Eaters. Bellatrix, Barty Crouch Jr, Voldemort himself, and the most skilled of them all: Severus Snape. Thankfully, it turned out that Edgar Bones and Emmeline Vance were fairly adept at one skill or the other and, therefore, the Order was separated into groups to be educated. Mia had been given the young Aurors. She felt it was a purposeful move against her by Moody, who appeared to have been pleased by Sirius's angry reaction during one of the meetings where they announced her secret set of skills.

Sirius, in an epic tantrum, had barely spoken a kind word to her since.

"Should we leave you two alone?" Frank asked hesitantly, glancing between Mia and Sirius as they glared at one another.

"No," Mia snapped. "Moody wanted the Order taught Occlumency, and you're my group, so I'm going to teach you bloody Occlumency." The tone of her voice was clipped and impatient. In the end, she knew this tension between them was only going to hurt Sirius considering it was *his* mind she would soon be digging into. "Of course, *someone* wouldn't have to bother with this if he'd listened to me and learnt it on his own years ago when I fucking told him to!"

"Oh, like you knew we would need this in the future!" Sirius yelled back, standing up and advancing toward her.

Mia stood her ground, not intimidated in the slightest. She looked up at him smugly, knowing that even if he *was* angry enough to hurt her—which she knew he never would—the Soul Bond prevented him from even trying. All this posturing was just that: a display. A really good display considering that Alice and Frank were shifting uncomfortably on the sofa.

"Really, we could just step outside," Alice mumbled.

Mia stuck her chin out and narrowed her eyes up at Sirius, annoyed that he was so much taller than her. When he grinned down at her, likely knowing how irritating it was to crane her neck up at him from that angle, she pinched the tender skin just above his armpit. Sirius let out a yelp of pain, and Mia shoved him out of her personal bubble, turning her attention back to her friends.

"You're fine, Alice. Now, basically, in order to learn Occlumency," Mia continued, ignoring the way that Sirius was growling behind her, "at least at the speed that Alastor wants you to learn it, I'll have to use Legilimency against you, and you will then have to build up barriers. Any questions?"

Frank raised his hand causing Mia to smile at him. "Is this how *you* learnt?"

"No. I built up a resistance over the years." When Sirius scoffed loudly, she threw two fingers at him from over her shoulder. "It took a lot of effort, but it's well worth it. I promise."

She thought back to the few times on the run while hunting Horcruxes when she had listened in on an older Sirius attempting to help Harry learn the skill. He told Harry—even then—that he was not very good at it. Mia should have remembered. Still, most of her basic skills in this form of magic had been learnt from Draco, who insisted that Occlumency could be used to help her with the nightmares she had been having since being tortured during the war. In the end, it had *not* helped with the nightmares—only confronting Bellatrix here in this timeline had done that. Mia had kept on with the study of Occlumency anyway, and over the years had begun to use it to fight off the strongest of attacks, mainly Dumbledore's Truth-Silencing Spell.

"Why?" Alice asked, bringing Mia out of her own head.

"Honestly? I was bored," she admitted with a smirk.

Sirius raised his hand mockingly as he moved around her to retake his seat next to Frank. "I have a question: what *else* are you hiding?"

"What exactly will happen when you use Legilimency?" Frank inquired nervously when Mia pointedly refused to acknowledge her boyfriend.

She frowned at the look of anxiety written on Frank's face. He so resembled Neville that it broke her heart a bit to tell him that she would, in fact, be invading his mind. Knowing his and Alice's futures only made her feel that much more guilty. In the future where she had come from, their minds had already been broken.

Trying to disguise her own worries and guilt, she tried to explain in the simplest of terms, "It's a little bit like the Sorting Hat, which is actually charmed with the skill to dig into our heads. Unfortunately, when a witch or wizard uses it, it *can* be painful, especially when resisted. And I'm really sorry about that ahead of time. I'll try to be as gentle as I can."

Frank swallowed hard. "Will you see, umm, everything?"

"Memories and thoughts are a lot like layers. It's not very organised, and you have to peel them away to reveal what you're looking for. I'll warn you, whatever is at the forefront of your mind, I'll probably see," she said and watched as Frank's eyes widened slightly as what she assumed were a slew of embarrassing memories flashed across his consciousness. She was suddenly very grateful to not have been assigned to teach her brother.

"It's best to focus on putting up the barriers. Think maybe about building an intricate brick wall hidden behind cement, encircled by Devil's Snare, and warded. Just keep adding layers upon layers and empty yourself of all emotion. To help with the motivation, however, I will be asking you to seclude very specific and possibly . . . intimate memories."

Alice blushed fiercely. "You're going to *what*?"

Mia shrugged her shoulders. "It's either me, Dumbledore, Edgar, or Emmaline; and let's be honest, I lived in the tower with you for seven years. You two weren't as subtle as you'd like to think you were, so what I'll be looking for might not have been seen, but could have been . . . *heard*."

Frank's cheeks turned bright red. "Oh, Merlin."

Mia exhaled and reached for her wand. *No time like the present; defences already down.* "Occlude your mind, Frank," she warned him and raised her wand. "*Legilimens!*"

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It was two hours later when Alice collapsed to the floor, sweat beading across her forehead. She looked almost as pale as Frank had before Sirius was able to slip an Invigoration Draught down his throat. The training had been hard, brutal almost, as Frank severely lacked the ability to fight off Mia's invasion, which led to several very awkward memories of her friends that she had never wished to see. Alice did only slightly better. It

had been their severe lack of talent at Occlumency that caused Mia to dig deeper into their minds, to erect barriers of her own—as dangerously close to Dark Magic as Mia had ever come, save for the few times she had attempted to kill Death Eaters, once succeeding.

Pandora's words echoed in her mind while she filtered her way through Frank and Alice's. "*You're not the tears of the phoenix, Mia Potter.*" She could not save anyone. She could not change the future. "*Don't you see? You're the song.*" She could not *heal*, but she could *help*. She could give courage and hope to those who needed it most. She would not be able to save Frank and Alice from the fate that awaited them, but she could bring something back to Neville—if she was ever able to go back, that is.

Mia struggled to burrow inside of the minds of her friends where she secretly built barriers, walls, and shields as strong as she could manage over a sensory area she was all too familiar with: the part of the mind that the Cruciatus Curse specifically attacked. While she could not prevent her friends from ending up in St Mungo's, at least she could tell Neville that she had done what she could to make certain they would not suffer as much as she knew they would normally under a Cruciatus.

"Just give me a minute," she said as she fell into her big fluffy armchair, summoning an Invigoration Draught for herself.

During the two hours spent working with the Longbottoms, Sirius had slowly calmed down. After watching her work with their friends in a way that strained them all, he looked as though he were beginning to understand that this was not something to be casual about. This was a serious talent, and one that he was now required to learn. At least, she hoped he was beginning to understand. He had stopped glaring at her, which she considered a victory.

After the draught kicked in and her energy returned, Mia stood up to face Sirius. "I'm good."

Sirius, tantrum apparently over, slapped his hands on his thighs and stood. He bounced on his feet, grinning, and stretched his neck, looking like a boxer ready to step into the ring. "Now which of our lovely nights together would you like me to keep from you, kitten? Hogwarts? Bathtubs? Backyard?"

His smile faded, replaced by a look of worry when she refused to take the bait.

"What?" he asked. "Why are you looking at me like—?"

"You need to have a reason to hide something, Sirius. Motivation to want to keep me out."

He stared at her for several long seconds, fidgeting slightly in the uncomfortable silence as the pieces clearly began to fit together in his mind. His grey eyes widened in obvious fear and anger. "No."

Mia struggled to fight back her emotions as she gripped her wand. "I don't want to do this, either."

Sirius stared at the sliver of vinewood in her hand, took a step backward, and snarled at her. "I am not showing you Grimmauld Place!"

"Good. I don't want to see it. I don't want . . . I don't want to see *that*. But there's nothing else you would try to hide from me. Can you think of anything?"

"I . . . I . . ."

"Sirius, please keep me out," she pleaded as she raised her wand. She wanted him to fight back—fight *her*. She thought about using any other memory, but Sirius was too open with her about too many things these days and not nearly ashamed enough of his past to hide the many nights he had spent with other girls at Hogwarts. It *had* to be *this*.

"Fuck." Sirius clenched his hands at his sides, his shoulders visibly stiffening. It took several moments before he managed to look her in the eye "F-Fine . . . Do it."

"I love you," she whispered. "*Legilimens!*"

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Remus stepped out of the fireplace and dusted the soot off of his hand-me-down robes, knowing that if they started looking even worse, he would be forced to let Mia or Sirius buy him new ones. He fought off their charity for as long as possible, unwilling to part with second-hand items, considering Sirius had bought the building they were living in, and he was pretty sure Mia took the brunt of the bills when it came to food. It was not like the Potter vault or Sirius's inheritance from his uncle had been dented by it. A part of him wanted to accept their help, but his pride was too great, and so he left the flat each day—when he was able to—in search of work so he could carry his own weight.

Unfortunately, today was just another typical day of poor luck for the overly-qualified-yet-still-a-werewolf wizard.

"Hey, love," Remus said as he spotted a head of curly hair in the corner of the dark living room. When she did not reply, he focused his gaze and noted that Mia's near-expressionless face was stained with dried tear tracks. He could smell the firewhisky from where he was standing. "Mia?"

"Dinner's on the table," she responded, her voice hoarse. "I saved you some stew."

Remus kept his worried gaze on his best friend as he walked to the table, glancing down briefly at the bowl of steaming vegetables and beef that had been placed under a Stasis Charm for him. "This looks . . ." He raised a questioning eyebrow. "Did Tilly pop over?"

"I made it."

He frowned, leaving the bowl to return his attention to her. "*You* cooked? You hate cooking. I didn't even know you knew how to do it. What's wrong? I can tell you've been crying," he said as he knelt down in front of her. "Where's Sirius?"

"Locked in the bedroom." She gestured haphazardly down the hallway with the half-empty glass of firewhisky in her hand. "Not currently speaking to me. We got into a fight."

"You two *always* fight."

"*Big* fight."

Remus lifted her in his arms, even as she protested only to be dropped against his side as he took her place in the large chair, draping her legs across his lap. He tried smiling at her as he stroked the back of her hair.

"How does that even work?" he asked, hoping to distract her by means of conversation. The girl had a habit of needing to educate people on every little thing, after all. "I mean, shouldn't the Soul Bond make the two of you constantly overjoyed with one another?"

Mia scoffed bitterly and leant back against his chest. "Sirius Black isn't even constantly overjoyed by being in the company of Sirius Black."

Remus nodded. "Fair point."

"It's not like you and . . ." Mia started to say but stopped before what he assumed was his mate's name. He appreciated her discretion. There was no way of knowing if Sirius was awake and eavesdropping from the other room. "Werewolves and their mates are all instinctual. Like a magical way of pairing up for the best possible outcomes."

He used the distraction to slip the glass of firewhisky from her hand, setting it down on the nearby table.

"Soul Bonds are the Wizarding equivalent to soul mates. He's my other half. Not my opposite, not my *better* half, just the other missing part of me. Which means we have far too much in common on a deep level, and, therefore—"

"You clash," Remus said in understanding. "So, what happened?"

"Mad-Eye—"

"Mad-Eye?" Remus asked with a raised brow.

Mia blinked at him, confused. "Moody."

Remus snorted. "Mad-Eye? That's kind of brilliant. Do I want to know how he gets that delightful moniker?"

"Shh." She pressed her finger against his lips. "Moody asked—or, well, *informed* me that I would be teaching Frank, Alice, and Sirius Occlumency." She began anxiously chewing the side of her cheek, glaring into the darkness as though Moody were standing there in front of them. "Sirius . . . didn't do well."

Remus inhaled sharply knowing that there could be quite an array of memories that Sirius would want to keep from Mia. Marlene McKinnon being at the very top of that list. "What did you see?"

"Grimmauld Place."

His mouth fell open in shock at the mention of Sirius's childhood home, knowing immediately what memory she was referring to. "Well, I get why he's angry then." Not knowing exactly how to proceed with helping his friends, he scratched the back of his neck. "Still, it had to happen *sometime*, and if not *you*, wouldn't it just be someone else digging through his mind?"

Mia turned and stared at him with wide amber eyes. The colour startled him a bit—as they almost glowed in the dark thanks to the reflecting lights from Diagon Alley outside the nearby window—and he wondered when the last time he saw chocolate-brown staring back at him had been.

"That was basically my argument," she said. "Lot of good it did me. Merlin, I just . . . I wish I could teach him Legilimency instead. Let him sift through *my* memories."

He frowned, recalling his own time doing so in Dumbledore's office, though not by means of Legilimency. "That's dangerous. Mia, I went with you into a Pensieve, and you

barely showed me a thing, and I still . . . I still have trouble sometimes wrapping my head around it all. I know you're still keeping things, and I know why. There's a future we have to keep protected, a war to win. Sirius . . . He wouldn't like what he sees in your mind, would he?"

Mia shook her head. "*I don't like what I see in my mind.*"

He wondered about the future. She had always been so angst-ridden whenever she was able to talk about it. The only thing that ever cheered her up was the mention of James's future son, Harry, and even then her few smiles were filled with a longing and sadness. A strong part of Remus did not want to see this future even though Mia promised him that the time she came from was filled with happiness and peace.

"He'll get over it, Mia. One day, Sirius will understand."

1994, Remus thought as he remembered the Unbreakable Vow he had taken to only reveal her secrets to Sirius only at a certain time.

"I don't know that he will," Mia drunkenly confessed in a panicked tone, tears reforming in her eyes. "What if I'm not here to make him understand? I don't know what's going to happen when . . . What if he blames me for every bad thing that's going to happen in the future? I could have changed it. I could have stopped all the bad things from happening."

"No, you couldn't. You can't . . . and . . ." Remus hesitated as the thought scared the hell out of him. "Merlin forbid, if you're not here to explain things to him, *I* will be. I made the oath. Sure, I won't be able to say anything for quite a few years, which I assume you did on purpose," he said, noting a confirming look in her eyes. "But I'll be here. I'll tell him everything, and he'll be okay."

When she turned into his robes, soaking them with her tears, he kissed the top of her head and held her close.

"Remus, promise me something?" Mia whispered.

"Anything, love."

She paused and took in a long, slow breath before speaking again. "Promise me that . . . that you'll *always* trust Sirius. Always remember that he's a good man. And when he needs you the most, please take care of him for me."

He raised a confused eyebrow at the request, wondering what on earth had sparked that need for her. What was in the future? And why Sirius would need him in such a way?

Would Sirius become untrustworthy? Would he do something that would make Remus think he was *not* a good man?

Despite the sinking feeling that her request left in his stomach, he cleared his throat and muttered, "I promise."

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Due to Remus's constant nudging, Mia made her way down to the bedroom she shared with Sirius. She sighed as she reached for the doorknob, taking note that, at some point, Sirius had taken down the Locking Charm. *That must mean something*, she admitted to herself before stepping inside the room.

Even in the darkness, she could see the silhouette of his body lying in the large bed. A sliver of moonlight broke through the nearby window, ever so slightly illuminating the room just enough that she did not need to cast a Wand-Lighting Charm in order to make it to the bed without stubbing her toe on something.

She stared at his beautiful shape in the shadows where she could watch his chest rise up and down slowly, and she was grateful to know that, even after revisiting his worst memory to date, he was able to sleep soundly.

Mentally and physically exhausted from the day, Mia quickly removed all of her clothing and—skipping pyjamas—slipped beneath the sheets next to him. As she settled in, resting her head on the large pillow, she glanced to the side and noticed his eyes were now open.

"Are you speaking to me yet?" When he made no reply, she sighed softly, her voice heavy with regret as she said, "You know I didn't want to do that."

"I know."

"But . . . I'm glad I did. You shouldn't have to keep everything inside, Sirius. If you can trust anyone with your past, it should be me."

"I know," he said again and groaned, rubbing a hand down his face. "It's just . . . I don't even like knowing that that memory's in *my* head, and now it's in *yours*."

Mia pulled herself close to him, pressing her bare chest against his side. Wrapping an arm around his waist, she let her fingers delicately trail along the soft patch of skin near his hip. "It doesn't make me think less of you."

"Not much *does* make you think less of me. I'm clearly not trying hard enough to lower your standards."

She smiled when he leant down to kiss the crevice of her neck.

"I'm sorry, Sirius."

"I forgive you, kitten."

"I love you."

"I know."

---

It was still dark when she felt the mattress shift beside her. Mia's eyes slowly began to open at the movement. She could barely make out his silhouette, but she could easily tell that Sirius was sitting up next to her. Too tired to talk—if that was the reason he had woken up—she rested her head back on her pillow and closed her eyes once more, allowing the warmth of the room to envelope her.

She smiled softly when she felt his knuckles rub her side, inches below the purple scar that ran across her ribs. As his hand moved higher and higher, eventually grazing across the underside of her right breast, Mia thought that she could wake up enough for *this*.

That was until she felt something wet and ice-cold drip onto her bare skin.

Shrieking, she jumped and reached for her wand, eyes wide and ready for anything.

"*Lumos!*"

What she found was her shirtless boyfriend, tattooed skin and long black hair—the usual picture-perfect image of the kind of bad boy most witches could never bring home to their parents—with a large serving spoon hanging out of his mouth and a carton of strawberry ice cream in his hands.

She gaped at him, eyes slowly narrowing at the image. When he grinned at her, she growled, throwing her still-lit wand down on the bed between them. "Your mood swings are doing my head in! Is that my ice cream?"

"No, this is *my* ice cream," Sirius said, mumbling around the spoon in his mouth.

Looking down at her stomach, she saw that the pink, frozen dessert was slowly melting against her warm skin. She reached for her wand to clean it up, but Sirius stayed

her hand, his gaze suddenly dark and hard. Mia swallowed in reply and watched as he removed the spoon from his mouth and leant forward, his eyes never disconnecting from her nervous stare as he leant his mouth over the flat planes of her body. Her breath hitched in her throat, and she could feel her heart beating hard against her rising chest as she stared down into her boyfriend's—no, her *lover's*—eyes as they pinned her to the bed.

Sirius licked the trail of melted sweet cream against her skin with languorous lapping, similar to the way he would lick her cunt shortly after making her scream her throat raw—his name the constant shout of praise on her lips. He would tongue her down from the high, a smug grin on his face as though he were partaking in the spoils of a well-won victory.

Mia moaned at the sensation, but then let out a sharp squeal when she felt ice-cold once again. She stared down to where she saw him purposely dripping the ice cream out of the container and onto her stomach.

"Sirius!" She sat up only to feel a firm hand on her shoulder shoving her back down. Glaring up into stormy grey eyes, she growled at him.

"You're going to lie there like a good little kitten," Sirius demanded, his voice husky and laced with amusement. "And I am going to eat this whole carton off of your sweet, silky skin until you are a shivering, writhing mess, and you don't know what parts of you are hot or cold."

She stared, shocked by both his specific demands and the wanton way her body was reacting to them. She imagined the absolute hysterical pile of nerves she would be if she were to allow him to go through with his plans, and *Merlin* did she want to give in, but also . . . she was not a bloody sundae dish.

"Sirius, if you think that you can just—Ah!" Silenced by the feel of an ice-cold silver spoon pressed against her damp core, the only sounds following her yelp were her short quick breaths and the dark chuckle in the back of Sirius's throat.

"You didn't *really* think that a simple apology was going to cut it after today, did you?" he asked with a smirk. "If *I'd* kept a secret from *you* for seven years then dug into your worst memory on the instruction of a prickish, paranoid Auror, *I'd* be sleeping on the sofa. Probably *Prongs's* sofa, at that. The least you can give me for my troubles, *witch*," he said, his voice retreating to a husky whisper, "is to hold still while I enjoy a midnight snack."

Mia whimpered as the words *Yes, please* ran repeatedly through her subconscious.

Sufficiently pleased with her stillness, Sirius leant forward to clean up the mess on her stomach before sitting back up and dribbling the frosty dessert against the already tightened peaks of her breasts. The cold was shocking and had her letting out crisp mewling noises that were quickly followed by breathy sobs as his hot mouth engulfed her chilled nipple.

Twenty minutes and half a carton of ice cream later, Mia was shivering over the intensity, very nearly weeping over the fact that not only would Sirius not let her move, but he outright refused to allow her to come as well.

"Not until I'm finished," he had said and spooned the treat out of her navel, licked it from between her breasts, savoured it off of the inside of her thighs, and even shared a few bites with her, only to suck the last of the sweet drops from her tongue.

Finally, when she outright pleaded with him for release, Sirius pulled himself between her *literally* creamy thighs. He hooked his forearms under her legs and gripped her hips to hold her in place as he bathed her clit over and over again with his icy tongue, his pressure firm and slow.

As Mia broke under his ministrations, crying out his name, she realised she would never be able to look at Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour the same way again.

*266,128 Grains of Sand Left*

## Chapter Ninety-Two

### *Filthy Half-Breeds*

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*And I'm damned if I do and I'm damned if I don't  
So here's to drinks in the dark at the end of my road  
And I'm ready to suffer and I'm ready to hope  
It's a shot in the dark aimed right at my throat  
(Shake it Out - Florence + The Machine)*

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**May 7th, 1979**

*195,135 Grains of Sand Left*

When word reached the Order that someone from the other side was looking to defect, all other missions took a back seat. Mia stopped training Sirius, Alice, and Frank in Occlumency, but not before Sirius figured out how to control the memories that popped into his head when Mia wandered inside of his mind. She was certain that, had headaches not always followed their sessions, her boyfriend would use this talent as a new form of foreplay.

James, Lily, Peter, and Mary were constantly being sent on missions to protect locally-threatened Muggle-borns and known blood-traitors, as well as to have extra sets of eyes and ears at stake-out locations. Frank, Alice, Sirius, and the rest of the Aurors in the Order were the official presence during some of the more violent takedowns involving Death Eaters.

Meanwhile, Mia had been reallocated to her post inside the Ministry where she was to do absolutely nothing for the Order until Dumbledore or Moody declared otherwise. Her days were filled with worry for her friends and family, intermingled with the monotony of her parchment-pushing job. The few moments of entertaining interruption came from Arthur, who was all too eager to sit around Mia's office and talk about Muggle culture, potential future Ministry reforms, and his wonderful family. Molly, it turned out, was pregnant again, and Arthur was absolutely positive that this one would not only be the last child they would have, but also a girl.

Mia bet him five Galleons he was wrong.

A blond witch burst into her office. "Hide me!"

Mia looked up before shaking her head in exasperation. The *other* entertaining interruption to her boring days had come in the form of Laurel Parkinson, a pureblood witch hell-bent on *not* blindly following the standards and traditions she had been raised with. Laurel had been a few years ahead of Mia in Hogwarts, and, despite having a slew of suitors following her every move, she waited until her mid-twenties to get married. Not only that, but she was a *working* witch. It was something rare for one from such a high-profile, pureblood family.

The two had met shortly after Mia began at the Ministry when there was a Floo Network malfunction. They both stumbled out of the Ministry fireplace together, only to end up locked within the closed grate while repairs were being made. Despite their many differences, they had become fast friends.

Laurel loved Mia's proud blood-traitor status and her take-no-crap attitude when it came to the Ministry and society as a whole. Mia adored Laurel's sharp mind and even sharper viewpoint. The witch had been sorted into Slytherin for good reasons, and Dorea's passing had left a serpent-shaped need in Mia's life that Laurel was all too pleased to attempt to fill.

"Good morning, Laurel." Mia grinned at her panicked friend. "I'm well, and how are you?"

"Mia!" Laurel shrieked, her wide blue eyes pleading.

"Go ahead." Mia gestured to the broom cupboard in the corner of her office and watched as the blonde rushed into it as quickly as possible.

Just as the door to the cupboard closed, Mia's office door opened again, and a familiar, portly, little wizard stepped into the space, holding himself with an air of smug confidence as though he were seven feet tall. He wore a pinstriped cloak to distinguish himself from the sea of black and navy robes.

Mia was just pleased to note he had yet to start wearing that hideous bowler hat.

"Ah, Miss . . . *Potter*," Cornelius Fudge said, checking the nameplate on her desk as he did every single time he stepped foot into her office.

*Permanently forget my name, you imbecile*, Mia thought harshly as she narrowed her eyes at the future Minister for Magic.

"Good day to you!" he greeted cheerfully.

"And to you, Mr Fudge," she said briefly before returning her attention to the stack of parchment in front of her.

"*Junior Minister* Fudge now."

Curious, Mia lifted a brow. "Oh?" She could tell he was expecting a word of congratulation from her, but the expressionless look on her face said everything that words could not. She could not give a nogtail's arse about his bloody promotion. "They've assigned titles like that to promotions within the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes? That seems a bit. . ."

"Exciting?"

"Presumptuous," she corrected and watched with amusement as his ego deflated. "What can I help you with, Mr Fudge?"

"Junior Minis—" he began to correct her, only to stop and clear his throat instead. "I was wondering if you have seen Miss Parkinson?"

"Do you mean Laurel?" Mia asked, knowing better than to even look in the direction of the broom cupboard where her friend was hiding herself away. "I'm sorry, Mr Fudge, I was under the impression she was *Mrs Greengrass* now. Wasn't she married this winter?"

Fudge's countenance dropped once more, and the aura of ego that he tried to wrap himself in faded to one of bitter self-pity. He rolled his eyes as he drawled, "Oh yes, *that business*. I had forgotten."

Mia copied his eye roll, but for quite a different reason.

She had been a driving influence in Laurel's marriage. When her friend approached her in a fit of worry over her many suitors, the two sat down to lunch at the Leaky where Laurel showed Mia a list of wizards who had made offers for her hand. Cornelius had, in fact, been on the list, but was very near the bottom. At the top were names Mia was quite familiar with: Theodros Nott and his son, Thoros, as well as Rabastan Lestrangle and Regulus Black. All Death Eaters. Theodros was one of Voldemort's original followers, if Mia was not mistaken. Both he and his son were old enough to be Laurel's father. Mia urged her friend to ignore all of them, including Regulus who, she informed Laurel, was still a Hogwarts student and quite possibly did not even *know* a marriage to an older witch was being arranged for him by his parents.

"*You don't want Walburga Black as a mother-in-law, believe me.*"

"*Aren't you dating the eldest Black son?*"

*"Yes, Laurel, so believe me when I tell you that you do not want Walburga Black as a mother-in-law!"*

Mia had encouraged Laurel to accept the offer from Hyperion Greengrass, already knowing that she would. Though Laurel had been born into another family that Mia was familiar with from her other timeline—the Parkinsons—she was, in fact, the spitting image of her daughters Daphne and Astoria Greengrass, the elder of whom *Hermione* had known in passing at Hogwarts.

The couple had married just before Christmas. Though Mia was invited by her friend, she politely declined, knowing that the event would be attended by far too many Death Eaters and blood supremacists for her liking.

A high-pitched, sugary voice interrupted Mia's thoughts and she felt a nauseating chill come over her entire body. "Hem hem!"

The scowl Mia had been forcing herself to hide from Fudge came out with a vengeance as her eyes were assaulted with a variety of pink shades in the form of a short, toad-like witch, who stood assumingly in Mia's doorway with a stack of parchment in her thick, stubby fingers. Mia gripped the quill in her hand like a dagger and clenched her fist around it tightly.

"Ah, good morning Dolores," Fudge said, his voice covering the sound of Mia's fingernails scraping viciously against the wood of her desk and the quill in her other hand snapping in half.

Twenty years younger than Mia remembered her, Dolores Umbridge turned to Fudge and beamed at him. "*Junior Minister* Fudge, congratulations on your promotion. Soon you'll be the very top of the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes; I'm certain of it."

Her voice was like poisoned honey, and Mia was fighting back the strongest urge to take the spare phoenix quill on her desk and stab the bitch in the hand repeatedly with it. Luckily, Mia's position at the Ministry meant that she was beneath Dolores and, therefore, barely worthy of a glance.

Fudge grinned, basking in Umbridge's praise. "Well, don't you go telling secrets, but I'm hoping to skip up the ladder a few steps more than that."

Mia held back the breakfast that was threatening to make a reappearance. Why had she let Sirius and Remus talk her into having a full English? She didn't even *like* black

pudding and only indulged because she knew Remus would make himself sick if he ate it all himself.

"And right you should!" Umbridge declared, her voice going up two octaves. "Minister Minchum has been wonderful, but elections are just a year away, and I hear that Millicent Bagnold is trying to weasel her way into the running," she said with disdain. "Did you know her mother is a Mud—Muggle-born? Can you just imagine?"

"A *Muggle-born*?" Mia finally interrupted, her comment laced with sarcasm on the end of a horrified gasp. "Merlin, how positively atrocious!"

Vexed by the mocking tone, Dolores turned her focus to its source, her beady eyes landing on Mia. "Quite. So you're the *file girl*?"

"Quite," Mia echoed. "And you must be Madam Umbridge, Head of the Improper Use of Magic Office."

"Oh, I daresay I do more than monitor underage sorcery these days." The annoyed look fell from her face as though Mia had just praised her by the mere mention of her position. "Speaking of which," she said, dropping the stack of parchment on Mia's desk. "I have several papers for you to put to rights."

Mia looked at the top one and felt her blood begin to boil in her veins. She swallowed back bile and looked up at the woman, her jaw tightening as the image of a bloodied and broken Remus lying in her bed, dying, came to the forefront of her mind. "You're trying to pass legislation to prevent werewolves from seeking medical treatment?"

"Not just *werewolves*, dear. *All* filthy half-breeds," Umbridge replied, either missing the flare of fury in Mia's eyes or ignoring it entirely. "They're a danger to the rest of the population. Did you know that a werewolf broke into St Mungo's a year or so ago and tried to maul an entire floor of injured witches, and the Aurors just let him loose in the end? Honestly, what is the government coming to?"

Mia narrowed her eyes at the witch.

She did, in fact, know about the event in question considering she had *been* there. The werewolf was Remus who had just found out his mother died. He had *not* broken into the hospital, he had *not* attempted to maul anyone—let alone a floor of witches—and the Aurors had no need to let him loose as her friends and family had not let them even come close to capturing Remus.

"Awful. I'm hoping that Auror Moody retires soon and someone less lenient of these filthy creatures steps in to take his place as Head of the Auror Office." Umbridge shifted the rest of the papers in her arms and went to take a seat. The chair, moved by Mia's raging magic, slammed against the desk as though pulled by a magnetic force. Umbridge pursed her lips in disapproval. "If you ask me, the entire Department of Magical Law Enforcement needs to be cleaned out."

Both Umbridge and Fudge seemed to ignore the way Mia's hand hovered over the wand on her desk, just barely restraining herself.

"I'm good friends with Bartemius Crouch, did you know?" Fudge announced brightly. "Hard worker that one. I had lunch with the man last week, and, from the sound of things, he's looking forward to a promotion over the department. He'll get things in order, trust me on that," he said with another conspiratorial wink, and Umbridge blushed as though he was flirting with her. It was nauseating. Mia was certain she would never eat again in her life.

"Hem hem!" She loudly mimicked Umbridge, drawing the attention back to her. "Sorry to interrupt, but I do have quite the to-do list, and I imagine my pitiful little office is the last place such *fine* Ministry officials as yourselves need to be cramped inside while planning the future of the Wizarding world," she said, her voice taking on a slightly sweeter tone, knowing that if she did not rein in her fury now, she might very well set the whole building on fire. A voice in the back of her head—that sounded a bit like Sirius—whispered that maybe that was not such a bad idea.

Fudge glanced down at the gold watch hanging from the pocket of his pinstriped robes. "Ah yes, indeed. Miss Potter, should you see Miss, er, Mrs *Greengrass*, will you let her know I'd like an appointment with the Minister?"

"Absolutely, Mr Fudge. Good day to you."

"Good day."

As Fudge escorted Dolores out, shutting the door behind him, Mia threw them both a rude hand gesture.

Laurel exited the cupboard with a grin on her face. "Mia Potter! Such a crude gesture for such a *sweet* little witch," she said sarcastically before falling into the previously magnetised chair.

Mia finally snapped. "That woman is beyond vile!"

Laurel nodded in agreement. "She's in good company then with Corny."

"Ew," Mia said, gagging. "Don't call him that."

Laurel laughed, her blue eyes drawn down to the massively large emerald ring on her left hand, looking at it with gratitude. "Did you hear the way he addressed me? '*That business*' he says. Arranged marriage or not, I'd sooner Avada myself than be caught dead on the arm of that toad."

"Umbridge or Fudge?"

Laurel snorted. "You're wicked. Are you sure you were sorted properly?"

Mia shrugged remembering the tone of disdain that the Sorting Hat had given her when she threatened to set it on fire. "Not always. Are you just hiding from Fudge? I was under the impression the Wizengamot was inducting a new member to their familial seat today," she said knowingly.

Laurel rolled her eyes but offered a smile in reply. "It's ridiculous really. Hyperion isn't even twenty-five, and his father's forcing him to take up the seat *just* so he and my hag of a mother-in-law can retire and move away. 'Too many damn Mudbloods in this country!' is what my father-in-law says, and Hyperion just eats it all right up because that's what's expected of him." She shook her head in disappointment. "Take the familial seat, run the business, throw the parties."

"*You* married a Slytherin," Mia reminded her.

"I *am* a Slytherin."

"One of very few I consider a friend; don't push your luck, you snake." Mia chuckled when Laurel stuck her tongue out at her. "Does Hyperion really believe all that anti-Muggle-born nonsense?"

She knew from the future that the Greengrass family had been quite the fence-sitters during the war, and though Daphne and Astoria had never gone out of their way to be cruel to her, both girls had been at least somewhat friendly with the likes of Pansy Parkinson. Although, after meeting Laurel, she could have attributed that fact to their family connection; the girls were actually cousins.

Laurel shrugged her shoulders and sighed. "Here and there. But he had a Muggle-born friend in school, so he's not a purist like his father or the rest of those sheep."

"Isn't your own father one of those sheep?"

"And my mum. Peneus, too. I enjoy being the horrible disappointment, but at least I'm pretty. You should see the witch that my brother married. *Poy*," she said the name with a grimace, and Mia snorted. "Ugliest woman I've ever seen. Nose looks like she ran into a glass window and it stuck there."

*Wait til you see her daughter*, Mia thought and then said aloud, "You and my boyfriend would get along famously." Her eyes drew back down to the stack of parchment on her desk with Umbridge's signature followed by the Minister's alongside the Wizengamot seal. How that horrid woman was able to get these awful laws passed . . . Mia just could not understand how people could be so cruel.

"Nothing you can do about it, you know," Laurel said. "Umbridge, I mean. She's got the ear of the Wizengamot *and* the Minister. I should know; I set all his bloody appointments, and she's in his office kissing his feet and pushing papers across his desk every week."

"She's beyond loathsome. Anti-werewolf laws."

"Not just werewolves. I've heard them talking," the blonde said in a sudden whisper. "She has legislation being written up against a number of half-breed groups. Muggle-borns as well. Quite hypocritical if you ask me."

"Why's that?"

"Well, she's a half-blood herself."

"What?" Mia's eyes widened dramatically. "Are you certain?"

Her mind went back to months and months of investigating old Wizengamot laws that were still in effect—though widely overlooked—and one such law stood out dramatically to her. Purebloods ruled the government to such a degree that even a half-blood was considered a different species in some old laws and did not have the authority to speak or act in the name of the Wizarding world. Mia was certain that in a bit of outdated legislation there was a law that meant Umbridge's anti-werewolf propaganda would be roughly translated into an act of war from one half-breed species to another.

"Who are you talking to?" Laurel scoffed, offended. "I know *everything* that goes on in the Ministry. Gossip Central is a lovely circle that surrounds my desk. Umbridge's mother was a Muggle. There's even a rumour that she has a squib brother out there somewhere."

"Out there somewhere?" Mia asked. "So you don't know?"

Laurel shook her head. "No, her father retired from the Ministry a few years back, long after he'd cast his son and wife back into the Muggle world."

"How does no one else know this?"

"Well, look how she goes about. Tells everyone that'll listen how she's pureblood."

Mia already knew that Umbridge was a blood supremacist, touting herself as a relation to the Selwyns and, therefore, pureblood—something Mia knew to be illegal. Since the archaic laws of the Wizarding world had always put such emphasis on blood status, Dolores was breaking laws by selling herself for something she was not. Even Mia technically had a higher legal standing since she was considered pureblood through her adoption.

"Her take on Muggles and half-breeds sure drives the point home, doesn't it? And acting like the bloody Minister's pet cat the way she does, who would bother to question her?"

*Harry will*, Mia thought.

"We really need a new Minister for Magic."

Laurel sighed, running a hand through her long golden locks, fidgeting when her enormous wedding ring got tangled in them. "He's not so bad. A bit of an extremist when it comes to dementors, really. Just ordered a new lot to be sent to Azkaban." Mia recoiled unintentionally at the mention of the prison. "But, other than that, he's fairly unbiased."

Glancing down at the Minister's signature on the paper, Mia said, "Not if he's allowing Umbridge to write and pass legislation like this."

"Oh, I hardly think he just *allows* it."

Mia looked up, confused. "What do you mean? He signs the papers, doesn't he?"

"Yes, but let's just say after his meetings with Madam Umbridge, the Minister is . . ." she trailed off, searching for the right word. Mia could see the Slytherin cunning coming into play. "Quite *agreeable* and relaxed."

Mia gasped. "You're kidding. *Imperiused*?"

Laurel nodded her head after looking back at Mia's door, which was still closed. "Can't prove it, though."

"No," Mia agreed. "But a little suspicion raised could hurt her quite a bit."

"Be careful, Mia," Laurel cautioned with a frown. "She's well connected. You Gryffindors, always running off to save the day, aren't you?"

Mia grinned deviously. "Trust me, when I do take that bitch down, I'll be quite the cunning little serpent," she said with an assured air. "At least until I'm allowed to rip my claws into her."

"Have I ever told you how much fun it is to visit your office?" Laurel asked as she leant back in the chair, kicking her small feet up on the corner of Mia's desk right on top of the stack of papers Umbridge dropped off.

Mia grinned. "Have I ever told you what an informative friend you've become?"

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The rest of Mia's workday fared much better.

After Laurel left to return to her duties as the Minister's secretary, Mia set to work filing away the papers that Umbridge had left with her, but not before pulling out several older documents on laws that might help her take down the bitch in the long run.

Shortly before lunch, Arthur stopped by to catch up on the latest gossip, and Mia filled him in on her morning. Arthur, in turn, vented to Mia about Molly's latest bout of nausea, to which Mia advised that he tell Molly to stop eating corned beef. After raising a confused eyebrow at her, she simply added, "Your son hates corned beef."

Arthur once again argued that he believed it would be a girl this time around, but that he would pass along the tip to his wife just in case.

Mia stepped out of the fireplace of her flat and dusted off her robes before setting her large bag down and removing her travelling cloak. "Sirius! Remus! Anyone home?"

A relaxed grin settled on her face as she moved further into the flat. "You are not going to believe the day I've had. Laurel just gave me some information I can probably use against that awful witch that's trying to pass—"

She stopped cold in her tracks when a familiar metallic smell assaulted her senses.

Her eyes widened, and she reached for her wand, rushing down the hallway toward her bedroom door. Gasping as she opened it, Mia brought her hands to cover her mouth, dropping her wand in the process.

Sirius sat on the edge of their bed, his skin pale and eyes glazed. His Auror robes and shirt were in a pile at the foot of the large four-poster, and Lily was kneeling in front of him, a flannel in hand, wiping blood from his exposed arms and chest.

Remus turned as Mia burst into the room, and Lily looked up at her friend, but Sirius's eyes stayed firmly set on some random point in the corner, looking as though he was not even aware that anyone was in the room with him.

"Mia . . ." Remus cautioned her. "Step back. Sirius is fine."

Mia shook her head in abject denial. *He's not fine! Look at him!* she screamed in her head.

Remus escorted her back out the door, shutting it closed behind him to let Lily continue attending to Sirius. He wrapped Mia into his arms tightly and breathed heavily against the top of her head which was tucked beneath his chin.

"It wasn't his blood."

"What happened?" she whispered, terrified.

"An Order mission went . . . very badly."

"Who?"

He pulled away from her and wiped at the corners of his bloodshot eyes. "A few were sent out to keep an eye on an informant. Someone we thought could be used as a spy. Our information was wrong. The informant turned on the Order the second they were questioned, and . . . Death Eaters showed up and attacked. It was a trap."

Mia gasped. "Where's Jamie?"

"He's fine. Shook up, but fine. Lily and Prongs just escaped thanks to Frank and Alice being there. Sirius . . . He . . . He got Peter out, but . . ."

Mia took a slow and shaky breath. "Who was Peter paired with tonight?"

Remus swallowed hard before speaking again.

"Mary."

*194,635 Grains of Sand Left*

## Chapter Ninety-Three

### *Would He Save You?*

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*Just because everything's changing  
Doesn't mean it's never been this way before  
All you can do is try to know who your friends are  
As you head off to the war  
(The Call - Regina Spektor)*

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#### May 7th, 1979 - Earlier that Day

Sirius did not trust the information, but Moody had insisted that they find a proper spy for the Order, someone who could be trusted by Voldemort and the Death Eaters. It left few options, considering that recruiting for the Dark Lord had come to a halt, at least in Britain. So when Wilkes—a known Death Eater—came to Dumbledore seeking sanctuary and safety from his fellows, the Order welcomed him. Despite the Legilimency and Veritaserum-fuelled interrogations, Sirius did not trust Wilkes in the slightest. Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater he told them all. Moody almost seemed a bit hesitant, but he claimed that an idiot like Wilkes could not fight off both an invasion of his mind *as well* as a truth serum.

Sirius wondered why they were willing to put their lives into Wilkes's hands if he was such a bloody idiot.

"Calm down there, Black. You look a little too eager to get in there."

Sirius ignored Kingsley, his attention set on the small, unassuming building. The lack of an obvious threat only made him more anxious. "I don't trust Wilkes. I know the intel says that he's defected, but I think we're putting a lot at risk right now just on the word of a *supposed* former Death Eater."

"At least the associates he's supposed to be meeting tonight aren't marked," Kingsley offered, always the one to attempt to paint a silver lining around the many clouds of this war. Each one so eager to piss rain on the whole lot of them.

Already, within the year, they had lost five Aurors in the fight. Caradoc Dearborn had gone missing two months earlier when he was attacked alongside Dedalus Diggle and Sturgis Podmore—both of whom were still recovering at St Mungo's. There had been no

sight or sound of Dearborn since. The Order had given up hope he would ever be recovered, considering that people, both magical and Muggle, were disappearing left and right all over Britain.

"The world isn't separated into good people and Death Eaters," Sirius muttered under his breath. "Marked or not, I still think he's one of them."

Kingsley bobbed his head in understanding. "Well, if he *is*, that's why we're all here, isn't it? And he only thinks that he's being monitored by Pettigrew and Macdonald."

Which was exactly what Wilkes had been told.

Peter and Mary were the least intimidating pair in the entire Order. Even the older witches and wizards like Dumbledore, Dorcas, and Aberforth looked like a force to be reckoned with. Most days Peter barely looked like he was able to tie his own laces, and Mary—despite her temper—had perfected the act of looking non-threatening.

Wilkes had been informed that, since this was supposed to be a meeting with himself and a few underlings, Peter and Mary would tag along and watch from nearby.

Sirius suggested that a pair of Aurors be on the inside with Wilkes, but he had been overruled by the group. Peter and Mary, while capable on their own, came off as the most non-threatening pair, putting Wilkes at ease—and, therefore, more likely to slip up should he decide to play both sides. Moody wanted the team of Aurors outside to spot anyone arriving. If a trap was going to be sprung, Death Eaters were more than likely to ward from outside of the building. To Sirius's relief, Wilkes had not been told that James and Lily were trailing him, hidden beneath an Invisibility Cloak to the south of Peter and Mary; nor was he aware that Alice and Frank were camped outside the back entrance of the building, while Sirius and Kingsley took to monitoring the front.

Kingsley patted Sirius on the shoulder. "You need to relax, mate."

Sirius growled in response. "Two of my best friends and the girl I consider my sister are in there."

A part of him had been wondering lately if he still considered Peter one of his closest friends. Since graduating, Wormtail had slowly separated himself from the group, and it certainly did not help their friendship that Sirius attacked him when Remus almost died. James had forced them to make up and shake hands, and despite pretending like things were back to normal, Sirius just was not as close to Peter as they had been when they were children. In all honesty, these days he felt closer to Frank than Wormtail. Hearing

James's voice in his head reproachfully telling him to be a better friend, Sirius made a mental note to work on spending more time with Peter.

"We've all got people we love that are taking risks, Black," Kingsley said in a kind tone that Sirius appreciated. It was nice being paired with someone who could do their job and not be a shit about Sirius's opinions and concerns.

"I still think it was stupid to leave Remus out of this."

Kingsley nodded in agreement. "I know. But you know Moody. Fool him once, shame on you . . ."

"Fuck, when will this be over?" Sirius groaned as he adjusted his position. "I just want to get home."

"Ah, to the beautiful Miss Mia?" Kingsley waggled his eyebrows.

Sirius snorted. "Jealous?"

"Always," Kingsley said with a smirk. "She's quite the witch. Beautiful, talented, and frankly, she's a bit terrifying." He laughed, a deep rumble.

Sirius grinned darkly. "Mate, you have no idea what that girl is capable of."

He immediately thought back to their latest argument where he had failed to wash the dishes, declaring that if she would just let him get a house-elf, they would not have these problems. He knew it would provoke her, and she had certainly let him have it. He pushed and pushed until her hair was sparking and she threw a dish at his head. Sirius had tossed her over his shoulder and carried her to their room where she proceeded to punish him properly for his insolence and bad attitude. An hour later, since there were still no clean dishes, Sirius fell back on his now-default serving platter for partaking in some more strawberry ice cream.

"When are you going to propose?"

Annoyed, Sirius kicked Kingsley in the shin. "Tosser. You're a worse gossip than Mary. What makes you think I'm going to propose marriage?"

Kingsley laughed. "Because Potter did."

"I don't do *everything* that James does."

Kingsley stared at him incredulously before lifting a questioning eyebrow.

"Fuck off," Sirius grunted. "I don't. I'm an Auror, and he's not. I can make *my own* decisions you know."

"What's your decision regarding your witch?"

"It's none of your—" Sirius turned, eyes narrowed, when his ears picked up something. He spotted a brief flash of red through the dirty window of the building. "Did you see that?"

Upon bursting through the door, he and Kingsley were met with, not underlings, but fully marked, cloaked, and masked Death Eaters shooting curses left and right. Peter and Mary were nowhere to be seen, and Wilkes did not seem to be there.

Instead, Sirius saw James and Lily facing off against four Death Eaters. From the sound of the cackle coming from one of them, he knew Bellatrix was there. Another had long, blond hair peeking out from behind the mask, and Sirius growled.

"Malfoy."

"Longbottoms, backup Potter and Evans!" Kingsley ordered. Suddenly, Alice and Frank came into Sirius's vision, rushing off to the battle. "Black, find Pettigrew and Macdonald!"

Sirius nodded, despite everything inside of him needing to be at James's side. He watched as Alice and Frank jumped into action, protecting each other as they moved toward James and Lily. Only then did he notice that the other two Death Eaters were not actually fighting. One was throwing hexes so far out of the line of battle, Sirius wondered if there was someone to the far right that he could not see. The other was duelling properly, in a familiar style, only from the angle Sirius was looking, it looked as though he were purposely deflecting curses that were being sent at Lily and James from Bellatrix and Malfoy.

"Don't just stand there, you idiot!" Malfoy shouted from beneath his mask at the smallest Death Eater in the group. He reached forward and gripped the masked wizard by the throat and threw him violently to the side where he collided with the corner of a door.

As he hit the edge, his mask cracked and fell from his face, and Sirius's eyes widened. A mirrored pair of grey eyes looked up into his face.

"Sirius," Regulus whispered, and his face drained of all colour.

"You!" Sirius snarled and aimed his wand at his younger brother, gaping at the boy's robes that had been pulled up in his fall to reveal the Dark Mark as clear as day. Sirius's stomach turned at the sight, and he threw a silent Stunning Spell at his Death Eater sibling. "Regulus, you bloody prat!"

"Sirius! Stop!" Regulus pleaded, throwing up a shield.

"You son of a bitch!" Sirius charged forward, forgetting the fact that he was supposed to have been looking for Peter and Mary. He could not think straight. All he could see was Lily falling into the Black Lake, Mia breathing life back into her body. He saw Death Eaters surrounding his bleeding body at Grimmauld Place while Walburga pleaded with Voldemort to spare *Regulus*. He saw Mia's scar—*Mudblood*—cut across her arm.

Red bled into his sight, clouding his judgment.

"Bloody hell, Sirius!" Regulus shouted as he deflected Sirius's attacks as best as he could. His smaller frame and Seeker reflexes were lending themselves well to duelling, and Sirius's lack of control was not helping in the assault on his younger brother. "Stop! I need to—You stupid, reckless—Sirius, you're being betrayed!"

"No shit!" Sirius snapped and tackled Regulus to the ground. Both of their wands fell from their hands.

Regulus was still fighting back, dodging punches. "Stop! Brother, I can explain—"

"I'm not your fucking brother!" Sirius shouted and sent a balled fist into Regulus's face, feeling the satisfying crunch of cartilage. With Regulus bleeding on the ground, Sirius summoned his wand and stood up, aiming it down.

"Wait!" Regulus pleaded, eyes wide.

Sirius hesitated just a split second too long, and Regulus regained his wand just in time to throw up another shield.

"It's not what you—Fuck, stop cursing me, asshole! I'm trying to tell you I'm getting out, and I've got information that your precious Order needs."

Sirius was shocked at the words, but he did not take them to heart. *Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater*. "You are such a cowardly little shit! You go off and join the bloody Death Eaters, and when it gets to be too much, you back out. What? Didn't feel like torturing your family members in your own home? Did you think that was a fluke? An off day where Bellatrix just got bored? No! That's what they *do*! That's what YOU do! *Stupefy!*"

"*Protego!* I don't! I've never . . ." Regulus lowered his wand. "I-I didn't . . . I don't anymore. Sirius, I want out!"

Shaking with anger, Sirius struggled with the image in front of him. Regulus, a Death Eater, his little brother. He was not wearing his usual sneer but instead looked panicked

and afraid. Sirius could not reconcile the expression with the Dark Mark on his forearm. He moved to attack and only stopped when he saw the smallest hint of a line on Regulus's neck and suddenly he could hear Mia's voice in his head.

*"I healed the wound on his neck, told him to find some Dittany so it wouldn't scar. Yes, Sirius, I healed your brother so he wouldn't scar. You might have an idea as to how I feel about scars."*

*Why had Mia healed Regulus?*

Her brief moment of mercy toward his younger brother caused Sirius to doubt himself.

"Get away from me, or I'll kill you," he said in a low, threatening voice.

Regulus widened his stare in shock that Sirius was backing down. Instead of moving in for the attack like Sirius expected, Regulus stood back and lowered his wand. "I'll prove myself. I will. In the meantime . . . tell Evans that I'm sorry," he said and then Disapparated in a cloud of black smoke.

"Fuck!" Sirius screamed in frustration and then turned back to the fight. "Peter! Mary!" He glanced over his shoulder to see Lily and Alice wildly throwing hexes at Malfoy and Bellatrix as well as three more Death Eaters that had appeared around the wall. He did not know where Frank and James were, and just as he was about to go looking for his best friend, he heard Peter screaming out for him.

"Padfoot! Help me!"

Sirius turned back around and noticed his friend poking his head out from behind the door of a small room. The wall had been blasted to hell, and Sirius rushed through, ducking behind it as he dodged a curse that flew over his head. When he got a good look at Peter and Mary, he felt the blood drain from his face.

Peter looked ready to vomit as he cradled Mary in his arms, tears pouring down his dirty face. She was bleeding profusely, her skin ashen. Her body was shaking, her eyes fluttering as she drifted in and out of consciousness. Still, she seemed to be struggling against Peter's hold, likely wanting to get back into the fight. Mary always had been a fighter. Her wand was near Peter's foot, snapped half. Sirius wondered if she had fallen on it when whatever had blasted the wall to bits.

"Padfoot. H-Help. T-They hit her w-with . . ." Peter stuttered as he looked down at the girl in his arms. "S-She's in shock."

"Mary?" Sirius knelt over the girl, taking her face gently in his hands. "Mary, love, look at me," he pleaded tearfully. He forced a smile when her blue eyes opened to look at him. "Hey there, beautiful. You hang on, okay? I'm going to get you some help. Pete, what happened?"

"W-Wilkes . . . It was a trap."

"Where is he?" Sirius growled.

"Over there." Peter gestured to the split wall, and Sirius took a look, noticing another attached room. "I tried, but . . . but I . . ."

"It's okay, mate." Sirius patted Peter on the shoulder. "I'm going to give you some cover, and you get out of here." He took another glance, noting that Lucius and Bellatrix were gone, leaving behind the three other Death Eaters who had stopped fighting, but were instead looking around. James, Lily, Alice, Frank, and Kingsley were not there.

"They put up Anti-Disapparition wards," Peter muttered. "Specific to them. We tried getting out right when Wilkes turned." Peter looked down at Mary when she struggled to speak. "Shhh . . . It's okay. Wilkes hit Mary, and then someone . . ." Peter lifted his left arm and Sirius took in the sight of a large gash over the skin.

"All right." Sirius gently pulled Mary from Peter's arms and set her down on the ground next to the wall. She let out a painful cry, and Sirius frowned. "Pete, you make a run for it; get outside the wards. I'll get Mary out of here."

"I can take her," Peter insisted.

"No, Wormtail, you're wounded. You might drop her. Just go." When he saw Peter hesitate again, he barked loudly, "Peter, go!"

Wand held high, he watched Peter rush through the door, heading for the exit. The three Death Eaters had apparently vanished in the brief time Sirius had been planning to evade them. At the sight of Peter making a run for it, Wilkes pulled from the cover of the small room and narrowed his gaze at Peter's retreating frame.

"Pettigrew!" Wilkes yelled, aiming his wand at Peter's back. "You little rat!"

"*Avada Kedavra!*" Sirius shouted, and a green light left his wand, hitting Wilkes in the chest before the Death Eater could set the same curse upon his friend. Wilke's body fell to the ground, and Sirius suddenly felt sick. His knees gave out, and he collapsed to the floor. Only the sight of Mary's shaking body brought him out of his stupor.

"S-Sirius . . ."

"Mary, oh Merlin, I'm sorry," he said, trying to pull her into his arms so he could get them out of there. As he moved to stand, she let out another cry of pain, and Sirius looked down to see the bleeding from her stomach was worse than he first thought. She and Peter must have been attacked right as they arrived for her to have bled out so much.

"Siri . . . Sirius . . . T-Trap . . ."

"I know." He blinked through his tears as he carried her to safety, wherever that might be. "I know, Wilkes betrayed us. I'm so sorry, Mary I . . . I don't know what to do," he admitted as he pushed his way through rubble and broken glass toward the entrance where he had come in.

"P-Peter . . ." Mary whispered. "Peter . . ."

"It's okay," Sirius leant down and kissed her forehead, noting how cold she was. "Peter got out safely. He just hurt his arm. Peter will be fine."

Mary's eyes watered, and she let out another cry before moaning, "N-No. Peter . . . T-Trap."

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**May 9th, 1979**

*193,457 Grains of Sand Left*

Mia did not know why Mary's death had surprised her. As close as Mary was to the rest of them, Mia should have known that she would have died in the war. A witch like Mary would not have stood by and allowed Harry to have been raised by Petunia and Vernon Dursley. No, Mary would have died in the war. Mia should have known; she was certain a part of her *bad* known but decided to live in denial and shoved that bit of information to the back of her mind where she kept a running list of people who would not make it out of this alive.

She instead focused on those who *would*.

Sirius and Remus.

*Harry.*

Sirius had fallen into a series of nightmares following Mary's death and his first kill. Moody was actually proud of him for taking down a Death Eater and a spy, protecting one of their own in the process. He was offered congratulations by most of the Order, but Mia could see that it was destroying a part of him.

The day following the attack, Kingsley had stopped by to speak with Sirius, for which Mia was grateful because whatever the older Auror had said to her boyfriend had begun to pull him slightly out of the darkness. He was an Auror, and they were at war. People died in war. Sometimes it was kill or be killed; Mia knew that. It had been *Sirius* who had told her that when she had fallen into the same darkness following her accidental killing of Crabbe Sr at the final battle in 1998.

Unlike Dorea and Charlus, or any of the other people they had lost to the war, Mary was not going to have a funeral. She had been the only one killed that day, and the Death Eaters were aware of it. With Mary having no surviving family members, that meant the Order of the Phoenix was in charge of her burial. Having a large funeral would only draw the kind of attention that would just get more of them killed.

James, Sirius, Remus, and Peter offered to take care of burying Mary. Sirius and Peter wanted to do it themselves, being the last two who had seen her alive, but James and Remus insisted on being there to support their fellow Marauders.

"Lily and Alice aren't going either," Sirius said as Mia helped him into his travelling cloak. "Both Frank and Alice are going to be at the Ministry with Moody as a distraction. Lily, too."

Mia understood. "That's probably for the best. I don't want any of you to go, but it's . . . it's Mary, and someone needs to see her properly buried."

"Once we've caught the bastards who did this, we'll have a *real* funeral for her," Remus promised as he put a hand on Sirius's shoulder. "For now, we just need to take care of her. She had no family left, just distant relatives really. Are you sure you're okay with staying?"

"I'm fine," Mia lied. "Like you said, it's not a real funeral, just a burial. When the war is over we'll all grieve together over . . ." She paused as her chest clenched painfully. "Over *everyone* we've lost. In the meantime, we just have to keep moving forward, pick ourselves back up, and fight on."

Sirius offered her a sad smile before leaning in and kissing the corner of her mouth.  
"My ferocious girl."

"Hey, you guys ready?" James asked as he stepped out of the fireplace, followed behind shortly by Peter.

Remus inclined his head to James and then looked at Peter. "How's the arm, Pete?"

Peter rubbed at the bandage around his forearm. "Better, thanks. Healers said it might take a long while to heal. Maybe never, even. Said it must have been a dark curse that hit me."

His watery eyes flickered to Mia's exposed forearm that read *Mudblood*. She had stopped bothering to cover it up, especially when she knew Peter would be around.

Sirius sighed. "We should get going. Get this over with."

All four wizards turned to leave.

"Peter," Mia called after him. "Could you stick around a minute? I'd like to have a word."

Nervously, Peter looked to Sirius.

"It's okay," Sirius whispered. "She told me she just wants to thank you for trying to help Mary." He patted Peter on the back before looking back to Mia, who was smiling sweetly at them both.

"Uh, sure." Peter nodded. "You guys go ahead, I'll meet you there."

"Love you, kitten." Sirius smiled to Mia before stepping into the fireplace.

Mia smiled back at him. "Love you."

James leant in and kissed her cheek. "Love you, Mia."

"I love you, Jamie."

"Love you, Mi," Remus said as he passed her, kissing the top of her head before following the others into the Floo.

"Love you."

A brief moment of silence passed between the two left alone in the flat as Mia stared into the slowly vanishing green flames.

"Strange, isn't it?" Her voice broke the silence and her recently kind tone of voice turned cold. "Do you feel that? So much love. And they've always had it. From the first moment I was adopted into the family, Jamie was right there hugging me tight and calling me his sister. Sirius was right there, picking me up off the street with a skinned knee, smiling

that brilliant smile of his and offering a handkerchief. And Remus, so afraid and yet so willing to trust me. That's *love*. That's *family*."

Peter smiled and nodded in agreement. "Yeah."

"You're not a part of this family, Peter."

His eyes widened in shock. "W-What?"

Mia slowly stepped toward him, not the lion chasing down a gazelle in the brush, but rather a serpent moving toward a rat in the bushes. She did not rush at him with balled fists the way she had once done to Draco and repeatedly with Snape. She *slithered*. She was the daughter of Dorea Potter, and it would not be her *bite* that would kill . . . but her venom.

"You were given the chance, that's what I don't understand. Pureblood parents, and only *one* of whom appeared to have an affinity for the Dark Arts. Yet you didn't care much at first, did you? No. You were just selfish and greedy and eager to please so long as it kept you in the good graces of those who could protect you."

With every step she took toward Peter, he instinctively stepped back as though the room was closing in on him. "All throughout Hogwarts I watched as you lapped eagerly at my brother's feet, basking in Sirius's shadow, and praising Remus's efforts to be your friend, all while turning up your nose in disgust at the fact that he was a werewolf, or that Lily and I are Mudbloods."

Peter flinched at the word. "I-I . . . Mia, I didn't . . ." He continued moving backward until he hit the edge of the brick fireplace.

She reached up, brushing the hair that had fallen over his eyes, her hands soft, almost affectionate as if she had not been looking at him like he was something she was so eager to squish beneath her heel.

"Are you afraid now? Are you standing there, mentally going through the various ways that I could genuinely harm you? Wondering if I might have slipped something into your food or drink at any point recently?"

Peter's eyes widened.

"You know I could do it. I did it in school quite frequently. Are you wondering if I'm going to hand you a Tele-Portkey? Wondering if maybe—*just maybe*—I really *did* finally feed one to the squid? Can you swim, Peter?" The smallest hint of a dangerous grin tugged at the corner of her mouth. "Can you swim out of the belly of the beast?"

"I-I need to go . . ." Peter stammered, his body shaking.

"Yes, to put Mary in the ground."

She sighed and took a step back.

Peter let out a sigh of relief and slumped forward a bit.

"But you've already done that, haven't you?" she challenged, eyes turning on him once again. "Muggle, Muggle-born, or blood-traitor: those are the sacrificial options. How's your wound, Peter?"

"No!" Peter screamed and tried to move when she reached for his arm, but her reflexes were faster, and she grabbed at him, digging her fingers into the bandage.

"Does it need a wand to summon him here or can touch simply do it?" She squeezed harder, watching as he cried from the pain. "I think you need a wand, don't you? *This?* This probably just hurts like hell." She squeezed it again and felt a brief moment of joy when his knees buckled beneath him. "Let me ask you again, *Wormtail* . . . are you afraid?"

He looked up into her eyes and dipped his head. "Y-Yes. Please, Mia . . ."

*It would be too easy, she thought. He's right here. Kill him. Kill him. Kill him like he killed Cedric. Like he killed Mary.*

Mia mentally did the equations in her head once more. If Wormtail died, he would not become Secret-Keeper. Someone *else* would be. Not Sirius, because Sirius would still suggest that they change it. *Someone just as untrustworthy? What if they change the plans? What if Voldemort comes early? What if Lily's not there to protect Harry? What if Harry dies instead?*

*What if? What if? What if? What if? What if?*

*No.*

Mia knew she could not do it. She had to keep Harry safe. She promised James. Even if it meant losing everything else, Harry needed to live. She could not kill in cold blood. Not like *this*. Not even Peter Pettigrew.

*Every action we take is the causation of destiny, time travel won't change anything. What is meant to happen will happen regardless of how it comes to be.*

"Do you think if I decided *not* to kill you right now, that would count as you owing me a life debt?" Mia asked, releasing Peter's arm and ignoring him when he clutched it to his chest. "No. Probably not. I wonder . . . Peter, do you think if I decided to kill you for what you've done, what you're certain to *keep* doing . . . would *he* save you? Would

Voldemort even care if you died?" She snarled at him when he recoiled from the word. "Don't flinch at the name, you little coward!"

"I'm sorry, Mia," Peter said, weeping. "I was . . . You don't unders—I'm so sorry."

"So am I. I'm sorry for my part in letting you become . . . *this*." She gestured to him in disgust. "Perhaps I could have been a friend and saved you, but somehow I think it wouldn't have mattered. Sirius was raised by blood supremacists, and he fought back. Remus is classified as a dark creature, and yet he's the best man I've ever known. Jamie, well, he's more powerful than he'd ever let on, and he's the very face of goodness. You had them *all* to emulate, to look up to, to ask for help from, and yet . . ." She shook her head and looked away from him.

"Mia—"

"Let's get something straight right now, Wormtail: I don't trust you. And for some reason that apparently only Fate knows, I have, at this present moment, decided *not* to put you down." She glared at him, feeling her magic buzzing at the tips of her fingers. "You are a coward and a traitor. You're gone. After you put Mary in the ground and pretend to cry over her corpse as though *you* weren't the one that murdered her, you stay away from my family or I will finish what I began four years ago in the Shrieking Shack."

She could not stop Peter Pettigrew from betraying her brother and his family. But she did not have to look at his face over the breakfast table ever again, pretending that she did not know the fate of Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs.

*193,439 Grains of Sand Left*

## Chapter Ninety-Four

### *The Lion, The Serpent, and the Cobra*

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*It's a quarter after one, I'm all alone and I need you now.  
And I said I wouldn't call but I'm a little drunk and I need you now.  
And I don't know how I can do without. I just need you now  
(Need You Now - Lady Antebellum)*

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**June 25th, 1979**

*124,220 Grains of Sand Left*

Mia sat at the small desk inside of Gringotts, exhausted. She had been there all day, having been given the runaround before even being let into her vault so she could have some of her things moved back into the main Potter family vault. The goblin who was assisting her, Gornuk, vanished a total of thirteen times in order to discuss her plans with no less than four supervisors. She made a mental note that if at any point in the future she *did* end up working in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, it would *not* be in the Goblin Liaison Office. Her patience as Mia Potter was a great deal shorter than that of Hermione Granger.

She blamed the Marauders.

At least Harry and Ron listened to her—once or twice.

"And, Miss Potter, you are *certain* that you want to add Mr Remus John Lupin as a holder to your vault? It will grant him the ability to access, deposit, and remove all funds and property, be it Muggle, wizard, gold, *goblin-made*," at this, the little creature sneered at her, "or otherwise."

"Yes. And, as specified, in the case of my death, the vault will be strictly in his name with no need for further declaration. Zero restrictions."

Gornuk nodded at her curtly and continued filling out the paperwork.

Mia yawned while she waited, sitting and contemplating the future and reflecting on Pandora's advice. She would be the song; she would be what brought hope and courage to those who needed it. Already she had removed Peter from the equation, at least for now, thus making herself a much more pleasant person to be around. Helping Alice and Frank

with the pain of the future encounters they would have with Barty Crouch Jr and the Lestranges was checked off of her list. Now, she was at Gringotts, assigning away her personal vault to Remus, who would be the only person in the future that would need it.

With James and Lily gone and Sirius in Azkaban, she knew that Remus would have nothing. Charlus and Dorea had begun depositing money into his personal account long ago, but when Remus began controlling his own finances, he had caught that James had continued making monthly deposits, and an argument broke out involving the fragile male ego much to Mia's grating nerves. Remus had agreed to let Sirius and Mia take care of things like rent and food, but any other such "charity" was ignored on all accounts. At least this way, if Mia was declared dead—either by actually dying or perhaps eventually going back to 1998—Remus would be taken care of. He could not very well deny her dying request that he not starve penniless for fifteen to twenty years.

As she sat contemplating a way to inform her best friend of her plans, Mia felt a growing heat against her sternum. She reached into her blouse, ignoring the strange look that the goblin gave her, and pulled out the charmed Galleon hanging on the end of the chain—the very same one that James had given her years earlier for Christmas. No one in the A.D. had used it as a form of communication for years, so Mia began to panic when she looked down at the coin as it read:

*Get home now.*  
-RL

She replied back immediately.

*What's wrong?*  
-MP

The reply that came a moment later was clear.

*Sirius.*  
-RL

---

"Remus? Sirius?" Mia shouted as she burst from the fireplace, tossing her bag and cloak on the floor as she rushed forward to search the flat. When she did not find either

of them there, she began to panic until the front door opened and her best friend stepped inside looking exhausted. "Remus, what happened? Where's Sirius?"

Remus put his hands on her shoulders and took a deep breath. "Calm down."

"Calm down? You send me a message like *that* and then tell me to *calm down*?"

"Mia . . ." Remus sighed. "Sirius got a letter from his mother."

Her anger fell immediately, and she groaned. They had not heard a word about Walburga in years—not since Sirius had escaped Grimmauld Place. Despite knowing the timeline, Mia blanked on any reason why the horrible woman would contact her disowned son. "Merlin, what did that nasty old bitch have to say now?"

Remus frowned. "Sirius's father and brother died."

Her jaw dropped in shock as she remembered a long time ago when she and an older Sirius sat together at Grimmauld Place. Harry and Ron had been tearing apart Regulus's room looking for anything that R.A.B. might have left behind, specifically a Horcrux.

*"Tell me about your brother."*

*"Maybe another time, love."*

*"Was there a funeral?"*

*"I imagine so. I wasn't invited. I got a lovely letter from my mother telling me that my father and brother were both dead."*

*"That's awful."*

*"That was typical."*

*"So you didn't even get to say goodbye?"*

*"Not in the way you're thinking. I said goodbye to them all the moment they blasted me off that tree in the other room. When Reg died, though . . . I said goodbye by drinking my way through a bottle of firewhisky with a girlfriend."*

Understanding her role now, Mia walked over to the kitchen and waved her wand in the air, levitating down a large, unopened bottle of firewhisky. Looking back to Remus, she asked, "Where is he?"

"Downstairs," Remus replied, gesturing to the door. "He threatened to duel me if I tried to separate him from the firewhisky." He glanced at the bottle in her hand, and Mia could tell he was wondering if she was making the right choice.

"Sirius? Love?"

At the foot of the stairs, she lit her wand and moved through the shadows until she found her boyfriend sitting in the middle of the large room in nothing but his trousers. Sirius's long, black hair was messy and soaked in sweat as though he had just come in from running. After Remus telling her that Sirius had been looking for a duel, she was not surprised. She did wonder where the rest of his clothes were.

As she approached him from behind, she noticed that his face was angled toward his left hand, where a half-empty bottle of firewhisky was. Walking around to face him, she saw that he was not looking at his hand *or* the bottle. Instead, his focus was fixed on the old scar on his forearm, from when Lucius Malfoy tried to brand him with the Dark Mark.

Mia frowned, figuring that he was replaying that night over and over in his mind. Having seen it herself when she went into his memories through Legilimency, she understood. She had watched as Sirius, bloodied and beaten, *still* tried to convince Regulus to run away with him.

"Hullo, kitten," Sirius mumbled as he tilted his head back to look at her. "Didya hear? I'm the sole livin' heir to the Noble and Most Fucked Up House of Black."

She held out her hand as she sat down beside him. "Sirius, give me the bottle."

"No, s'mine."

"Then share it with me," she insisted. "I'm not opening *mine* until *that's* all gone."

Sirius stared at her, one eyelid half closed.

She placed a sweet kiss to his mouth, tasting the remnants of the whisky on his lips. At her touch, Sirius leant in, slipping his tongue into her mouth in an effort to deepen the kiss.

*Oh, no. That's not going to happen right now*, she thought to herself and then pushed him away.

"You've got the prettiest eyes, kitten . . ." Sirius smiled at her. "I ever tell you that? Like firewhisky." He held the half-empty bottle out to her as though to compare the colour. "Hey, your eyes aren't brown anymore. Not ever."

"I know." Mia snatched the bottle from him quickly and took a long drink straight from it.

"Since when?"

She winced slightly as her throat burned—he had chosen a cheap vintage—setting the bottle down between her legs. "The Pack Bond ritual. Even when a werewolf isn't fully

transformed, the bite can have other side effects. Weird cravings, irritability around the full moon . . . I guess my Animagus form reacted with Remus's bite and made the eye shift permanent."

Sirius paused and concentrated as though he were trying to force himself to be sober for a moment. "You never said anything before about the side effects."

"That's because Remus would pitch a fit. Does it bother you?" she asked, worried that a bit of the jealousy in Sirius would find its way out when he was intoxicated. She looked over at him with concern only to find him giggling. Actually giggling. "Why're you laughing?"

"Chocolate. That's what they used to look like," he said, snorting. "Chocolate for *Remus*. I always preferred *this*, though. Like this firewhisky colour was *mine*, and the other was . . . And somehow it took Remus sinking his teeth into your neck," he continued speaking as his hand touched her cheek and then moved down to her shoulder where his thumb grazed over the Pack Mark thoughtfully, "for your body to figure out you were always meant to be *mine*."

She did her best to ignore the way his eyes darkened and how his tongue darted out to wet his bottom lip.

*Nope*. That was not what tonight was about.

"That is strangely poetic and well-thought-out considering how absolutely pissed you are right now." Mia picked the bottle back up and held it out to him. "What should we drink to?"

Sirius snatched the firewhisky from her and held the bottle up as though to make a toast. "The end of the most pure and polluted House . . ." he said almost proudly before drinking deep from the bottle. "I'm the last of us, you know. The last Black."

"Jamie and I are Blacks." While she had associated herself as a Potter practically since the beginning of her time in the past, it had taken Mia longer to identify with Dorea's side of the family. The older she got, however, the more she noticed that somehow—despite not being blood-related—she was, in fact, a Black. The temper alone was revealing if nothing else. "There's still Andromeda and Narcissa. And the Weasleys and Prewetts are technically from the House of Black. Same with the Longbottoms."

"I'm the last of the *name* though. It'll die with me."

She furrowed her brow. "You don't want to carry it on through your children?"

Sirius barked a laugh. "You want to give our kids *my* name?"

Mia smiled smugly. "Oh, it's *our* kids now?"

"Course it's *our* kids." Sirius sighed and put an arm around her, handing her back the bottle. "I'm an agreeable sort of man these days, kitten, but you're not having *Remus's* pups."

Mia rolled her eyes and took another sip. "As long as it's not a whole litter, I think I'll be fine with birthing your spawn."

"And they'll be Potters," he insisted.

Mia disagreed. "They'll be *Blacks*."

"No, it should die with me. The whole bloody House and everything it stands for," Sirius growled under his breath.

Mia continued to argue, not knowing why, considering it was unlikely he would even remember this conversation about their future hypothetical children. "No, you should rebuild it. Make it a name that's worth something again. Make it a name Mum would be proud of."

Sirius said nothing, but tipped to the side and crawled into her lap, wrapping his arms around her waist.

She sighed and ran her fingers through his hair as she had done a thousand times since they were eleven. She wished that they could stay like this, just like this, forever. No Death Eaters, no Voldemort, no war, and no Azkaban on the horizon. *How did he do it? How did he survive Azkaban all those years? All those years without this? Without me?*

And then a darker thought came over her mind and she fought to hold back her own tears: *How am I going to survive without him?*

"They killed my brother, Mia," Sirius whispered, interrupting the silence in the darkness.

"What happened?" she asked, even though she knew the answer.

"He wanted to leave. Told me so when . . . when we were fighting." Sirius sat up and scrubbed his face with his hands. "Fucking little coward jumped into the deep end of Death Eaters and the second it got to be too much . . . You can't just *walk* out. Did he expect to just get a stupid-looking tattoo and that be the end of it when he got bored? Death Eater means for life. It means *death*. Your death. And they . . . they killed him. They killed my . . ."

Mia bit her lower lip to stop herself from crying when she heard the hitch in Sirius's throat—the way his voice began to break. She knew how much he hated crying, and if he showed what he perceived as weakness while drunk, he would likely lash out in anger and be even more difficult to control.

"Do you know . . . when he was little he was afraid of the dark. Reggie would crawl into my bed and . . . they killed him, Mia."

"When's the funeral?" she asked, hoping to distract him with busy work.

Sirius scoffed angrily. "Two weeks ago."

Mia growled, shocked. She had known that Sirius found out about Regulus's death through a letter and grieved without his family, but she had always assumed that it had been his choice to avoid the funeral. "That bitch!"

"I wouldn't have gone anyway. I hate him. He . . . So stupid."

"Maybe it wasn't because he was scared," she offered. "Maybe he wanted to finally do the right thing."

"Un-fucking-likely."

"Maybe we could pretend."

"Pretend *for* me, kitten." Sirius sighed and fell back into her lap. "Tell me a story about a brother who wasn't a . . . Just . . . make it better."

Mia ran her fingers once more through Sirius's hair and let out a soft sigh of relief when she felt him relax into her body. "Once upon a time, a family of snakes awoke one morning to find a magical gift in their home. A tiny lion cub." She smirked when she heard Sirius chuckle. "They raised him and taught him everything there was to know about being a snake. Try as he might—and he didn't try very hard—the lion cub still had claws instead of fangs, still had fur instead of scales, and still roared instead of hissed. And despite being so *very* different, the lion cub loved the smallest snake in the family, who was very much a snake in every way there was to be a snake."

Mia frowned when she felt the laughter die away from Sirius, and he went still in her arms.

"The little snake and the lion grew up together, but then they were separated by a long distance, and the lion found a pride of his own and grew into a fierce King of the Jungle."

"Don't lions live on savannahs?" Sirius interrupted her.

"Hush, you're ruining my story."

"Your story is weird," Sirius complained. "I don't think you're very good at telling it."

"Shut up. So the little cub became a fierce lion, and the little snake grew into a proper serpent, as he'd been raised to be. They became enemies and rarely spoke to one another and the venomous serpent struck out, biting and attacking the lion's friends. But he regretted it."

Sirius had once again gone still, and she wondered what he was thinking.

"One day, whilst in the snake pit, the young serpent came across a treasure that belonged to the King Cobra," she said with a grin as she recalled the moment that they had found the fake Horcrux with the note from R.A.B. inside of it. "And he stole it away and ran, hoping to share this wonderful secret with his brother, the lion. He wanted to reconnect with him so they could be a family again."

"But the cobra killed him," Sirius said, interrupting her.

Mia frowned. She had planned on changing the ending of the story, of course, but Sirius was just too smart for it. He could not be fooled by lies. Could not be swayed by fairy tales. "But the cobra killed him," she agreed.

"They found his body in the Thames on the beach up near Gravesend. Death Eaters just dumped his body there. Muggles pulled him out."

Mia furrowed her brows as she remembered the truth behind Regulus's death. His fellow Death Eaters had nothing to do with it. He had died a hero. Saved a house-elf, defected from the Dark Lord, and sacrificed his life in the end in an attempt to bring him down.

"Maybe . . . maybe he drowned."

"Yeah, and maybe he was really a good person," Sirius said sarcastically. "Too many maybes in this world if you ask me." He grabbed the bottle taking another long drink from it. She felt some of the liquid pool on the fabric of her skirt. "He wanted out. I didn't believe him."

"You couldn't have known, Sirius."

"I could have . . . I . . . just stood back and watched. I had the power to do something, anything." His voice was soft and his breath grew shallow, drifting closer to sleep. "Stead I just . . . just sat back and let my only brother die."

When she was certain that Sirius was completely asleep, Mia let out a small sob and whispered, "Me too."

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"Wake up. Moony, get your arse up."

Remus opened his eyes to darkness. "Sirius?" When his focus adjusted, he looked up into the exhausted face of his friend, who reeked of firewhisky. "Pads, what's wrong?"

"It's Mia. Something's . . ." Sirius frowned, looking desperate, and shook his head as Remus sat up. "I don't know how to help her."

Remus groaned, pulling himself out of bed. "What happened?"

Sirius made his way to the door and opened it. "I passed out hours ago, mate. Woke up, and she was throwing things all around the shop downstairs. Half of what's there is broken, and the bottle I'd brought with me is empty. *I* wasn't the one that finished it."

"And you can't deal with your *own* drunk witch?" Remus growled a little bitterly.

"I tried, Moony. Anytime she tries speaking to me she's got this . . . stutter or something. Can't make heads or tails of anything she's saying."

"Oh, fuck," Remus said, understanding completely. "All right." He opened the door to the flat and then turned around to see that Sirius had planned on following him down. "No, you go and get some rest. You've had a rough night, and you still have to work tomorrow. I'll take care of your witch."

"You sure?"

"I can only take care of one of you at a time. Go."

Sirius gave him a grateful smile. "Thanks, Moony."

"I'll bring her to your bed if I can get her to calm down." After Sirius walked away, Remus stared at the door and sighed, running a hand through his hair before descending the stairs.

He spotted broken shards of glass and winced. Suddenly, he was incredibly grateful that they had decided not to store anything of their own things down in the empty shop, with the exception of whatever had been left behind by the previous owner. He found Mia standing in the corner of the room, an empty bottle of firewhisky at her feet and another one three-quarters gone in one hand, her wand in the other.

"Mia?"

She spun on her heels and rushed over to him, wrapping her arms around his waist tightly, the contents of the bottle sloshing around. "Remus? Remus, wait . . ." She pulled away from him and looked up with heavy-lidded eyes. "Which one are you?" she asked, and he could see her trying to focus her gaze.

"Younger," he answered, already knowing what her issue was. He was glad that something like this had not happened years ago before Dumbledore set the Truth Spell on her. Considering the future of the war hung on the facts inside of her head, firewhisky was a poor decision for the witch who apparently had a very loose tongue when well-plied with liquor. "You having dreams of somewhere else, love?"

"Somewhere . . . *somewhen*." She nodded and then reached up, running her fingers through his fringe. "I miss your grey hair. You were so handsome."

"Am I so hideous now?" Remus teased affectionately.

"I love that smile." She touched his lips in an investigative manner. "You should always smile Remus . . . Even when . . . Even after . . . J-J-Ja—" Unlike when she tried to force the words out, now she was just trying to stop herself from stammering on and getting caught in the loop.

He pulled her back to his chest when he noticed tears forming in her eyes. "It's okay, Mia. You don't have to say anything."

She cried against him. "I'm supposed to be strong. Remus, I can't be strong. I'm not brave enough. I don't know what's going to happen. Am I going to die after it happens? After everything's gone and everyone I l-l-love—"

"Stop talking."

He could see how this would scare the hell out of Sirius, who had no idea that the love of his life was a girl that would not even be born until later that year. "I don't know everything *you* know, and Merlin, I wish you didn't know it either. I wish I could take it away. I don't want to get old and send you back here. I don't want you to hurt anymore. I'd do *anything* to prevent whatever it is you're going through."

She pulled away from him instantly and looked up at him with wide, amber eyes. "You have to, though. You promised me," she said in a panic-laced voice.

"I know."

On the edge of a sob, she pleaded, "Please send me back. Always send me back. Remus, don't take my life away from me. Don't take *him* away from me."

Remus could only think she meant Sirius, and he understood. It was up to him to send a nineteen-year-old girl thirty years into the past just so she could fall in love with Sirius Black—and himself at a certain point, but that was neither here nor there any longer. *Sirius* was the important part now. She needed Sirius, and Sirius *definitely* needed Mia. Remus was getting exhausted trying to take care of them both.

"It took so much to get him back," she whispered. "He lost too much, Remus. I didn't even do it for *me*, you know? At least I didn't think so at the time. I just . . . I thought of him when I saw the spell in that book, and I thought . . . Harry *needs* him, and maybe I could give that to him."

Though he had not a clue as to what Mia was talking about, he continued to stroke her hair, using his wand to clean up the broken glass everywhere before he sat down and pulled her up against him. He took the bottle from her hand and set it down next to him. "Tell me about Harry."

"I can't." She sulked. "You know I can't."

"You can tell me about him because you're not going to change anything," he explained. "That's how it works, right?"

After a long moment of silence, Mia whispered, "I miss him. He was my best friend."

Remus smirked, pressing his lips to the top of her head. "I'm hurt. I didn't realise I was so easily replaceable."

"*You're* my best friend too," she said, poking her finger into his chest.

"So what made Harry different? How'd you meet?"

"On the train. Broken glasses, *Potter* hair, and the brightest green eyes I'd ever seen."

"Lily's eyes," Remus whispered with a smile.

Mia let out a soft, teary laugh. "It was so funny. He was there with Ron—"

"Who's Ron?"

"You'll see," she said, waving off the question. "Anyway, Ron was trying to do magic to show off. Said this worthless spell over his r-r-r . . . Scab-b-b—Fuck!"

"It's okay, love." Remus wondered what on earth could have happened on the bloody Hogwarts Express that not only had something to do with impacting the future, but also angered her to such an extreme level. "Skip that part. Go back to Harry."

She took several slow, deep breaths and reached for the bottle of firewhisky. Before she could bring it to her lips, Remus snatched it from her hands and launched it across the room. The glass shattered, and the noise echoed off of the walls. Mia momentarily pouted and then sighed, leaning back against him.

"He flew his broom . . . but wasn't supposed to. Malfoy was picking on Neville."

"Alice and Frank's boy?"

"Yeah. Harry stood up for him. Brilliant."

He grinned. "And what, may I ask, were *you* doing?"

"Lecturing Harry to stay on the ground, of course. *Always* lecturing him. Them both." She yawned, rubbing her face against his chest. Likely to scratch her nose. He knew that her nose always turned red and itched when she cried. "The whole lot of them. Nothing but trouble. Sirius, too. Bloody reckless."

"What about *me*?" Remus asked. "Tell me more about me."

"So smart and brave. You t-t-taught . . . n-not to be a-f-fraid."

"Okay, it's okay," he assured her immediately before she burst into tears again. "You don't have to be afraid. I'm here. I'll always be here."

She let out a long sigh and yawned. "Mmm tired, Remus."

He slowly stood and pulled her into his arms, placing one hand behind her knees and lifting her up. Her arms fell over his shoulders, and her head tucked beneath his chin like a child's. Remus smiled fondly at how innocent she looked when just minutes ago she was a raving mess.

"Come on then, love. I'll take you to bed."

"Sirius better not hear that," she mumbled.

"Very funny." He rolled his eyes and nudged open the door to the flat, carrying her inside. "I'm taking you to *Sirius's* bed."

"Careful, he sleeps naked sometimes."

Remus grimaced as he walked down the long hallway, noting that Sirius had left the bedroom door open. "I'm aware," he said before poking his head inside the room.

Despite being utterly exhausted, Sirius had clearly waited up for Remus and Mia. He looked relieved when he saw his girlfriend calm in Remus's arms. He stood to take her from Remus, who handed her over willingly.

"Thanks, Moony."

"You owe me," Remus insisted with a yawn before walking out, closing the door behind him.

Sirius smiled down at the witch in his arms as he carried her over to the bed, placing her down on the mattress gently. "Hey, sleepy drunk kitten."

"Hey, sleepy drunk dog," Mia mumbled, tucking her hands into his hair and accidentally pulling when he set her down. Sirius winced a little and then just decided to go with it, collapsing on top of her. When she did not appear to mind at all, he made a pillow of her breasts.

"You okay now?"

"Mhmm. Remus fixed me."

"He's good at that."

"Sirius?" she whispered.

"Yeah, kitten?"

"Promise me something?"

"Anything, love."

She paused and took a long, slow breath before speaking again. "Promise me that . . . that you'll *always* trust Remus. Always remember that he'd never hurt anyone. And . . . and when he needs you the most, please take care of him for me."

Sirius frowned at the request, wondering what on earth had provoked something like that. He could not, however, find fault with the need for it. They were at war. After Mary's death, Mia was probably terrified of losing everyone else around her. Terrified that she, too, might die and leave them all behind. Sirius did not want to think about losing her. He did not want to think about losing anyone else.

"I promise."

## Chapter Ninety-Five

### *Something Old, Something New*

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*Cause it's a beautiful night,  
We're looking for something dumb to do.  
Hey baby, I think I wanna marry you.  
Is it the look in your eyes,  
Or is it this dancing juice?  
Who cares baby, I think I wanna marry you  
(Marry You - Bruno Mars)*

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**September 6th, 1979**

*19,079 Grains of Sand Left*

"Are you sure you want to have your stag party tonight?" Alice asked as she watched James, Sirius, and Remus put their cloaks on. She raised a sculpted eyebrow as James laughed quietly again, something he had been doing all night anytime anyone mentioned "stag party." "You're just not looking very well, Remus."

Remus smiled at the three witches gathered around a large round table, each with a black cauldron in front of them. "I'll be fine, thank you, Alice."

"I just mean, well, it's the moon," Alice said softly, gesturing at the window where the sun was setting. "And you two are okay with your wizards going out there with him?" she questioned, turning to Lily and Mia, who were busy pulling silverweed seeds off of the stems.

Lily was the first to look up and smirk at the boys. "Oh, I just figure that if something bad happens, I'll marry whichever one of them is left standing. I'm kind of hoping for Remus. No offence, Sirius."

"Offence very much taken, Lils. Then again, I suppose with Prongs, you're already used to a man with a tiny cock. Perhaps Moony should be the man to fill Prongs's *very* small shoes."

"Fucker," James muttered and attempted to hit Sirius in the groin, only to miss and almost trip into the table. Lily, Mia, and Alice all gasped when the bottles full of ingredients shook.

"Clumsy, Potter," Lily said, flicking him in the ear.

James lifted her into his arms. "Little witch, do you honestly think I can't take on a big bad werewolf? I'll have you know I've been wrangling wolves for years. If anyone should be worried, it's Moony over there."

"Please keep safe," Mia interrupted her brother. "Enjoy your 'stag' night," she said, rolling her eyes when he laughed again. "Yes, yes, you're very clever."

She patted James on the head before walking over and giving Remus a gentle hug, slipping a bar of chocolate into the pocket of his robes. "For the morning," she whispered, and he kissed the top of her head before passing her along to Sirius.

"You sure you don't want to come with us, kitten?"

"Nope. Hen night."

"*Boring* hen night," Sirius scoffed. "Sitting around and brewing potions. You should be drinking the night away, dancing, and ordering a stripper—"

"They should *not* be ordering a stripper!" James snapped.

"I would!" Sirius laughed. "If you hadn't decided to have your bloody stag night—" Sirius rolled his eyes when James giggled again. "—on the full moon, the three of us would be tossing Galleons at Voluptuous Victoria."

"Sirius Black, you will not go anywhere near a veela stripper," Mia said, her eyes narrowed. "Am I clear?"

"Crystal, love. Besides, why would I ever go for some *bird* when I've got my own gorgeous little *fox* at home?" He grinned before leaning in and capturing her lips. "Have fun with your potions and Lily's boring last few days as a single witch."

Mia shook her head. "Go before the moon rises."

The three slipped out the back door and Disapparated to Potter Manor and the orchards where they had arranged to meet Peter, much to Mia's displeasure. There, they would celebrate James's approaching nuptials by literally acting like animals, as per James's request.

They had spent months planning the wedding. Despite it being fairly small, the plans had taken over their lives. Lily had needed to be educated in pureblood wedding customs, something that Mia was all too willing to help with. When she was told that, according to the old ways, a bride was brought to her groom wearing absolutely nothing, Lily gaped at Mia, Alice, and Pandora, waiting for one of them to start laughing and tell her

that they were joking. When none of them did—and instead Pandora presented Lily with photographs from her *own* ceremony—she burst into hysterical laughter and threatened to elope.

In the end, Lily and James had chosen a beautifully planned ceremony that fell somewhere between Muggle traditions and the current customs of Wizarding society—dress included. The wedding was to be held at Potter Manor in the orchards, which Sirius and James were supposed to be cleaning up the morning following the full moon while Remus rested in the manor. Despite protests from her friends and fiancé, Lily invited Petunia and Vernon to the reception—but not the *actual* wedding ceremony, which would include a bonding ritual. Mia imagined that even if Petunia *could* handle some forms of magic, the ceremony was something that Lily was not willing to let her sister and brother-in-law's close-minded opinions sully.

The invitations had been sent out and, as suggested by Mia and Sirius who had seen it done before, they had been charmed as time-activated Portkeys that would bring the guests right to the manor. Frank and Kingsley offered their services as security, knowing that Death Eaters could try to use the Potter wedding as a chance to infiltrate and attack the Order. The food was all being prepared by Tilly, who had not been so happy since before Dorea had passed away.

As much as they wanted to celebrate, Mary's death still hung over them all like a flashing reminder that, wedding or not, they were still at war. When planning Lily's hen night, it was suggested that they try to get out and enjoy themselves, but with Alice needing to work the following morning, Lily not in the mood to celebrate without Mary, and Remus informing the witches that Mia was *not* to get into any firewhisky after a recent drinking binge, the witches all decided to stay in, brew potions, and enjoy a quiet girls' night in.

"All right, so we've got enough Blood-Replenishing Potion to stock the Order for emergencies . . . Invigoration Draught, Essence of Dittany," Alice said as she continued to go over the list of potions that they had been brewing all day to keep the Order well prepared, just in case. "I can start on the Pepper-Up Potion if you'd be willing to do a double batch of yours for me, Lils?"

"Not a problem," Lily replied, smiling as she added several ingredients to the brew to double up the batch. "I'll make enough to last us each three months. What're you making, Mia?" she asked as she leant across the table to look at the green liquid of Mia's cauldron.

"Sober-Up Potion," Mia confessed. "For some reason, we run out of it rather quickly at home."

Lily shook her head, smirking. Alice simply rolled her eyes as she cleaned out her cauldron, ready to start another brew.

"What're *you* making, Lils?"

"Contraceptive Potion."

Mia slowly looked up at her soon to be sister-in-law. "What's that now?"

"Contraceptive Potion," Lily repeated.

"You two use the *potion*? The charm is easier. Merlin, it was the first non-verbal spell Sirius ever perfected," Mia joked. "And I know, for a fact, that Jamie knows it. Mum drilled it into my head when I was fifteen, and I'm sure Dad did the same with him."

"Well, yes," Lily agreed, blushing. "But he's, well . . . a little forgetful when he's caught up in the moment. Besides, I enjoy making potions. I always have."

Mia watched as a strange look overcame Lily. A look of brief sadness that Mia assumed was the smallest part of her missing Snape and the friendship they once had that they could never have again. Brewing potions was Lily's way to stay connected to that part of her—the part that she just could not disconnect forever from her childhood and the one person that had bridged the Muggle and Wizarding worlds for her when she needed it.

"I understand. Still, you're going to be married. I don't see what the fuss is over keeping up with the potion."

Lily and Alice gaped at her as though she were crazy.

"Just because I'm getting married does not mean I'm about to turn into some barefoot and pregnant house-witch." Lily laughed at the thought. "I don't plan on starting a family for a few *years*."

"Same here," Alice agreed.

Mia nodded silently, not saying a word as she mentally did the math in her head.

*End of July minus average pregnancy gestation, give or take a week or two depending on the variety of an individual witches cycle, genetics and factor in . . .* She bit her lower lip nervously. November. A little over a month away and Lily just mentioned she was making enough to last three months.

Mia cleared her throat. "I don't know about you two, but I could use something to drink. Why don't you go and pick out a bottle of wine we can share, Lily? I'll put a Stasis Charm on the cauldrons, and we can go into the living room and dig into that treacle tart that Tilly made?"

"That sounds lovely." Alice beamed, setting down her stirring stick and lowering the heat on her cauldron.

"Red or white?" Lily asked as she, too, lowered the heat on her cauldron.

Mia smiled. "White."

Alice headed in the direction of the living room. "I'm going to get a head start on that treacle. You coming?"

"Be right there. Just need to add one more thing before I can leave this to brew," Mia lied and watched as both of the other witches left her alone.

*Okay, so am I a terrible friend to Lily and Alice? No, I'm an amazing friend to Harry and Neville!* Mia reasoned, nodding to herself before taking a deep breath to tap down the guilt inside of her as she reached over Lily's cauldron and dropped in a single shrivelfig, making the brew completely useless. The Contraceptive Potion turned blue for a split second before returning to its normal pink colour.

She let out a sigh of relief. Lily and Alice would never know the difference.

Mia walked into the living room to find Lily struggling to open the bottle of wine. She laughed at the sight of the redhead with the large bottle held firmly between her thighs while she wrestled with the cork on the other end.

"Are you a witch or aren't you?" Mia reached for the bottle, waved her wand, and the cork flew out of the end of it.

Lily flushed with embarrassment.

"Have you decided what jewellery you're going to wear for the ceremony?" Alice inquired. "Frank's mother made me wear this awful, gaudy tiara that I swear weighed a full stone. I'm amazed I was able to kiss him at the end; my neck felt like it was about to snap."

Lily glanced down at her hands. "I was just thinking my ring, honestly. Oh, I've been meaning to give this back to you, Mia," she said, having noticed the Potter bracelet. "I know you gave it to Sirius and he gave it to me, but I'm about to become a Potter anyway—"

"You're keeping it," Mia insisted, holding a hand up to Lily. "It's a Potter family heirloom. It should go to your children when you have them." She paused and then added with a secret smirk, "In a few years."

Lily frowned. "If it's a Potter heirloom then it's more yours than mine."

Mia shrugged. "I'll have plenty of Black heirlooms to rifle through one day."

"Oh?" Alice raised a brow. "Has Sirius proposed then?"

"What?" Mia paled. "No, of course not! I meant because my mother was a Black, not because . . . Godric. I think I'd *die* if Sirius ever gave me anything that belonged to *his* mother. *Literally* die. The woman probably cursed everything she owned to poison any Muggle-born that touches it. Thankfully, the things my mum left Jamie and me have been tested by Curse-Breakers."

Lily and Alice shared a look.

Mia glared at them. "What?"

"Nothing, nothing." Alice swirled the wine in her glass innocently. "Just interesting to note how quickly you changed the conversation from marriage proposals to jewellery."

"Technically, *you* changed it from jewellery to marriage proposals," Mia said, eyeing her friend. "I was merely changing it back."

"Do you *not* want to marry Sirius?" Alice asked.

"I need more wine for this conversation." Mia reached for the bottle. "Actually, I don't want to have this conversation at all. It's supposed to be a night about Lily. Shouldn't we be playing games?"

"Fine," Lily stated with determination. "Drinking game, then."

"I'm off the firewhisky," Mia reminded her.

"Remus told us. Wine will have to do," Lily said as she refilled each of their glasses. "Now, as the bride, I get to pick the game, and I choose 'Never Have I Ever'."

Mia groaned.

"Play it with less attitude, or I'll put Veritaserum in it," Lily threatened.

"This is cliché," Mia declared. "But fine, you're the bride. I'll go first. Never have I ever forced my friends to play a ridiculous Muggle drinking game in order to manipulate them into confessing their deepest, darkest secrets."

Lily drank from her glass with a smirk on her face; Alice followed suit even though it had not been her idea.

"Never have I ever wanted to marry Sirius Black." Lily eyed Mia daringly.

Her nose twitched, and Mia sighed, slowly bringing the glass of wine to her lips. She flinched at the high-pitched squeal that both of her friends made in response. Mia smiled slightly at their reactions. They wanted to be excited about the prospect of another wedding on the horizon. It was what girls did, looking to the future where they were all happily married with families and careers. And as much as she wished she *could* do that, Mia knew that it was not in her future. At least not for a long time. She *did* want to marry Sirius, but it was not in the plans. She would never see this *younger* Sirius in dress robes waiting for her in a charmed ceremonial circle. No, *this* Sirius had nothing in his future but heartache and dementors.

To wash the thought from her mind, Mia threw back the entire glass of wine, ignoring the concerned looks on Lily and Alice's faces. Curse Remus and his high-handed ways.

"Never have I ever had sex in the Heads Room at Hogwarts," Alice said, taking her turn and watching with amusement as Lily blushed and then drank from her glass.

The game went on innocently for another twenty minutes until Mia ran out of things that she had never done, and Lily and Alice each took turns widening their eyes as they took to challenging one another to see how risqué they could be whilst questioning Mia's history.

At the end of the hour, both had discovered more than they *ever* wanted to know about Remus and Sirius, the Room of Requirement, several broom cupboards at Hogwarts, the orchards of Potter Manor, blindfolds, Sticking Charms, and strawberry ice cream.

Late into the night, Lily brought up the bracelet again, and Mia smiled at her friend. Knowing that for some reason it was important to her, Mia reached out and took Lily's wrist and tapped her wand over the bracelet, muttering, "*Geminio*." An exact duplicate appeared in her hand.

"There," she said proudly, "now we each have one."

September 15th, 1979

*6,060 Grains of Sand Left*

James and Sirius stood at the end of an aisle beneath the orchards of Potter Manor completely hungover. The green in James's face clashed terribly with his robes. Sirius had sent Remus off to wait for the ceremony to begin, and Peter had been shoved away in an attempt to search for a Sober-Up Potion for each of them.

The night prior to the wedding found the Marauders all gathered inside of the flat, drinking into the early morning. Not in celebration, but rather to keep James from having an absolute mental breakdown. He had not been away from Lily for *one hour* before panicking over the fact that she had less than twelve hours left to decide whether or not he was actually worth marrying. It had taken all three of them to subdue him enough to get the first shot of firewhisky down his throat. Remus had suggested a Calming Draught, but Sirius had hoped that once the panic attack passed, James would be up for celebrating.

Unfortunately, they had been forced to keep James drinking all night long until he collapsed on the sofa, at which point Sirius finished off the bottle. When they woke, Sirius had a nasty headache, and James had gone right back into panic mode, but this time with a hangover.

"I can't breathe." James gasped at the end of the aisle, ignoring the way that many of the guests were staring at him, hands gripped in his hair as though he were attempting to yank it out by the roots. "Pads, I can't breathe." He released his hair and turned to grip Sirius's robes, hazel eyes frantic. "What if she doesn't show up? What if she ran away with Diggory?"

"Amos?" Sirius laughed. "Mate, she went on *one* date with him like . . . forever ago."

"Maybe he's just been waiting for a moment like this to strike," James said with a grimace. "Oh fuck. I'm gonna lose the love of my life to a Hufflepuff!"

His screaming attracted attention from the front row of wedding guests, all of whom were gaping at the display in front of them, none with more disapproval on their faces than Minerva McGonagall, who glared when Sirius turned and winked at her.

"Better than a Slytherin," Sirius suggested.

James stared at his best friend with wide eyes. "You are the worst best man in the history of weddings!" He punched Sirius in the shoulder and huffed when Sirius just laughed in reply. "You're supposed to be calming me the fuck down!"

Sirius snorted, rubbing his arm. "How the hell am I supposed to do that? It took a whole bottle of firewhisky last night to get you to relax, and even then you burst into tears, tore open your shirt, and started playing with the tattooed flowers on your chest while talking to yourself before you passed out." He snickered at the memory, still regretting that no one had brought a camera. "What the hell do you want me to do, mate?"

"I don't know, Sirius! Distract me for Merlin's sake! I don't care with what! Whatever it takes!"

"Whatever it takes?" Sirius asked with a raised eyebrow as he looked around for inspiration

James nodded frantically.

"Huh." Sirius spotted a familiar patch of trees to the left of where they were standing beside the Ministry official, who had just arrived to perform the ceremony. Sirius grinned as an idea to distract James came into his mind. "You want to know something funny?"

James let out a brief sigh of relief. "Yes. Please. *Anything*."

Sirius put his hand on James's shoulder and leant close while pointing to the small patch of trees nearby where his gaze lingered. "See that little circle clearing between those trees? Moony and I had a threesome with your sister right there."

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"You ladies ready?" Remus asked, leaning his head into Mia's old bedroom that had been converted into a bridal room.

The witches answered by appearing before him in one group, bright smiles on their faces. Alice and Mia wore the same style of dress, a deep crimson with a golden ribbon around the middle.

Mia's long, honey-brown curls hung loose and low to the middle of her back, and Remus smiled at the sight, leaning forward to kiss her cheek and whispering, "Sirius is going to go mental when he sees you."

She blushed in response and then turned around to reveal Lily in a simple white gown, her long red hair pinned up and held in place by a charmed, golden comb encrusted with rubies that matched the Potter family ring that sat on her left hand.

"Speaking of going mental . . ." Remus chuckled at the sight of his friend. "James is going to go barmy at the sight of you, Lils." He held out his arm to the bride, trying his best not to look worried, considering the last time he saw James, his friend was hungover and hyperventilating.

Her hands were shaking as her fingers gripped his. "How does he look?"

Remus just kept smiling, trying not to look strained while doing so. "He's great," he lied. Thankfully, Lily was apparently too anxious herself to notice the fib.

"Good, good." She nodded quickly, squeezing Remus's hand.

Mia interrupted them. "Just a few more things left. We have some gifts for you to honour your Muggle heritage."

"Something borrowed from me," Alice said, presenting Lily with a small, red box that, when opened, revealed a golden necklace with a ruby at the end of it. "It's from my side of the family actually. I wore this at my wedding."

"It's beautiful, Alice, thank you," Lily said, as she clasped the gold chain behind her neck.

Remus reached into the pocket of his robes and pulled out a Sickle. "I know it's not a sixpence, but it's the closest I could get considering I didn't actually know this tradition," he offered, placing the coin in Lily's hand.

She laughed and kissed his cheek before bending down to place the Sickle in her shoe.

Mia handed her another small box. "Jamie and I took care of the old and new."

Lily opened the box, nearly bursting into tears at the sight of the earrings. One earring was a golden silhouette of a stag and the other of a doe. "They're beautiful."

"He had them made years ago," Mia confessed with a smile as Lily's eyes widened. "Was going to give them to you on Valentine's Day, but he ended up punching Amos Diggory in the face instead."

Lily laughed loudly. "I remember that," she said, wiping the tears from her eyes. She took hold of each earring, looping them through her pierced ears with pride. "I was so angry with him. So, what's the new then?"

"This." Mia grinned and waved her wand over Lily's head.

The bride turned to look in the mirror. The earrings she wore were now glowing softly. "What is it?"

"Something I've been trying to perfect," Mia said. "A variation of the Patronus Charm. Those earrings will absorb all the happy memories of today, so whenever you wear them, they'll be imbued with the magic of the Patronus Charm. You could face twenty dementors and still be able to summon your Patronus as long as you're wearing them."

"I love it!" Lily shrieked and wrapped Mia into a tight hug. "All right, now what about the blue? I've got something old, new, borrowed, and sixpe—er . . . *Sickle* in my shoe. So where's the blue?"

"Sirius was left in charge of that," Remus announced, and suddenly Lily's smile faded into one of brief panic.

"Oh God, what's he done?"

"Nothing horrible," Mia said with a laugh. "We're going to head down." She kissed Lily's cheek before taking Alice's hand and leaving the room.

Once alone, Lily looked up at Remus. "Thank you, again. For doing this. I just didn't have anyone else to give me away, and I thought—"

"There's no need to thank me." Remus smiled, taking her hands once again. "The job would have fallen to Sirius or me anyway. Sirius, because he gave you *that*," he said, gesturing to the bracelet. "Which basically means he's your brother and, therefore, the Head of your House; and me because well . . ." He shrugged his shoulders. "You're Pack. And that makes you mine. Just like Sirius, James, and Mia."

"I like that," Lily replied brightly.

The two made their way downstairs and out the back door where they were greeted by a standing crowd, a crimson carpet leading out into the orchards, and a string quartet. As Lily stepped onto the carpet, glass bulbs filled with bluebell fire lit up the pathway down the aisle.

She stared at the beautiful touch of magic and beamed at the sight. "Sirius did good," she whispered.

Lily shook nervously in Remus's grip as he walked her slowly down the aisle. He could see the outline of James standing at the end, practically bouncing on the balls of his feet.

Lily's own feet ignored the tempo of the music as her steps quickened.

Remus chuckled beside her.

When they reached the end of the aisle, Lily's gaze could not be torn from James's face for all the Galleons in the world.

Had she been able to look away from her future husband, she would have noticed her maid of honour, bridesmaid, the wizard at her side, and every other guest in the marquee staring at the best man, who was sporting a fresh bruise beneath his left eye but was still smiling triumphantly.

*6,030 Grains of Sand Left*

## Chapter Ninety-Six

### *Vows and Agreements*

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*Can you feel this magic in the air?  
It must have been the way you kissed me  
Fell in love when I saw you standing there  
It must have been the way  
Today was a fairytale  
(Today Was A Fairytale - Taylor Swift)*

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**September 15th, 1979**

*6,030 Grains of Sand Left*

Mia glared at Sirius from the other side of the Ministry official and mouthed, "What happened to your face?"

Sirius grinned at her and mouthed back, "I was born this good-looking."

Beaming at his bride, James shifted from foot to foot anxiously. Lily's eyes sparkled in the sunlight. She bounced on her toes, looking like she was fighting the urge to let go of Remus and jump right into James's arms.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the Ministry official began. "We are gathered here today to celebrate the union of two faithful souls. James Potter and Lily Evans come to bind their lives and their magic, and they wish to share this event with their family and friends. In these dark times, a love like theirs will not only serve as an example for the rest of us to follow, but I believe will serve as a guiding light to a future we all wish to partake of."

Mia swallowed hard at the words.

"Who presents this witch?"

Remus stepped forward and placed Lily's hand in James's open palm. "The collective House of Godric Gryffindor." With a grin, he patted James on the back and took his place behind Sirius.

The Ministry official tied Lily and James's hands together with a golden cord before asking, "Does this couple come today with the blessings of their Houses?"

Immediately, Mia and Sirius stepped forward, each with a different coloured cord in their hand.

"I, Sirius Black, bonded brother of Lily Evans, give my blessing for my sister to wed into the House of Potter." Sirius kissed Lily's cheek before tying the black cord in his hand around her wrist, securing it to James's.

"I, Mia Potter, bonded sister of James Potter, give my blessing for my brother to bring this witch into the House of Potter." Mia placed a wet kiss on James's cheek and laughed when he grimaced. She tied the red cord in her hand around his wrist and secured the opposite end to Lily's.

Mia could barely pay attention to the words of the Ministry official as she stared at the joyous expression on her brother's face. From time to time, she would look over James's shoulder to catch Sirius winking at her. Every so often, however, Sirius would be caught staring at the bride and groom just as intently, fingering the silver chain around his neck like he used to do when he was anxious about something. Mia frowned at the sight, but the words of the Ministry official pulled her out of her concentration.

"James and Lily, these cords are symbolic of the vows you will each take, tying you to the same House and binding together your hearts, your families, and your magic. As your hands have been bound together, so shall the rest of your lives be bound together. Do you each come here this day of your own free will?"

"We do," the couple answered together.

"Do you swear upon your magic to be faithful partners throughout your lives?"

"We do."

"Do you swear upon your magic to establish between yourselves a lifelong friendship?"

"We do."

"Do you swear upon your magic to love one another without reservation?"

"We do."

"Do you swear upon your magic to stand by one another, in sickness and health, in plenty and in want, in times of joy and sorrow, in years of peace and in war?"

There was a pregnant pause as the reality of war settled upon the crowd, reminding them of the severity of the time they lived in. James squeezed Lily's hand and her eyes sparkled once more. "We do."

"Lily Evans," the Ministry official said with a smile. "Turn to your new Lord Husband and make your vow."

Everyone seemed to hold their breath. Mia remembered Narcissa's wedding and the horrible feeling of sadness that accompanied it. There was nothing of that here. Nothing but joy and pure love.

"I, Lily Evans," Lily said, "give to you, James Potter, my love, my friendship, my support, and my protection. I take your name as my own and uphold it with honour and respect. I pledge to you our firstborn child, to serve as your heir who will carry on the legacy of your House: Courage and Craft. I willingly bind myself to you until death separates us and swear this vow upon my magic. *Suscipiam illud vinculum,*" she vowed, and the black cord around her wrist turned gold.

"James Potter—" The Ministry official turned to him. "—turn to your new Lady Wife and make your vow."

"I, James Potter, give to you, Lily Evans, my love, my friendship, my support, and my protection. I willingly bring you into my House knowing that you will uphold it with honour and respect, and I vow to honour and respect you in kind. I pledge to you my wand to serve and defend you, and my life to be given for any purpose you have need of it. By Courage and Craft. I willingly bind myself to you until death separates us and swear this vow upon my magic. *Suscipiam illud vinculum,*" he said, and the red cord around his wrist turned gold.

"I now declare you bonded for life!"

Before another word could be spoken, James pulled Lily into his arms and kissed her.

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"Careful, there."

Mia grinned as she approached Remus, taking the seat beside him at the head table at the front of the marquee. It was marked by empty chairs that surrounded him and empty bottles of butterbeer at the place settings. Almost everyone in the room was on their feet, dancing, enjoying the company, and congratulating James and Lily—all but Peter, who kept his distance from everyone when Mia was near.

"Careful of what?" Remus eyed her suspiciously.

"Careful or you might bury so deep in this misery you're creating that you'll come out the other side cheerful."

He lifted a brow at her. "How many firewhiskies have you had?"

"None," she answered proudly, holding up the slender bottle in front of her. "I'm a butterbeer girl tonight."

"How come you're not out there?" Remus gestured to the dance floor where Frank was now spinning Alice around in a circle, laughing.

"How come *you're* sitting *here*?" Mia countered.

"You first."

Mia dramatically sighed, leaning her head on his shoulder. "My dance partner has abandoned me. I told him to go and play nice with the Muggles." She flippantly gestured at a round table in the corner where a miserable-looking Petunia and Vernon Dursley sat with their noses in the air as an enthusiastic Sirius attempted conversation.

"That's probably not the best idea you've ever had, love," Remus said, amusement tinting his tone of voice. "So, instead of dancing the night away in the arms of your boyfriend, you've come to keep company with the—"

"Sad sod sitting in the corner?" Mia offered, chuckling when Remus burst out laughing.

"Something like that."

"Why are you sad, my lovely Mr Moony?"

Remus sighed, taking the butterbeer bottle from her hands and finishing it off. He smiled when she relaxed against him, allowing him to settle an arm around her shoulders. "Weddings are stressful. There're so many people. Thanks for convincing James and Lily to keep it small. I know Sirius was already trying to get Andromeda and her family to come."

Mia smiled sadly, imagining how awkward it would be if Sirius's cousin had, in fact, shown up to the wedding where Remus would certainly make an awkward fool of himself trying to escape a six-year-old. "If it makes you feel any better, you had a very small wedding yourself," she whispered as she tilted her head up to awkwardly look at him.

"Are you *able* to tell me that?" he asked, raising a brow and staring down at her.

"Evidently."

"What was it like?"

Mia shrugged. "I have no idea. You didn't invite me."

"What?" He sat back. "I thought you said you and I are friends in the future."

"We are. Frankly, it didn't bother me at the time because I didn't know any better, but *you* apparently *did* and now I'm kind of annoyed with you. Future you."

"Hopefully, I had my reasons for such a slight," Remus said with a smirk.

"I'm pretty sure the two of you were just so overjoyed at finally being together that you eloped." Mia smiled, not wanting to inform him that she knew his last-minute wedding had everything to do with the war and the fact that, had Bellatrix *known* her niece was going to marry a werewolf, Death Eaters would have crashed the party and slaughtered everyone.

"Muggles suck," Sirius announced with a pout as he approached the table from Remus's other side instead of Mia's, ignoring the fact that the two were snuggled up together. "Lily's brother-in-law doesn't know who the Sex Pistols are, and I'm pretty sure he called me a hippie. What the fuck is a hippie?"

Mia pouted at him as she sat up. "I'm sorry, love, do you want to dance to make yourself feel better?"

"Yes. I'll have the prettiest witch on my arm by the end of the night," he replied with determination and took a moment to adjust his robes before walking away from the table entirely.

"Excuse me?" Mia called after him, laughing. "Did you forget someone?"

Sirius ignored her as he made his way through the large crowd, standing tall and drawing attention to himself as he moved directly across the dance floor, actually separating Frank and Alice in the process before approaching a table at the back. Very loudly, he cleared his throat. Anyone who had not seen his grand entrance turned their eyes toward him at the noise.

"Would the lovely lady care for a dance?"

Minerva McGonagall scowled at him.

"C'mon Minnie, you know you want to."

With all eyes now on her, she let out a huff and took Sirius's hand, following as he led her to the dance floor and pulled her into his arms.

"I must tell you, Minerva," he said with a grin. "I understand how good I look right now in these fancy-pants dress robes, but I have to insist that I am still a taken wizard, and so I'll thank you to keep those delicate hands of yours off my arse."

Minerva seethed with a visible fury and moved to get away from Sirius's grip, but he took that moment to dip her low to the ground, grinning when everyone around them cheered, no one louder than Remus and Mia from the head table.

"Come on," Mia demanded.

"Come where?" Remus inquired, following her as she tugged at his hand.

"You, come dance with me."

"Mia," Remus whinged.

"Aww, you're cute. You thought that was a request."

She pulled him onto the dance floor, wrapping her arms around his neck and smiling when his hands settled on her waist. "You're smiling already."

"Well, I happen to be dancing with the *second* prettiest witch at this wedding," Remus said, glancing to the right where Sirius was trying to get Professor McGonagall to twirl. Everyone stopped to watch, laughing when, after she outright refused, Sirius stopped and twirled in a circle in her stead.

Mia sighed happily, pressing her cheek against Remus's chest. "This is a good day. I'm going to remember this forever. Jamie and Lily, just like that," she said, gesturing to the couple in the corner of the room snuggled up together as they danced slowly, wrapped in one another's embrace.

"They sure do set a high standard."

"May I cut in?" Sirius asked as he appeared beside them, hand extended outward.

"Be my guest," Remus replied as he stepped back. Though, instead of gripping Mia's hand, Sirius grabbed Remus and pulled him further onto the dance floor.

Mia threw her head back and laughed loudly. Sirius entertained the crowd by dancing close to Remus, laying his head on the other man's chest, while Remus struggled to get out of Sirius's tight embrace.

Before she had a chance to return to the table, a large pair of hands gripped Mia's waist from behind, lifted her up, spun her mid-air, and caught her when she came down.

"Jamie!" Mia shrieked. "You're rotten."

"What?" James feigned innocence. "Can't a groom dance with his little sister at his own wedding?"

Mia smiled at him, previous annoyance forgotten at the look of joy on his face. "I'm so happy for you, Jamie."

"I'm so happy for me, too. How much has he had to drink, by the way?" He gestured to Sirius. "I'm shocked he can keep to the rhythm of the music."

"You'd be surprised the amount of things that man can do while properly intoxicated." After a solid minute of silence taken up by dancing—Mia was certain that James was counting steps to avoid stomping on her feet—she looked up at her brother and smiled sadly. "Mum and Dad would have been so proud of you, Jamie."

"You too, Mia."

"I love you, big brother."

"I love you, little sister."

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"Hello Petunia, Vernon," Mia politely greeted as she approached the table where the couple were sitting. She took a seat beside Petunia, knowing that she could scarcely stand the look of Vernon, let alone the stench of the man.

"I don't believe we've officially met. I'm Mia Potter, James's sister. Well, *Lily's* sister now, I suppose," she said, eyeing Petunia, who looked like she was being challenged. "I wanted to thank you both for coming. I know it means a lot to Lily to have her family here."

"Quite the celebration," Vernon responded with an irritated tone. "An *outdoor* wedding. Couldn't your family afford to rent out that mansion there for these festivities?" he questioned with a smirk on his face, clearly pleased with his insult.

"Oh, Lily and James *wanted* an outdoor wedding," Mia explained. "And that mansion there doesn't rent out, actually. Although, I wonder how much money we could make. I should talk to Jamie about it."

"What do you mean?" Petunia asked.

"The house belongs to us. James and I grew up here. That mansion is our home," Mia replied with a sweet smile. "Or, well, it was. James and Lily have their own little cottage now."

The Dursleys looked dumbfounded, which Mia discovered was not very difficult for them.

"*Grew up* here?" Petunia gaped at Mia. "So, it's just you here, then? That big house all to yourself?"

Mia could tell by the tone of voice that the woman was trying to be polite now that she was aware the Potters had money. "Oh no, I moved to London." She then pointed to Sirius and Remus standing beside James, pouring drinks for one another. "I live with those two handsome men."

Petunia blushed furiously, looking scandalised. "You live with *two men*?"

Mia grinned, half tempted to tell her, in detail, what she and those two men had done right here in this very orchard. The particular shade of red on Petunia's face was intriguing, to say the least, but nowhere near as amusing as the purple that Vernon was turning as he muttered, "shameful" and "scandalous" under his breath.

"Does your . . . *kind* always drink so much?" Vernon asked, glaring across the floor at the three wizards who had their hands raised in a toast.

Instead of answering his question, Mia waved her wand in front of the ungrateful Muggles, refilling their glasses with champagne. "Care to toast to the lovely couple?"

"I would never," Petunia answered harshly. "We're trying to start a family," she announced, placing a hand on her stomach as though she were already with child.

Mia raised her eyebrows in mock surprise. "How wonderful," she said, lying through her teeth as she remembered stories from Harry about his bully of a cousin. "Then I should toast to *you*, Petunia. To new life. May our joined families ever increase."

"Let's hope not," Vernon mumbled under his breath.

"Beg your pardon?" Mia challenged.

The large man leant forward and glared his small, beady eyes at Mia. "I said, let's *hope* not. There's enough of you people in our world as it is. I would be horrified to discover that they're—" He looked at Lily and James, who were beaming at one another. "—breeding."

Memories from her original childhood came flooding back to her. Harry and his hand-me-down clothes. Ron telling Hermione about the bars on Harry's bedroom window. The numerous birthday cakes Harry received over the summer that kept him fed when the Dursleys decided to starve him. The locks on the doors, the threats, and the mockery of birthday and Christmas gifts.

The cupboard.

The cupboard under the *fucking* stairs.

"I'd like to make an agreement with you," Mia offered, setting her glass of champagne on the table. When Vernon's moustache bristled, she held a hand up. "Oh no, see, you have no need to speak right now because I'll be saying my piece regardless of what you have to say." Her voice was calm and collected though she knew that her eyes were blazing. "I promise you, Vernon Dursley, that you will hear nothing of our world or my *kind* unless under the direst of circumstances, at which point you will be *absolutely* agreeable. If you are not, you will have *me* to deal with."

Vernon glared at her, unafraid. It was very stupid of him. "Am I supposed to feel threatened by a little girl like you?"

"Yes. You are."

When Vernon gaped at her, dumbstruck, his mouth opening and closing like a fish, Mia smiled at him.

"Mr Dursley, my own *kind* have the intelligence to feel threatened by me, and *they* have wands to defend themselves. I know you struggle with intelligence," she said plainly, ignoring the way Petunia gasped, "so I will speak slowly and use small words." Leaning across the table, she made eye contact with the man, daring him to look away from her. "Let me make something painfully clear to you: if you cause *any* member of my family a single *moment* of pain, I will use my freakish magic to go inside that little brain of yours and hollow the whole goddamned thing out."

Vernon stared at her in absolute silence.

If Mia had not seen the beaded sweat on his forehead, she might have thought that her words had not sank in. She was equally pleased that Petunia was shaking. Sitting back in her chair, Mia turned her sparkling smile on as a feeling of pride washed over her. She wished like hell that her mother could have been there to see that. She wished that *Harry* could have seen that.

Vernon and Mia were interrupted in their stare-down by Petunia's shrieks. "Oh goodness! Get that beast away!"

A large black dog approached the table, a bouquet of flowers in his mouth.

"That better not be what I think it is, Padfoot," Mia said, glaring down at the dog, who proceeded to drop Lily's bouquet into her lap. "I'm returning this," she insisted, grabbing the flowers and standing up, eager to give them back to Lily. She smiled politely

to Petunia and Vernon. "It was so lovely to meet you both, and I really do hope you take to heart what I've said."

She left the Muggles in Padfoot's capable paws, and made her way over to the newlyweds, holding the bouquet of flowers out to Lily. "Padfoot brought these to me."

"Did he now?" Lily asked with a smirk, not looking surprised at all. "How funny. I was *just* telling Sirius that there's a Muggle tradition that whoever gets the bride's bouquet is the next woman to be married. Strange that my flowers just up and disappeared right after I told that story."

Mia folded her arms and glared at her new sister.

James put his arm around Mia. "Oh, give them a break. They just want us all to be one big, happy family. Minus the Muggles."

Lily laughed and sighed. "What was I thinking? Inviting them here?"

"Were you thinking that they'd get peed on?" James asked.

A loud scream echoed around the marquee, and everyone turned to see Vernon Dursley attempting to shield his screaming wife away from the lifted back leg of the shaggy black dog.

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"Have I ever mentioned that your sister does not take too well to subtlety?" Sirius asked James with a smirk on his face as they walked through the halls of the manor.

James levitated a large trunk in front of them, filled with what Sirius presumed was clothing and other assorted items one would need for a honeymoon. "Mate, you dropped a dog-slobber-covered bouquet of flowers in her lap. What did you expect her to do?"

"I'm not good with words." Sirius sighed and nervously fingered the silver chain around his neck. "She knows it, too."

"Get it over with, mate," James insisted. "Trust me on this one. The longer you hold off, the worse you're making it on yourself."

"What does it feel like?" Sirius asked.

"What's that?"

"Being bonded."

James snorted in amusement. "You and Mia are already bonded, Pads."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "I know *that*, but you and Lily . . . You're *married*. A proper, *sealed* Marital Bond. What's it feel like?"

James stopped mid-step to actually think about the question. He sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know if I can even describe it. Relief, I guess? You know I can feel her magic now? And any questions I had before about how she felt about me . . . It's like I have all the answers. Like there's nothing stopping us. I'm gonna spend the rest of my life loving that witch."

"As it should be, mate." Sirius smiled, patting James on the back.

"Sirius?"

Sirius turned, brows furrowed, knowing that James only ever used his given name when it was important. Under the intense hazel gaze, he almost looked away. But then James gripped his hand tightly, and Sirius swallowed hard at the feel of the small box pressed into his palm.

"You found it."

James nodded. "I found it."

"Oh fuck." Sirius wanted to laugh a little, but James did not look to be in a joking mood.

"You take care of my sister. Get her safely through this war no matter what and, if by some miracle she still likes your sorry arse, marry the witch."

"I swear it." Sirius pulled his best friend into a tight embrace. "On my magic, James, I'll keep her safe."

*5,778 Grains of Sand Left*

## Chapter Ninety-Seven

### *Out of Time*

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*Time is a valuable thing  
Watch it fly by as the pendulum swings  
Watch it count down to the end of the day  
The clock ticks life away  
Didn't look out below, Watch the time go right out the window  
Trying to hold on but didn't even know  
I wasted it all just to watch you go  
(In The End - Linkin Park)*

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**September 19th, 1979**

*198 Grains of Sand Left*

The noises she was making were going to be the death of him.

Whether it was the constant worry and adrenaline fuelled by war or the euphoric high they were riding from James and Lily's wedding, Sirius could not care less. All he knew was that the witch in his bed was responding to his every touch as though her very life depended on how fast he could make her pulse race.

He bent his head down to pull the tightened nipple back into his mouth, sucking lightly as she raked her fingers through his hair and shifted her hips trying to gain friction, something that he was not allowing just yet.

Wrapping an arm around her waist, he pulled her flush against him, grinning when she hitched her leg over his shoulder expectantly. He moved south, kissing every inch of her on his way before delving his tongue into her heat and lapping at the proof of how desperately she wanted him. He worked over her with his tongue, gripping the thigh that rested on his shoulder with one hand and reaching up to knead a breast with the other.

"Sirius, please," Mia whimpered. "I need you."

He smiled, placing a tender kiss to her swollen bundle of nerves before ascending her body in a smooth, fluid motion and sliding inside her, filling her completely. Sirius hissed as the pleasure overwhelmed him, the feel of her velvety walls encasing him perfectly.

"You're very distracting. I was busy down there, you see." He grinned as he rocked against her, finding his rhythm. "And I fully intend to finish the job later tonight."

*If all goes according to plan, she'll very likely reciprocate the offer,* he thought to himself as he thrust into her slow and deep. "Mia, you feel so good . . ." He moaned loudly, increasing his speed when he felt her briefly flutter around his cock. Sirius leant down and gently nipped at her neck, shoulder, and collarbone, moving down until his teeth grazed against her breast when she arched her back.

When Mia's breaths became short and shaky, he took it as a sign to move harder and deeper, just how he knew she liked it. He lifted her thighs and settled them around his waist, silently pleading for her to lock her ankles together as he leant forward and hit her deep at a new angle that forced the breath from both of their lungs. Just after inhaling once again, he pressed forward and kissed her slow and sweet, relishing the way that her fingers dug into his shoulders, trying like mad to pull him ever closer to her, as though she could crawl into his skin.

"I love you," he breathed as he pulled away from her lips. "I love you like you can't even begin to imagine."

"I love you so much, Sirius. Come with me, love, please."

Her body and voice gripped him like a vice, her tight cunt pulling him physically into her in a way he could not escape. Her mouth whispering words of love and adoration brought him metaphorically to his knees. Merlin help him, if all went according to plan, the witch would be his fiancée by the end of the night.

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*81 Grains of Sand Left*

After deciding to have a romantic night in, Sirius left the flat to pick up dinner from a Muggle take-away place on the other side of the Leaky Cauldron while Mia was instructed to dress up. She had laughed at the idea of dressing up for a cheap night in, but Sirius was insistent, and she was all too willing to go along with whatever plans he had in store,

especially with the promises he had made in the throes of passion to finish a few things previously left unattended.

Mia took a nice, relaxing bath, and then wand-dried her hair—marvelling at the fact that it was nearly the length of Pandora's—thrilled that somehow she had been able to tame the frizz over the years. Securing the mane of honey-brown locks to the side with a loose plait, she slipped into a pair of dark green hot pants and threw on Sirius's old Quidditch jersey while she searched for something dressier in their shared closet.

Once she had found a slender, black dress and set it down on the bed, Mia reached into her old Hogwarts trunk in search of the silhouette earrings that Sirius had given her years ago for Christmas. It had been a long time since she had worn them, and she recalled putting them away in a jewellery box before leaving Hogwarts.

Finding the small wooden box, despite the Notice-Me-Not Charm she had placed on it, Mia waved her wand to remove the Locking Charm and opened it in search of her earrings. What she found instead was the old Time-Turner. She pushed it aside casually, wondering if she had placed the earrings beneath it.

As she moved the hourglass aside, she blinked at the sight of the sand.

*Moving* sand.

Mia did a double take as she lifted the Time-Turner out of the box by the long golden chain it was secured to. *That's not possible*, she thought as she noticed that instead of the blue grains of sand being frozen in place at the top of the hourglass, nearly *all* of the sand was flowing freely at the bottom.

Pulling the object closer for inspection, Mia tipped it upside down only to see that the blue sand remained unaffected by gravity. She observed closely, carefully, as she watched one very tiny grain of sand fall through the centre of the hourglass.

"What's the rate?" she asked herself in a frantic whisper, rushing to the side of the bed where Sirius kept an old pocket watch that her father had given him for his seventeenth birthday. Clicking the watch open, she stared at the hourglass in her hand and timed the sand.

"No," she said on a panicked breath minutes later. "On the minute. Why on the minute?" She stood and paced around the room in a panic, Time-Turner clutched tightly in hand. "Why did it start? *When* did it start? What's it counting down to? Fuck!"

Her eyes widened as her gaze landed on a calendar hanging on the wall. It had been purchased to remind them all of the plans leading up to James and Lily's wedding, but there it was, as clear as day. It had been years since she had even thought of the date as anything more than just another secret.

She felt a tight pressure in her chest and sobs immediately began wracking her body. How had she not realised it sooner?

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*62 Grains of Sand Left*

"Kitten!" Sirius called from the other room. "I know you think Divination is rubbish, but these fortune cookie things are hilarious. Do Muggles really think this works? I just opened one that says, 'Your infinite capacity for patience will be rewarded.'"

He set the bags of food on the dining table and yelled, "Mia! Come eat!"

When there was no reply, Sirius made his way toward the bedroom, opening the door and poking his head inside. "Mia, I brought dinner and—Mia?"

He stared down at the floor to see his witch cradling her knees to her chest and sobbing, gasping every few seconds as she struggled to breathe.

"Shit, Mia!" He knelt down beside her immediately. "Love, what's wrong? What happened?"

Wet, amber eyes looked up at him, and she let out a loud cry when he touched her cheek.

"Please don't hate me," she pleaded. "Please forgive me. I'm so sorry, Sirius, I'm so sorry."

Sirius swallowed hard. "What did you do, love?"

"Nothing," she answered, and the word seemed to make her cry all the harder. "I didn't do anything. I *couldn't* do anything. I wanted to, I promise you, I did. I wanted to fix it all. Fix everything. But I did the calculations, and I even asked a Seer . . . and when I tried to do *something*, it blew up in my face!"

"Calm down, love." Sirius pulled her to his chest and rubbed circles on her back. He had not seen her like this since the night she drank too much firewhisky and started

rambling downstairs. A part of him wondered if he should send an emergency Patronus to Remus. Somehow he had a way of talking her down when she got like this. "Whatever it is, we'll figure it out, yeah?"

"No, no, no . . ." Mia pulled away from him. "I can't. I don't have time. There's not enough time. I wasted it all, Sirius, I wasted eight years."

Sirius stood up as she rushed out of the room. "Mia! Wasted eight years? Wasted it doing *what?*"

"Doing nothing, everything . . ." she muttered, digging her fingers into her curls and gripping tight as she paced around the room.

"Are you . . . ?" His hand hovered over his pocket where a small, square bulge sat. His heart rate picked up dramatically, and he nervously bit the inside of his lip. *Fuck, did she find out?* he wondered to himself. Did she know what he was doing and this was her way of saying no? "Are you saying you wasted time with . . . with me?"

"Yes!" she snapped. "No! Not like . . . I should have b-been t-trying to s-s-sa . . ."

Her stutter set something off inside him.

"What're you hiding?" he demanded, and the look of fear on her face at his question gave him the answer. Whatever it was that she was hiding, it was important. And it was *big*.

"I can't tell you. If I try I'll just pass out," she said. "I want to, Merlin, I want to tell you everything."

"Then tell me!" Sirius barked. "Fuck! Are we *ever* not going to have secrets between us?"

"Yes! One day you and I will tell each other everything, but that's not for y-y-y—"

"Years?" He blinked rapidly. "Were you going to say *years?* As in, you're going to keep secrets from me for fucking *years?*!"

"No, no, no." Mia rushed forward, wrapping her arms around his waist and clinging to him tightly. "Sirius, please, you don't understand. I don't have time to explain. I should have fought harder. I should have tried; I wanted to try but I could only think of H-H-Har—But now it's up to you. Sirius don't t-trust W-W-W—Shit!"

Sirius was barely paying attention, too caught up in the fact that the love of his life was not only still keeping secrets, but had apparently planned on doing so for years.

"Not the future . . . not the future," Mia mumbled over and over. "Maybe the past . . ." she whispered to herself and then turned with a bit of hope in her eyes. "Sirius, the Shrieking Shack. The first time we were there. Instincts. Trust your instincts."

"My instincts are telling me I need some fresh air," Sirius growled, shrugging her hands off of him as he reached for his leather jacket.

"No!" Mia screamed desperately. "Then trust *my* instincts!"

"I'm having a little trouble trusting *anything* about you right now, Mia."

"Sirius don't leave, don't leave . . . Please!" she yelled after him as he opened the door to the flat. "Sirius, don't leave me!"

"I'll be back in an hour or two, Mia. I need to . . . Fuck. I need some time to think."

"Sirius!" Mia cried as he Disapparated at the foot of the stairs.

She sobbed and rushed back up the stairs in search of her wand. The moment the vinewood was wrapped in one fist, the Time-Turner in the other, Mia shouted, "*Expecto Patronum!*" and watched as a silver fox emerged from her wand, turned, and waited for instruction. "Remus! Help!" was all she yelled before the little fox-shaped Patronus darted away.

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*10 Grains of Sand Left*

Remus Apparated at the foot of the stairs and hastened up to the flat as fast as possible. He had not even bothered to grab his recent purchases at the apothecary when the little fox Patronus darted through the door of the shop, opened its mouth and screamed, "Remus! Help!" He had vanished on instinct, leaving his things behind.

When he practically kicked through the front door, expecting the worst, he found Mia kneeling on the ground trembling, her eyes red.

"Mia?"

She turned her head up and, at the sight of him, burst into a fresh set of sobs before rushing into his arms. "Remus, he's gone."

"What?" he asked, pulling her away from him. "Who's gone? What happened?"

"Sirius left. We fought and he . . . He didn't understand, and I couldn't tell him because Dumbledore—"

"Have you been drinking? Mia, whatever's wrong, I'm sure we can fix it."

"No." She shook her head. "It can't be fixed. It's all broken and I didn't fix it. Remus, I'm so sorry. He'll never forgive me. How can he forgive me for not changing it all? For not stopping Voldemort from k-k-k—"

Remus flinched at her open use of You-Know-Who's name, not because of his own fears, but because it had become a habit picked up from the rest of society. "Mia, we've talked about this. You know you can't change the future, and whatever happens is *meant* to happen. We'll figure it out together, but no one is going to hate you, especially not Sirius. Just give him some time to cool off and I'm sure it'll all work out."

Mia held up her left hand.

"What's that? Is . . . ?" His eyes widened and a cold chill ran through his entire body, the feeling sinking into his heart. "Mia, is that what I think it is?"

She opened her palm to show the Time-Turner, with only a few grains of sand left in the top portion.

"It's moving. It wasn't moving before," he said, swallowing down the panic that was quickly rising in his chest. "Mia, when did it start moving?"

"I'm guessing about nine months ago, but I only just found it."

"Why's it moving?"

"Because there can't be two of me," she explained. "Today's my birthday, Remus."

"Your birthday's in March," Remus corrected, shaking his head.

"Mia Potter's birthday is the twenty-seventh of March, but Hermione Granger was—*will* be born on the nineteenth of September, 1979."

Remus held his breath. "What time?"

"One after ten," she whispered, a look of utter defeat in her eyes.

Remus pulled his pocket watch from his robes and clicked it open.

"Oh, shit," Remus muttered and then looked at Mia who stood frozen, one hand gripping her wand, the other the Time-Turner. "What's going to happen?"

"I don't know," she replied, shrugging her shoulders. "The last time I used a Time-Turner, when everything ran out, time caught back up with itself. But that was just hours, no more than three at a time. It's been eight years. Remus, I could just . . . vanish."

"No," he said, trying to think of something, *anything* to fix this. He quickly did the first thing he could think of and pulled the chain of the Time-Turner from her grip, looping it around her neck.

"What are you doing?"

"Saving you. It's my job, right? *I* send you back. You said that it wasn't just a Time-Turner; it was a Portkey that brought you here into the past."

Mia nodded.

"Then I'll figure out how to layer the spells," he promised her. "I already know the date you get sent back, and now I know the date you have to . . . have to leave," he said, fighting his own set of tears that were threatening to emerge. "I'll set a time-activated Portkey to go off on the nineteenth of September, 1979 at exactly one minute after ten. I've got . . . I've got nineteen years to figure out how to do it."

Nineteen years. "Oh Merlin, nineteen years. Nineteen years without . . ." Remus looked down at the witch, holding back the tears that were building in the corners of his eyes. "Without you." A part of him wanted to pull the chain back and vanish the Time-Turner entirely. "How am I supposed to live nineteen years without you?"

"Fourteen." She wrapped her arms around him tightly. "Remus, I love you," she mumbled through her sobs. "You're my best friend, and I love you. Please take care of him. Remember what I said: trust Sirius. Always Sirius."

"I promise," Remus said, holding her as tightly as possible, a part of him wondering if he could just go *with* her. But no, he had a promise to keep. "I'll see you soon, yeah? You'll get your handsome, grey-haired werewolf back."

Mia sobbed as she pulled away from him. Standing on the tips of her toes, she leant up and kissed his cheek. Then, with a flourish of her wand, she summoned her Patronus. The little fox blinked wide eyes at them both before focusing on her.

"Sirius, I'm so sorry. Please remember that I love you. I love you more than anything, Sirius, and I'm so sorry that I—"

Before she could say another word, a bright blue light enveloped her, and when it faded, she was gone.

---

Sirius thought about going to the Leaky, but that would have been the first place Mia would have looked for him, and after that fight, he needed to clear his head before he saw her again. The witch put him on edge. He thought he had adequately prepared for proposing to the girl, but he certainly had not expected panic to rise up inside of him the way it had. James's reaction the night before and the day of his wedding suddenly made more sense.

Sirius was putting his heart and soul on the line.

He had only seen someone do something similar twice in his life. The first had been a year ago when James proposed to Lily. The "yes" was barely out of her mouth before James was spinning her around in his arms, a look of relief in his eyes. The other time had been at Hogwarts when Remus sent the Letter of Intent to Mia. Sirius knew that he had been the cause behind it and, in the end, despite making the choice for themselves, it was the Soul Bond that brought Mia back to him. But she had burnt Remus's Letter in front of everyone, as was the custom.

Sirius worried that somehow she would burn *him*, too.

"A pint for everyone, on me!" a tall, dark-haired man shouted as he burst through the doors of the nearly empty Muggle pub.

The five or six people actually there all cheered, and the bartender nodded to the man before proceeding to fill up several glasses, handing the first to the Muggle who was grinning from ear to ear.

Sirius looked at the bloke, raising a brow. "Your team win a game or something?" he asked, still not knowing enough about Muggle sports to be more specific than that.

"Better! My wife's in labour."

Sirius snorted in amusement. "No offence mate, since you just bought me a drink and all," he said, glancing at the pint as it was placed in front of him. "But if you're about to have a baby, why're you in a pub?"

The Muggle drained his entire glass in one go and then nodded to the bartender to refill it. He let out a shaky exhale and laughed a little hysterically. "It's been a long day. Doctor says it'll still be a while, and Helen, my wife, said I was making her more anxious by pacing around the room. Ordered me out. Said if I passed out from nerves when the big moment came, she'd break my nose. Said to get a drink in me while she was still allowing it."

"Sounds like my kind of woman." Any girl that threatened to break someone's nose was good in Sirius's book. "Well, in that case, two shots of firewhisky," he said to the bartender.

The bartender raised a brow. "That some new brand? I don't think we carry it, mate."

"Regular whisky, then. One for me, and one for the new father here," he said, gesturing to the Muggle beside him.

"Thanks," the man said brightly and extended a hand to Sirius. "Richard Granger."

He accepted the outstretched hand with a nod. "Sirius Black."

"Sirius?" Richard laughed. "That's your *name*?"

Sirius shrugged, more amused than insulted. "Family tradition."

"Interesting family," Richard muttered with a slight smirk. "No offence, of course," he added before taking a sip of his beer.

"None taken," Sirius assured him. "*Shitty* family. Glad to be well rid of the lot." He shoved the images of his parents and Regulus into the back of his mind and tried to summon up visions of his *real* family: James and Lily, Mia and Remus, even Peter, wherever

the fucking prat was these days. He had shown up for the wedding under threat of violence and then vanished right after the vows.

"Is that why you're drinking alone?" Richard asked curiously.

Sirius rose a brow. "Do you often ask total strangers details about their personal lives?"

Richard shrugged his shoulders. "I pride myself on being a bit of a know-it-all. Can't know it all without asking first, can you? Plus, you don't look to be drinking to celebrate."

"*Should* be celebrating right now." Sirius sighed defeatedly. "Instead of a drink in my hands, I should have my girl."

"Break up?"

"No. I got angry over something and stormed out. So she'll be bloody pissed at me for a while. She's always pissed at me." He laughed and raked a hand down his face. "All the fucking time. Screams like she just discovered she had lungs."

Richard chuckled. "Sounds like most women I know. What'd you do?"

Sirius withdrew a small velvet box from his pocket and popped it open, setting it on the counter revealing the silver-banded ring. The silver swirled and curved into a pattern similar to an infinity symbol, coated in diamonds. Then there, at the centre, rested a massive opal.

"My God, man." Richard gaped at the ring. "Maybe *you* should have bought *my* drink."

Sirius snorted and closed the box, slipping it back into his pocket.

"So she said no?"

"Didn't even get to ask. I walked in the room and a fight just happened out of nowhere. Halfway through, I nearly thought about throwing the thing at her and screaming, 'See? That's what I think about the future. You fucking happy now?'"

"Romantic," Richard retorted sarcastically.

"I do what I can. Never been good at the romance stuff. Not with this one." He briefly thought of Remus and wished to hell that he would have asked Moony's advice on how to propose. At the time, he thought it might have been weird, being her ex-boyfriend and all, but Sirius was scolding himself for it now. "She sees through all the bullshit. Can't come up with a good way to ask her to marry me."

Richard nodded as though he genuinely understood. Sirius wondered why *all* Muggles could not be this understanding and friendly. No, there just *had* to be arseholes like Vernon Dursley existing in the world.

"I spent six months trying to get up the nerve to ask my Helen," Richard mused. "And then another four months trying to figure out how to do it. In the end, I took her on a trip to Sicily." He leant back against the counter, resting his elbows there as he told the story with a grin on his face. "We took in a show, dinner at a fancy restaurant, then I bought her this antique collection of Shakespeare works. Tied the ring on a ribbon bookmarking her favourite sonnet. *That's* how you do romance, my friend."

"Wouldn't work for me," Sirius said with a smirk. "The books sure, but my girl *hates* Shakespeare. Some other bird sent me a poem back in school, and my bird lost her bloody mind over it. Eyes flashed, hair sparked, and then she cursed her and any other girl that blinked my way twice." Sirius said the words and then immediately swallowed hard, realising that he had just said several Wizarding terms to a Muggle.

Richard simply laughed. "You got yourself a spitfire there."

Sirius let out a sigh of relief and joined his new friend in laughter. "You have no idea."

"So why the hesitation to marry her?"

Sirius shrugged and threw back the shot of whisky, making a face when it did not burn right going down. "It's complicated. She's keeping secrets."

"Everyone does."

"She keeps *a lot* of secrets, mate," Sirius said, reflecting back on all of Mia's scars, the strange way she started stuttering out of nowhere in the past year or so, her vague references and unwillingness to talk about the future, the crazy way she would burst into tears around certain people—not to mention her outright disdain for Peter that went above and beyond what the little tosser deserved for spying on her once back in school.

"You think she's got another bloke?"

Sirius shook his head immediately. "No. She's only ever been with . . ." *Remus*. "We're supposed to end up together, y'see. Destiny or something stupid like that. Between knowing that she's *it* for me and her not telling me the truth, I feel like all my choices have been taken away. Like fate expects us to end up together, but it failed to mention how that's supposed to happen."

"But you bought a ring," Richard pointed out.

"I *got* her a ring," Sirius corrected. "It's an old family heirloom of hers. Belonged to her mum's mother. She lost both of her parents within the last few years and then her brother got married last week."

"So, did *fate* find the ring for you?" Richard asked.

"No. Her brother found it. I'd asked him for his blessing, and he said he would help me."

"If fate was forcing you to be with her, do you really think you'd have the ability to be sitting here drinking away your worries?"

"Point taken," Sirius conceded, scooting back from the bar. "Guess I've got a proposal to plan."

Richard chuckled. "I'd plan the *apology* first."

"Nah. Sex is better when she's still a little ticked off at me," Sirius said with a devious grin.

"Speaking of a good shag," Richard said, looking down at his watch. "I better head back to the hospital to deal with the consequences of one of mine. But first, one more shot of whisky for my new, soon-to-be-engaged friend," he said to the bartender, who gladly refilled the small glasses as Richard placed Muggle money on the counter. He reached for the second glass and handed it over to Sirius. "Cheers. To Sirius and . . ."

"Mia," Sirius said with a smile.

"Sirius and Mia!"

"And to the expectant father," Sirius said before throwing the cheap whisky down his throat.

"Cheers, mate," Richard said with a grin and drank down his shot. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a daughter to meet."

The two walked out the door together. Sirius held out a hand to the Muggle, who took it with a smile, shaking it eagerly with a stupid grin on his face. Sirius wondered if he would *ever* be as happy as this simple Muggle, all over the birth of a kid.

"Got a name picked out yet?"

Richard's grin faded into a soft smile. "Hermione."

Without another word, the two separated. Once out of hearing distance and nearing the Leaky, Sirius chuckled under his breath. "And he thought *my* name was stupid. Poor girl."

He shook his head as he laughed, once more tapping the small box in his pocket to make sure it was still there.

He could do this. He could do this.

"Evenin' Tom." Sirius nodded a greeting to the man as he passed through the pub, walking out the other side toward the large brick wall that opened into Diagon Alley. As he tapped his wand on the combination of bricks, a swirling silvery mist appeared in front of him. He turned, wand held out as the mist formed itself into a very familiar corporeal Patronus.

*"Sirius, I'm so sorry . . ."* the fox said in Mia's voice. *"Please remember that I love you. I love you more than anything, Sirius, and I'm so sorry that I—"*

The words ended, and the Patronus vanished. Sirius stood there feeling like his world had just come to a crashing halt. Unconsciously, he touched his chest. Something felt . . . wrong.

That did not sound like an apology. That did not sound like a declaration of love.

That sounded like . . . goodbye.

## Chapter Ninety-Eight

### *Denial and Defection*

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*Tell me how I'm supposed to breathe with no air  
If I should die before I wake  
It's 'cause you took my breath away  
Losing you is like living in a world with no air  
(No Air - Jordin Sparks)*

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**May 19th, 1980**

He reeked of firewhisky.

He *always* reeked of firewhisky these days.

Sirius sat in the back of the circular drawing room, half-lidded eyes set toward the front where Frank went over the details of an approaching mission. James stood beside him as the two took charge of the meeting while Moody and Dumbledore lingered in the other room, potentially discussing the most recent Death Eater attacks where Benjy Fenwick and Dorcas Meadowes had been murdered. Losing Dorcas was the reason that headquarters had been temporarily relocated to Potter Manor. Tuts Tower had been *her* home and, upon her death—and the death of Fenwick, her Secret-Keeper—the Fidelius Charm wore off, and the Order was forced back into hiding elsewhere.

James had stepped up, opening his childhood home.

*Their* childhood home.

Of course it now *completely* belonged to James, since Mia had been pronounced dead five months ago.

Following her disappearance at the end of September, the Order kept the search for Mia very hush-hush as per Dumbledore's request. Sirius and Remus were both questioned under Veritaserum, and Dumbledore insisted that *he* be the one to ask questions. James and Lily were summoned home early from their honeymoon, and James had gone into overdrive trying to find his missing sister. When no clues showed up, Sirius went behind Moody and Dumbledore's backs and started his own investigation into the disappearance of his witch.

Arthur Weasley was first on his list, knowing that the redhead and Mia had been friendly. Arthur was shocked to hear that she was missing, having been told through the rumour mill that she had been promoted to another department, though he was not quite sure which one or even from whom he had heard the rumour. Sirius suspected signs of Obliviation.

Laurel Greengrass had been next on his list, and the blonde heard a similar tale, only one that involved Mia and Sirius eloping in some romantic getaway. When he informed her that Mia was missing, Laurel did what most purebloods of her station did: she threw money at the problem. Unable to do much on her own, she hired multiple private investigators, including two Muggles, despite the disapproval of her husband.

When Laurel and Sirius caused enough of a stir, the *Daily Prophet* picked up the story. The copies of the *one* printing about Mia's disappearance all but vanished the following day. Immediately afterward, an Order meeting had been called where Moody announced the search was being called off, and that Mia was dead. No more information was given to them, just that she had been on a mission of her own decision that ended badly. Save for the few friends she had at the Ministry, the Order, and their pack, Mia Potter might as well have never existed in the memories of the Wizarding world. Her name became something almost forbidden during Order meetings, and anytime Sirius brought her up, he was asked to step outside or accused of selfishly forgetting that the war had not ended with his loss.

James was utterly devastated. Lily and Alice were heartbroken. Remus secluded himself in his room for weeks at a time, only coming out for the full moon or to occasionally eat and attend Order meetings.

Sirius had gone into a mad rage and attacked Alastor Moody in the middle of the Ministry Atrium, surrounded by hundreds of people. He very publicly quit his job as an Auror by threatening to shove his badge down Moody's throat and was subsequently arrested and detained by wizards who, up until moments before, had been his co-workers. Grief-stricken, Sirius spent three weeks in detainment, which was apparently how long it took for Moody to calm down and drop the charges against him.

After his release, Sirius did nothing but try to drain both his Gringotts vault and the United Kingdom's supply of firewhisky in order to bury his pain.

There had been only one small light in the darkness of Sirius's world.

"Calm down."

He felt a soft hand reach up and run fingers through his hair and he took a slow breath, realising that he had apparently been growling protectively while staring at the front of the room. The fingers in his hair helped to calm him somewhat, but they felt wrong. He wanted to lean over to the side and place his head in the witch's lap, but there were two large problems: one, the witch was not Mia; two, there was no lap to lie on.

Sirius smiled sadly at Lily, grateful for the attention she gave him considering he was always such a mess. No one else was willing to put up with him these days save for James, Remus, and Peter. But even then, his fellow Marauders did nothing but enable his drinking problem or scold him for it. On the other hand, Lily gave him a purpose for the life he was certain he had all but lost.

His focus drifted to his right hand resting protectively on her expanded abdomen, where his godson was furiously kicking from the inside.

"He's gonna be a Beater," Sirius said with a small smile.

Lily rolled her eyes. "God help me."

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### **Five Months and One Week Earlier...**

Despite it being close to Christmas, not a single decoration had been displayed at either the Diagon Alley flat or Potter Cottage. It was the first time that the family had not put any thought into the holiday, and most could understand why. Mia's disappearance created a standstill in their lives. Lily did her best to keep up strength for the rest of them, but taking care of James through his panic over his missing twin was hard enough, let alone dealing with a stressed out werewolf and an alcoholic Animagus.

She had been overjoyed when, after months of keeping to himself following Mary's death, Peter came back to the Marauders following Mia's disappearance. At the time, his presence seemed helpful, but in the end, all Peter had done was enable Sirius's drinking to even more unhealthy levels. Not only that, but without Mia there to temper Sirius's aggression, he was getting out of control, especially with his fellow Aurors and superiors, who were not putting enough effort into locating Mia.

Lily finally snapped that morning when, after being sick for over a week and waking up to find her husband missing from her bed once more, she took the Floo to Longbottom Keep to find Alice under the weather as well. It had not taken a N.E.W.T. in Charms—though Lily and Alice each had one—to find the particular diagnostic spell to discover what was wrong.

Alice had been thrilled, and Lily stood by with tears in her eyes as her friend related the news of their impending parenthood to Frank, who promptly fainted.

When Frank wrapped his arms around Alice, shouting gratitude to Merlin, Lily officially had enough. She stormed in a rage toward Alice and Frank's fireplace, her friends on her heels as she tossed powder into the grate and screamed, "Ninety-three, Diagon Alley!"

On the other end of the Floo, she found the small London flat in absolute disarray. She shook her head at the sight of the place that she knew would have sent Mia into a violent fit. Not a single Cleaning Charm had been cast in weeks, and the place absolutely reeked of liquor. Empty bottles littered the counters, and there were cigarette burns on the sofa and carpet.

Storming down the hallway, Lily stopped in front of Remus's bedroom knowing it was pointless to even check the back bedroom; Sirius had not slept there in weeks. Her temperamental magic blew the door off the hinges, and her angry gaze settled on the pile of wizards in the centre of the large four-poster bed.

Remus and James were leaning against one another near the headboard, Sirius draped across their laps. There was a witch-shaped gap between the three of them that made Lily clench her eyes tightly, forcing the sadness back down somewhere behind the nausea that was threatening to resurface.

Not a one of them had moved even when the door fell, telling her exactly how much they had been drinking the night before.

She stepped into the room and viciously kicked the leg that was peeking out from beneath the bed. "Get up!"

Peter crawled out from under the bed frame, wincing from the pain in his shin.

"You were supposed to be *helping* them, not making things worse!" she snapped and felt mildly victorious when Peter looked properly shamed.

"*Agnamenti!*" She aimed her wand at the bed and watched as the men jolted awake, coughing and squirming in a tangle of limbs as they fought against her attack. "Get up, all three of you!"

Sirius glared at her as he pushed his wet hair off of his face. "Go away, Evans."

"No." She approached the bed, smacking Sirius in the back of the head before turning her glare toward Remus and James, who both looked painfully hungover. "You are *not* the only ones who are sad, but you *are* the only ones drowning in it, and I will not let my family be destroyed like this!"

"Lils . . ." James groaned, rubbing his forehead. "Can you at least find us a Sober-Up Potion before you start screaming?"

"Sober-Up Potion?" she asked incredulously. "I'm pregnant, you idiot! How's *that* work for a Sober-Up Potion?"

As it turned out, it worked quite well.

"You're . . . You're . . ." James stared at her with wide, red-rimmed eyes. "You're pregnant? Are you . . . ? Are you sure?"

Lily nodded, her anger dissipating as tears filled her eyes. "Alice and I did the charm about an hour ago. *She's* pregnant, too." She stared at James, watching with butterflies in her stomach as she waited for any reaction. When he jumped up from the bed and pulled her into his arms, she let out the heaviest sigh of relief and then promptly began to cry.

"Not that I'm not thrilled, because I absolutely am," James said, smiling as he pulled away from her, "but I thought you were on the potion?"

"We thought so, too," Alice said with a chuckle from the doorway. "Lily made a three-month batch during her hen night. We must have had too much to drink and forgot an ingredient."

"You were both in the Slug Club, though," Remus said, finally speaking after the shock of Lily's news began to wear off. "I've seen Lily brew a Pepper-Up Potion in her sleep. Literally." He smiled at the memory. "Are you—Wait, did you say you brewed the potion at your hen night?"

"Yes. Why?" Alice asked.

Remus's eyes widened as he turned and stared at the witches' still-small stomachs. "Oh, shit." When everyone turned and stared at him, he fumbled over his words. "Oh,

umm . . . just . . . wow . . . pregnant," he mumbled and then stood up, walking over and hugging Lily. "Congratulations, Lils."

James turned around, his face alight with happiness. "Did you hear, Pads?" he asked with a hearty laugh. "I'm going to be a father. What do you think about that?"

Silently, Sirius stared at Lily's abdomen. His emotions spun around inside of him, and he could not grasp any one at a time. Joy and fear seemed tied together, but it was devastation that felt most present. Despite knowing better, Sirius felt as though something else had been taken away from him.

*"You want to give our kids my name?"*

*"Oh, it's our kids now?"*

*"Course it's our kids. I'm an agreeable sort of man these days, kitten, but you're not having Remus's pups."*

*"As long as it's not a whole litter, I think I'll be fine with birthing your spawn."*

*"And they'll be Potters."*

*"They'll be Blacks."*

"Pads?"

Pulled from his memories, Sirius looked up at James and blinked, swallowing back the emotions that were threatening to erupt from within him. Out of habit, he tugged on the silver chain around his neck. The action was caught immediately by everyone in the room, and their smiles faded into awkward looks of concern. Automatically, Sirius let go of the chain.

James leant forward and put a hand on Sirius's shoulder, a look in his eyes said that he was fighting through the conflicting emotions as well. James had lost too much in too few years. Both of his parents, too many friends, and now his sister. Then, somehow in the middle of all of this death and darkness, someone was giving him a light at the end of the tunnel.

"You'll be godfather, yes?" James asked with a crooked grin.

Sirius said nothing and instead jumped up, pulling James into a tight hug.

"You want to tell me why you're upset *today*?" Lily inquired quietly. She placed her hand on top of Sirius's as it rested on her stomach, smiling up from time to time at James, who was doing his best to be the leader that he had always been.

Sirius understood why Lily needed to be specific. Despite his future godson giving him a purpose in life through the shitstorm of war, he was unpredictable at best, reckless at worst. He had been arrested no fewer than three times since quitting the Ministry. Getting into pub brawls with random wizards had become a hobby—one that he had previously relished with great pride, especially considering he recently sent Lucius Malfoy to St Mungo's after running into the Death Eater at the Leaky.

Sirius had been there with Remus, stocking up their flat with what little food the two actually ate these days when they had spotted Lucius meeting with a table of *associates*. Remus had pleaded with Sirius to leave it alone, but when Malfoy loudly announced that after years of *failing* in her duties as a wife, Narcissa was finally providing him with the heir he deserved, Sirius lost it.

The man was married to his cousin, a witch plenty of wizards desired, and now had a son on the way. It was not fair, and Sirius held a bitterly jealous grudge against the man who did not appreciate the gifts he had been given.

He beat Malfoy unconscious, and it had taken three other pub patrons to pull him off before Aurors arrived. A week after Lucius had been released from St Mungo's, Benjy and Dorcas were murdered.

Sirius blamed himself for their deaths.

"Didn't sleep well last night," he lied to Lily. "Fucking cat woke me up before sunrise."

Most of Mia's things had been boxed up a month earlier, but the cat remained loose despite Sirius's desire to shove it in a box and owl it to Abu Dhabi. Even though he was the beast's primary caregiver now, the stupid cat *still* did not like him. Mia had been right; he should have bought her a fucking kneazle.

"*You* wouldn't want it, would you?"

Lily sighed and then nodded her head. "Bring Snuffles by tonight. But only once you've showered," she said with a stern glare. "You look like shit and smell worse."

Sirius smiled at her. Lily was never one for subtlety. "Still planning my intervention?"

He knew they had talked about it already. Once, shortly after Sirius's first arrest following his Auror resignation, and again after a drunken one-night stand where he tried to provoke Remus into beating the guilt out of him. Remus had not taken the bait, but instead dumped him on James and Lily's sofa and let Lily play Mind Healer as she tried to help Sirius work through his grief.

Remus seemed to move on the fastest from Mia's supposed death, though no one could really tell considering that he had always been good at keeping his emotions bottled up compared to the rest of them. James, thankfully, had fatherhood to look forward to as well as a cause in the war to keep his mind occupied so as not to dwell on Mia's disappearance.

Sirius, however, firmly walked the fine line between anger and denial.

When Moody and Dumbledore announced Mia's official death, Sirius had lodged an *actual* formal complaint after he had found an old copy of *Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy*. The old book, given to only the oldest families, was magically spelled to update on its own. Births, marriages, and deaths were all automatically logged on the parchment. Sirius had opened it to the *Potter Family Tree* where Charlus and Dorea's births and deaths were listed. James and Lily's names were written down as well, marking their marriage. A floating light hovered beneath their names which Sirius had assumed was the magic waiting for their child to be born before it would write their name down in the timeworn text.

But there, next to the name *Mia Potter*, was no date of death. Strangely, in fact, Mia's birth date was not written down either, something Sirius assumed had to do with the fact that she was adopted. Stranger still, while the other names were written in dark black ink, Mia's faded in and out as though it had been improperly Disillusioned, or as though the book did not know where she fit: dead or alive.

It was just enough hope to drive his already unstable mind to the brink several times.

"I'll get you off the booze once I get this kid out of me," Lily declared with a bright smile and then winced when the baby kicked again.

"Maybe I was wrong," Sirius offered, rubbing her belly. "Maybe he's not a Beater. I think he might just be a Bludger," he teased.

Lily laughed and leant against him. "He or *she* will be a bloody Quaffle by the time I give birth to them. At which point I think I'll go back to hexing James. It's been a long

time, and he's due for something particularly awful for allowing his child to give me seven months' worth of heartburn."

Sirius did not have a chance to say anything else to her as a collective gasp filled the room. All eyes turned toward the front where Dumbledore stood next to a familiar wizard in long black robes, with greasy hair and black eyes. Instinctively, everyone was on their feet, wands at the ready at the mere sight of Severus Snape. While most were firm in where they stood, James, Sirius, and Remus had created a semicircle around Lily as if to shield her from the Death Eater.

"Subtle," Snape said, sneering at the display.

"What the fuck is *he* doing here?" Sirius snapped and moved forward, the empty space next to Lily immediately filled by Peter.

Dumbledore stepped in front of Snape protectively and held a hand up to stop Sirius in his tracks. "He is here as my guest, and as a guest, he is under my protection. Though, as the newest member of the Order, I should hope that he would not need it."

The room erupted into screaming before Dumbledore once again called for silence.

"Sir, you can't be serious!" James shouted from the back of the room.

"Are we or are we not in need of a spy?" Dumbledore asked. "I have interrogated Severus and believe him to have honourable intentions for joining our cause. He will be loyal and has vowed as much."

"Why the hell would he switch sides?" Sirius angrily demanded.

"Those are my reasons and mine alone, Black," Snape drawled, his face expressionless save for the look of disdain sent toward Sirius.

Unfortunately, Sirius did not miss the brief moment where the man's black eyes flickered over to where James, Remus, Peter, and Lily stood.

The eye contact was enough to incite Sirius once again, and he growled, stepping closer. "Don't you dare look at my family."

"It's your *family* that actually has the need for my information," Snape declared. "The Dark Lord has caught word of a prophecy proclaiming his downfall. He believes that a child born this July will be his undoing, and he's seeking out information as to how he can . . . *rid himself* of the problem."

Everyone heard Lily gasp.

"Don't listen to him, Lils," Sirius insisted. "He's just trying to manipulate his way into the Order. How do we know that this prophecy even exists?"

"Because it was given to me," Dumbledore answered. "A young Seer approached me for a job interview at the beginning of this year. In the middle of her interview, she fell into a trance of sorts and began speaking about the downfall of Voldemort." Half the room flinched at the name, but no one more than Snape, who briefly looked terrified at the word being spoken aloud.

Though he had not used it much in the past himself, Sirius made a mental note to say the name as often as possible, if only to get that reaction out of Snape.

"Why didn't you tell us, then?" Marlene McKinnon asked, looking up at Dumbledore with hardened eyes. She had been known to get quite irritable when secrets were kept from Order members. While Sirius had not agreed with her much in the past, he felt just a touch vindicated at the look of irritation on her face aimed at Dumbledore.

"The prophecy speaks of Voldemort choosing his own rival," Dumbledore explained. "There are at least *two* children due to be born toward the end of July," he said as his eyes briefly glanced at Alice, who—up until that moment—had clearly not made the connection. Her hands protectively encircled her stomach, and Frank was immediately by her side, glaring daggers at Snape. "I intended to keep the prophecy contained in the hopes that, if left unheard, Voldemort would not take action to fulfil it. Regrettably, I was wrong, and he is now fully aware of the contents of the prophecy."

Everyone else was too busy watching Dumbledore to notice the brief flash of guilt that fell across Snape's face. Sirius, however, caught it.

"While we take care to keep both the Potters and Longbottoms protected, we still have a war to fight, and now have a new ally on our side," Dumbledore stated, placing a hand on Snape's shoulder. "Unfortunately, because he must remain in the good graces of Voldemort, should any of you come into contact with Severus on missions, I would ask that you do your best to keep up the ruse of his status, while also attempting to keep him from harm."

"How *much* harm should we keep him from? You expect us to just sit back and not throw hexes back if he attacks us?" Sirius challenged, glaring at Snape.

"Quite the opposite, Sirius," Dumbledore said with a smile. "I expect you to keep up the appearance of a rivalry in case others are watching. It would serve us well to keep Severus's position as a double agent the *highest* priority."

"So basically don't *fatally* injure him?" Sirius asked for clarification, and Dumbledore nodded.

Sirius finally lowered his wand. In the split second that Dumbledore's blue eyes turned away, he sent a closed fist into a large hooked nose, knocking the *supposedly* defected Death Eater to the ground.

"There," Sirius said with a triumphant smirk. "Rivalry still well established."

## Chapter Ninety-Nine

*Harry*

---

*Well I don't know if I'm ready  
To be the man I have to be  
I'll take a breath, I'll take her by my side  
We stand in awe, we've created life  
(With Arms Wide Open - Creed)*

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**July 26th, 1980**

*"Remus, promise me something?"*

*"Anything, love."*

*"Promise me that . . . that you'll always trust Sirius. Always remember that he's a good man. And when he needs you the most, please take care of him for me."*

*"I promise."*

Remus was eating those words as he stared down at the man passed out on the floor beside a blond witch.

*At least he's not lying in his own sick again,* Remus thought bitterly.

He had just returned home from his graveyard shift as security for a local Muggle club. Despite his lithe build, Remus had proven his strength on his first night by throwing a man twice his size out the back door when he got a little handsy with one of the bartenders. The owner of the club also mentioned that the scars helped to deter trouble. Apparently, no one wanted to fuck with a man who looked like he had survived a knife fight and was ready to go another round. It was a temporary job if there ever was one. His lycanthropy had him calling in sick far too often, not to mention the last minute Order meetings that he was required to attend. He brought in what little money he could, and he was grateful for the work, temporary or not. What he was *not* grateful for was the fact that he spent all night watching Muggles drink themselves stupid only to come home and see Sirius doing the same thing.

It was the fifth time Remus had arrived home in the early morning to see Sirius unconscious with a random girl—or two—curled around him. He pinched the bridge of his nose. He knew that Sirius never *set out* to bring girls home. Most of the time, once he

went past the point of no return—which was usually a bottle and a half of firewhisky in—all Sirius did was talk about Mia and how much he missed her. Girls latched onto his sensitive, broken heart, buying him more drinks until Sirius could not tell the difference between a Beater's bat and his own wand.

The mornings when Sirius would wake up before the women, he would see what he had done and would curse, lock himself in the bathroom, and scrub his skin bloody as though he could wash away the guilt. Remus had been the one to help patch him up when he broke skin or used too hot water and scalded himself.

Peter insisted that Sirius did not have anything to be guilty over. James tried to ignore the problem since he had bigger things to worry about, what with Lily ready to give birth any day, and the pesky problem of You-Know-Who wanting to kill their baby.

Remus, on the other hand, was officially done enabling Sirius's behaviour.

"Get the fuck up!" he shouted, kicking Sirius in the leg.

*"Remus, I love you. You're my best friend, and I love you. Please take care of him. Remember what I said: trust Sirius. Always Sirius."*

Her last words to him before she vanished from their lives.

Remus shook his head. He could not trust the idiot to keep himself alive right now. The thought made him that much angrier, and he kicked Sirius again. "Get up, Padfoot!"

Sirius moaned and rolled over, shielding his eyes from the light and wincing as he looked up. "What the fuck, Moony? Leave me alone," he groaned and tried to roll back over.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" Remus shouted, aiming his wand at his friend who froze up immediately. Levitating Sirius's bound body off of the floor, Remus gently cleared his throat and nudged the woman still sleeping, curled up in a blanket next to the now empty space Sirius had previously occupied. "Umm . . . Miss?"

The witch slowly rolled over and looked up at Remus, who immediately gaped at her.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me." Remus growled bitterly. "With all due respect, Marlene, please show yourself out."

Marlene scoffed and pulled the blanket up to cover herself—as though Remus would *ever* want any part of her—before running a hand through her long blond locks and scowling up at him. "Last I checked, this place was owned by Sirius. You're just a guest."

"And last I checked, tomorrow's the full moon, so feel free to stick around if you'd like, and we'll see what happens, yeah?" He watched with half amusement, half guilt as the girl shrank away from him, terrified. Before she had a chance to say anything more, he stormed down the hallway, kicking open the back bedroom door and levitating Sirius into the bathroom.

After filling the copper clawfoot tub and using a Vanishing Charm to get rid of Sirius's clothes, Remus removed the Binding Curse and let Sirius's body drop into the bathtub with a splash. Sirius struggled against the water, coughing and spitting as Remus took a seat on the nearby windowsill after closing and locking the door. He waved his wand, charming a bar of soap and a nearby flannel to scrub down Sirius against his will.

"Fuck! Remus!" Sirius yelled. "Moony, stop!"

"Consider this Day One of your forced detox," Remus declared, unaffected by the glares that Sirius was now throwing him. "I made a promise to Mia that I would take care of you no matter what, so here I am, literally bathing your drunken arse because you can't be bothered to do it yourself."

"You've no right—!" Sirius began to yell.

"McKinnon!?" Remus screamed, standing up and kicking the nearby ceramic bin, launching it into the opposite wall where it shattered into a thousand pieces. "Are you kidding me? Mia *hated* Marlene!"

Sirius had the grace to look ashamed, and he finally stopped struggling against the charmed flannel that was now scrubbing dirt and sweat off of his chest and shoulders, revealing a plethora of new tattoos that now covered the majority of his upper body; there was more ink than skin these days.

"I didn't mean to. I . . . I didn't even know it was . . ." Sirius grimaced. "Marlene? Really?" he asked, looking up at Remus who nodded angrily. "Fuck."

"It needs to stop."

"It *hurts* to stop," Sirius admitted, clearly trying to rein in his emotions but doing poorly. "I can't breathe when I'm sober, Moony. All the evidence says that she's still alive, but everyone tells me she's dead. Why are they telling me she's dead when I can still feel her," he confessed, pounding his fist against his chest. "The Soul Bond, it's . . . it's different. Like it's almost entirely supported by me, but it's still there. It feels broken. *I feel broken.*"

He buried his face in his hands and sobbed openly. "What if that means that she's hurt, and she needs me? She's somewhere . . . Do you feel it, too? Through the Pack Bond?"

"Yes," Remus answered mournfully, wishing like hell he could tell Sirius the truth, but an Unbreakable Vow was just that: unbreakable. "I don't know what to tell you about Mia, mate. But you have to focus. Winning this war is what's important right now. Protecting Prongs and Lily's baby is what's important right now."

"Or Alice and Frank's," Sirius added.

Remus sighed and shook his head. "Either way, we have friends and family to protect, and you can't bloody well do it drunk. Get cleaned; get dressed. There's an Order meeting this afternoon."

"Didn't you just get in from work?"

"Full moon's tomorrow," Remus stated, a part of him sad that Sirius had not known by the way that he winced at the reminder. Then again, Remus had gone without company for several full moons since Mia left. Prongs was too busy taking care of Lily, and Padfoot was rarely sober even as Padfoot. Wormtail, though loyal and always willing to accompany Remus, was fairly useless due to his small size.

"I'll sleep the day after." Remus shrugged and left the bathroom.

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"Won't it be dangerous? To give birth outside of St Mungo's?" Alice asked nervously, wringing her hands in her lap as Dumbledore stood at the front of the room, Alastor Moody on one side of him, Severus Snape on the other.

"It would be more dangerous to do so *inside* St Mungo's," Snape chimed in. "As I've said," he continued, his voice tainted with impatience, something that was earning glares from everyone in the room except Dumbledore, "it is the Dark Lord's greatest desire to discover this supposed rival from the prophecy, and the closer we grow to the end of July, the more volatile he is becoming. He has had the hospital attacked with much less to lose in the past."

Dumbledore placed a hand on Snape's shoulder, which the defected Death Eater flinched away from before moving to the side entirely, drawing the focus away from himself.

"We believe it would be safest for the children to be born either here at Potter Manor or Longbottom Keep," Dumbledore told Alice. "Both have wards that will keep you protected until it's time to move both of your families to a permanent safe house."

After the meeting ended, Snape slowly drifted across the room, approaching the Marauders and Lily with caution.

Sirius gave him credit that he never willingly turned his back on any of them. One wrong look in Lily's direction, and Sirius thought he would be willing to kill a friend, never mind a foe.

Snape cleared his throat. "Lil—er . . . Mrs . . . *Potter*. Might I have a word?"

Sirius stepped forward and growled ferally. "Over my dead body."

Snape slowly raised a questioning brow. "If you like."

Before Sirius could strike, James placed a hand on his shoulder. "Ease up, Pads. What do you want, Snape?"

"To speak to your wife."

"That's not going to happen," Sirius said with another growl.

Lily sighed in frustration, one hand resting on her large stomach, the other on her back. "James, Sirius . . . please."

James hesitated for a long moment, but then nodded and leant forward to kiss his wife as though marking her. Snape rolled his eyes at the display.

"I'll be right over there," James insisted, gesturing to where Moody and Dumbledore were speaking with Alice and Frank. He turned on his heel and left, dragging Remus and Peter with him.

Sirius lingered.

Lily smiled softly at him and touched his face affectionately as if to draw his attention away from Snape and back to her. "Sirius, go. I'm fine."

Though he hesitated just as long as James did, Sirius eventually conceded and made his way over to the other Marauders, leaving Snape and Lily alone to speak. He did, however, keep close enough to eavesdrop on every single word.

"Is Black aware that a marriage includes two, not three people?"

"What do you want, Mr Snape?" Lily snapped.

"*Mister* Snape? How formal," he drawled. "I don't exactly appreciate the moniker. You knew my father."

"You and I no longer have an informal relationship of any kind."

"Yes, Potter saw to that."

"No, *you* saw to that," Lily said defensively. "That brand on your arm is the culmination of everything I warned you about years ago. Years before I *ever* fell in love with James."

"I used to be your best friend," he whispered.

"Yes, and then you became a Death Eater."

"A Death Eater who's risking his life to save your child."

Lily ignored his attempt at manipulating her emotions, her tone did not rise to match his. "For which I am grateful, but it doesn't erase the past. It can never be like it was, and that breaks my heart in ways you can't imagine. We've all lost too much. I've buried my parents, watched my friends do the same. I lost two of my best friends in the last year. One because she was brutally murdered—by *Death Eaters*—and the other because she up and vanished—presumably kidnapped by *Death Eaters*. Now I have to sit in Order meetings and watch another of my best friends stand there wearing the mark of something that has taken nearly everything away from me."

Snape took a long moment to digest her words before softly uttering, "It was a mistake."

"I know that, Sev."

"I wish . . ." he hesitated. "I wish there was something I could do to properly apologise, but I'm aware nothing I say can make up for the things I've done."

"Keep helping us. And tell me the truth."

"About what?"

Lily paused, likely contemplating her question carefully. "Did You-Know-Who take Mia?"

At the mention of Mia's name, Sirius stopped all pretending and looked back across the room. He wanted to watch Snape's face as the man answered Lily's question.

Snape rose a brow, confused. "Not to my knowledge. The only time I ever recall her being discussed is when the Dark Lord desired to bring Black onto our, er, *their* side. I was asked if the witch would be a way to get through to him. I informed the Dark Lord and his inner circle that, despite being prone to violence—" He subconsciously rubbed at

his jaw, like a Pavlovian dog, as he had apparently come to associate Mia's name with facial pain. "—Miss Potter was as against Death Eaters as one *could* be."

"Thank you," Lily said while frowning, clearly dissatisfied with the reply.

Sirius knew how she felt. Even if the answer broke his heart all over again, it was the not knowing that was slowly killing him.

"I was . . . I was hoping that they'd actually taken her. Then at least we'd have answers."

"I'm shocked that she'd even allow herself to be taken. I was under the impression that Potter's sister had the Sight."

Lily looked at him in surprise. "What? That was just a joke she told us years ago to try to get out of Divination."

"Are you certain?"

Lily nodded. "Absolutely, why?"

"Things the girl said to me before leaving Hogwarts. And there was an altercation with a former associate of mine: Regulus Black. He informed me that he believed she was aware of his allegiances to the Dark Lord, but kept his secret for him. Mentioned that she knew things she shouldn't have known. Of course, who knows what the boy was thinking at the time."

*He wasn't thinking*, Sirius thought to himself, burying the remaining grief about Regulus's death deep down beneath everything else.

"What did Mia tell you, Sev?"

Snape paused and swallowed. "She offered me forgiveness for something I had yet to do."

"What?"

He looked away from Lily, shame written across his face. "I'd rather not say. She informed me that I would make a mistake and would seek forgiveness, but that it would not be offered, and therefore she was giving it to me instead. Then she advised me to seek out Dumbledore when I was ready to . . . atone."

"She said that?"

He nodded. "In so many words. She had quite the talent for being cryptic. Regardless, I did make a rather large mistake and, to atone for my sins, I sought out

Dumbledore, which has brought me to my current situation. Reporting on the Dark Lord's intentions and advising where I can in order to keep you safe."

"Me and Alice," Lily corrected him.

"If you like."

Sirius watched as Lily averted her gaze, unwilling to meet Snape's intense stare.

"And *are* we safe?"

"Not in the slightest." Snape scoffed. "You should have run the moment you found out you were pregnant. Potter should have taken you and vanished."

"We can't abandon our friends. We can't leave our world. We have to fight," she argued.

"You all trust too easily. I've already reported it to Dumbledore, but there is a traitor in your Order."

Sirius felt as though the floor had been knocked out from beneath him.

Lily's eyes widened, and she gasped. "What? How do you know?"

"Because shortly after I began my role as a spy, I was brought into the Dark Lord's presence and questioned about my comings and goings," he informed her. "Someone had reported to him that I'd defected. Luckily, I'm an accomplished Occlumens and was able to persuade him into believing that I'd *falsely* offered to aid Dumbledore in order to get close to him and discover all of his secrets. Right now, I'm supposed to be attempting to discover your location. Which is why I've been trying to make our former headmaster see reason and have you and the Longbottoms sequestered, under a Fidelius Charm if needed, but away from any and all eyes, my own included."

Lily looked like she was taking in all the information. The hand resting on her stomach tightened protectively. "Should *I* not trust you, Severus?"

"You should not trust *anyone*; that is the point." Snape's focus narrowed across the room, and Sirius glanced away before they made eye contact.

"Would the Fidelius Charm keep us safe?" Lily asked.

"Yes. So long as you choose a proper Secret-Keeper, but therein lies the problem. We do not *know* who the mole is. Of course, my Galleons are on Black or Lupin."

Sirius clenched his hand tightly around a butterbeer as James handed it over. He took several calming breaths in order to stop himself from shattering the glass.

"You're wrong about Sirius and Remus. They would never—"

"Wouldn't they?" Severus interrupted her. "Black was raised by blood supremacists and is known for walking the fine line between reckless and mad. And Lupin is a bloody werewolf. If Potter's sister ever *does* turn up dead, I'd be willing to bet that it was either one of them that did it in some sort of jealous rage."

Something bitter and painful moved around in Sirius's stomach at Snape's words. James and Peter were discussing the latest reports from Ireland with Kingsley. Remus was in the corner, whispering with Dumbledore with some sort of Silencing Charm thrown up around them. His instincts told him that Dumbledore was likely trying to convince Remus to speak with the werewolf packs again, but Snape's words echoed in his head, and Mia was not there to help ease them back out.

"They are my family," Lily told Snape. "They would never do such a thing. Besides, you don't know Sirius and Remus, or anything about their relationship with Mia."

Snape took a long moment before speaking. "You would be very surprised to see what dark lengths a man will go to as a result of petty jealousy."

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### **July 31st, 1980**

Sirius slowly opened his eyes, surprised that he did not have a hangover. He was, however, incredibly thirsty—as though he had not had anything to drink in days. He glanced around the room, wondering where exactly he was. What was the last thing he remembered? A pub, a lot of firewhisky, and a conversation with Peter about whether or not Remus could be trusted. He remembered Wormtail advising him that he had *always* suspected Remus of being jealous of Sirius and Mia's relationship, and how he was surprised that he so easily gave her up.

Sirius had argued back at first, insisting the night Mia vanished, Remus had been in a meeting with Dumbledore, or at least that was where Remus said he was when Sirius finally tracked him down in a panic after arriving at the flat to find Mia missing.

Despite believing that Remus could never harm Mia, a lingering hint of doubt inside of Sirius inflated, fuelled by firewhisky and Peter's words. He had then drunk more than

he ever had before in his life, one last hurrah to try and permanently bury the mistrust, the heartache, the grief, and the pain.

So why wasn't he hungover?

Sirius looked to the side, noticing that he was in Potter Manor—his old bedroom. A large assortment of potions were on a table by his bedside. James was sat in a chair nearby, glaring at him.

He must have drank himself to the point of injury.

"Oh," Sirius muttered.

James rose a brow. "Oh?"

Sirius coughed, trying to clear the dryness from his throat. "Mornin', Prongs." He smiled up at his best friend, who was suddenly hovering over him with a deranged look on his face. *Uh oh.*

"You dickhead!" James yelled, sending a balled up fist into Sirius's cheek. "You drank yourself into a coma, and you wake up and say '*Oh?*' like nothing happened?"

*Coma?!*

"Ow! Arsehole, stop hitting me!" Sirius winced, trying to defend himself but not having the strength to move much. How long had he been unconscious?

"What the hell is going on in here?" Lily yelled, bursting into the room, wide eyes on her husband. Upon making eye contact with Sirius, she rushed to the bed, wrapping her arms around his neck. "Oh God, we thought you were going to die, you idiot. If you were a Muggle, you'd be dead, do you know that, you awful man? We were lucky that Peter was sober enough to bring you here!"

Sirius looked over her shoulder where Peter sat in the corner of the room, avoiding everyone's attention.

"Madam Pomfrey said that the Pack Bond probably saved your life," Lily said, releasing him.

Remus walked into the room just in time to catch Lily in his arms, glaring down at Sirius while the witch sobbed against his chest. He shifted her into Peter's arms just as James reared back again and hit Sirius hard in the shoulder.

"Prongs!" Remus shouted as he rushed to his friend, pulling him away from the bed. "He's still injured!"

"He's a bloody alcoholic who needs to have his arse kicked!" James yelled teary-eyed and furious. "You almost died! Do you have any idea what that would have done to me? I lost my parents and my sister, and now you're going to leave me, too?"

Sirius looked down, unable to meet the intense looks of disapproval from his friends. They had joked about an intervention and scolded him for his drinking, but Sirius had never harmed himself in such a way. He could not look at them. The expressions of worry and anger reminded him of how Mia would linger over his bed in the hospital wing after a Quidditch injury or fight with Slytherins, begging him to stop being reckless and letting himself get hurt.

"I'm about to be a father, and I have no idea what the fuck I'm doing, and I *need* you!" James confessed loudly. "I need my best friend!"

Sirius winced in shame.

"James," Lily muttered.

"You're a selfish prat and you need to grow the fuck up, Sirius!" James screamed, pointing a finger in Sirius's face.

"James!" Lily yelled.

James turned and faced his wife, irritation still on his face. "What?!"

"I think my water broke."

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"Merlin, look at this head of hair." Sirius grinned, looking down at the infant in his arms.

Madam Pomfrey had rushed over to Potter Manor when Remus fire-called Hogwarts. James had panicked at the announcement that he was soon to be a father. Sirius, knowing that his best friend needed him, downed every potion near his bed and rushed to Lily's side, dragging James behind him. Madam Pomfrey had not been pleased to see Sirius already up and about, but Lily's needs superseded his, so she held back her scolding.

Madam Pomfrey admitted to Lily that she was grateful she had held out as long as she did. Apparently, she had only just returned to Hogwarts, having spent the prior night at the Longbottom homestead delivering Alice and Frank's boy.

Hours later, as July threatened to fade into August, Harry James Potter entered the world and screamed his tiny head off until someone wrapped him up tightly in a small blanket and placed him in Lily's arms.

He immediately fell silent as emerald eyes met their mirror image between mother and son.

"I thought babies are born with blue eyes," Remus said.

"Magic," Lily whispered, an enamoured look on her face.

While Lily slept off her exhaustion, the Marauders took turns passing the infant between themselves. Or at least, that had been the plan. So far, Sirius refused to relinquish his hold on his godson, who was cradled in the crook of one arm, while his fingers toyed with the mass of black hair on the baby's head.

"He'll figure out how to work with it," Remus said, chuckling in reference to the hair. "Prongs somehow pulled Lily, though she *could* be under the Imperius Curse for all we know."

Sirius smirked and shook his head. "Unlikely. He's not clever enough to be able to cast one. Hopefully, the boy gets his mother's talent for spells."

"I can hear you, you know," a tired James groaned from a nearby chair.

Sirius laughed. "Well, that's good. For a second there I was worried Lily screamed in your ears so loud that you'd gone deaf."

James pouted. "I still can't believe she kicked me out."

"It was only for twenty minutes," Remus said with a chuckle.

"You didn't miss much," Sirius said. "At least you'll still be able to look at your wife and want to have sex with her. After seeing what I did today, I'm pretty sure my cock shrivelled up and died. Ow!" He winced and looked over at James who was instantly at his side, punching the arm that was not holding the baby. "Fuck. What was that for?"

"Don't swear in front of my baby," James hissed.

Sirius laughed quietly in reply. "You have a kid, Prongs."

The three wizards stood in silence staring down at the infant in Sirius's arms. In the bed, Lily slept peacefully despite the snoring that was coming from Peter, who had passed out in a nearby armchair.

"We're going to teach him so much." Sirius grinned, thinking about all the possibilities that the future had in store. "How to prank and fly a broom and pull witches and—"

"Oh, Merlin," Remus groaned. "I hope the boy has Lily's common sense. If not, I suppose we can try and figure out how to counteract whatever horrible habits Sirius will let rub off on him."

"Have to keep him alive first."

Remus and Sirius both turned and stared at James, who had lost all mirth from his expression as he watched his sleeping son. Harry had his tiny fist gripped tightly around Sirius's index finger.

Remus placed a hand on the new father's shoulder. "James . . ."

"What?" James snapped. "It's true. Voldemort wants to kill m-my son," he quietly cried, reaching a shaking hand out and gently touching the boy's soft hair. "I don't know what to do to protect him. I couldn't save Mum or Dad . . . and I couldn't save—"

"Don't," Sirius said in warning as he felt his own emotions begin to rise to the surface. "Don't say it."

James ignored him. "I couldn't save Mia."

Sirius held the baby out to his friend. "Remus, take Harry," he insisted as he felt his heart begin to race, the familiar urge to drink overpowering him. He wanted to drown in the pain and never resurface, but he had a job to do. Sirius could not drown—not while James was struggling.

He pulled his friend into a tight embrace and held him there for a long time. "Get it together, mate."

"I don't know how," James sobbed into his friend's shoulder. "I feel helpless. Voldemort wants my son dead, and I couldn't even save the rest of my family from being killed by Death Eaters. How am I supposed to do this? What am I supposed to do? It's my job to protect him. It's my job to keep him safe."

A pregnant pause filled the air before Sirius whispered, "*Our* job."

Remus nodded, stepping close so that Harry was encircled by all three of them. "*Our* job."

Sirius pressed his forehead against James's. "It's *our* job to keep Harry safe."

## Chapter One Hundred

### *We've Won*

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*Drowning deep in my sea of loathing  
Broken, your servant, I kneel  
It seems what's left of my human side  
Is slowly changing in me  
Looking at my own reflection  
When suddenly it changes.  
Violently it changes  
There is no turning back now  
You've woken up the demon in me  
(Down With the Sicknes - Disturbed)*

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**August 15th, 1981**

*Dear Padfoot,*

*Thank you, thank you, for Harry's birthday present! It was his favourite by far. One year old and already zooming along on a toy broomstick, he looked so pleased with himself, I'm enclosing a picture so you can see.*

Sirius smiled at the photograph of his one-year-old godson whom he had not seen in almost six months. While no longer an Auror, the Order of the Phoenix still made use of Sirius, just as it did with everyone else. The Potters and the Longbottoms had been in hiding for well over a year now, while the rest of the Order was sent on various missions: Peter to Scotland to scout potential safe houses, Remus to Wales to infiltrate werewolf packs—this time with a fully sealed Pack Bond to protect him.

Sirius, however, had been sent to Bulgaria where he had befriended Dark wizards in darker pubs, who were all too aware of his family name but unaware of his alliances and personal views regarding the "Mudblood problem."

Letters from his friends kept him grounded in his ethics and values, reminding Sirius of who he was and what he stood for so he did not get lost in an ocean of darkness similar to how he grew up. Photographs of Harry reminded him of what he was fighting for.

*You know it only rises about two feet off the ground, but he nearly killed the cat and he smashed a horrible vase Petunia sent me for Christmas (no complaints there) . . .*

Sirius snorted. *Fucking cat.*

*Of course, James thought it was funny, says he's going to be a great Quidditch player.*

*We had a very quiet birthday tea, just us and old Bathilda, who has always been sweet to us, and who dotes on Harry. We were so sorry you couldn't come, but the Order's got to come first, and Harry's not old enough to know it's his birthday anyway!*

Sirius sighed as he remembered the hassle he had gone through just to get that bloody broom mailed to Britain. It went through three different customs problems, and it still had to be sent to Dumbledore, who eventually delivered it to James and Lily. Sirius was not even aware of their location, though he had his suspicions. It was too dangerous to include any location information in a letter. With Lily's mention of Bathilda Bagshot, he assumed they were back at Potter Cottage in Godric's Hollow. He made a mental note to subtly reply to the letter and let Lily know that she needed to be more careful just in case their owl was intercepted.

*James is getting a bit frustrated shut up here, he tries not to show it, but I can tell—also, Dumbledore's still got his Invisibility Cloak, so no chance of little excursions . . .*

Sirius sighed at the revelation that Dumbledore had the cloak. He could almost feel the frustration of his best friend from thousands of miles away. James was not the type of man who could just let himself be locked away, out of the fight. Sirius would go mad if they had suggested such a thing for *him*.

*If you could visit, it would cheer him up so much. Wormy was here last weekend, I thought he seemed down, but that was probably the news about the McKinnons; I cried all evening when I heard . . .*

Sirius set the letter down briefly and pinched the bridge of his nose. Despite their sordid past and the fact that Mia had hated the girl, he had been hurt by the news of Marlene's death. Of course, these days, each new letter he received reported one death or another. The news about the Prewett brothers had sent him back to the pubs in search of firewhisky, only to find that since his alcohol-induced coma a year earlier, he had developed

a near immunity to the drink. No longer able to drown his sorrows in liquor, Sirius was forced to soberly deal with his inner turmoil. It did not stop him from drinking the stuff, though; now it only tasted like nostalgia . . . and *her*.

*Bathilda drops in most days; she's a fascinating old thing with the most amazing stories about Dumbledore. I'm not sure he'd be pleased if he knew! I don't know how much to believe, actually, because it seems incredible that Dumbledore—*

Sirius set the first page down, picking up the second.

*—could ever have been friends with Gellert Grindelwald. I think her mind's going, personally!*

*Lots of love,*

*Lily*

Dumbledore and Grindelwald friends? Old Bathilda certainly was losing her mind. Next, she would be telling everyone that, prior to the famous duel between the pair of wizards, they had been lovers.

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### **October 25th, 1981**

It had taken Sirius over a month to get back home to Britain. He had gone straight to Godric's Hollow after making his report to Dumbledore and Moody who, despite having a demolished face and missing half of one leg after what he considered a "scuffle" with some Death Eaters, still insisted on trying to help run the Order from his hospital bed at a safe house. St Mungo's was too risky to keep Order members these days.

Sirius remained inside the small home with the Potters for as long as they would have him. He had no desire to return to his flat—recalling that the last time he had seen the place, he and Remus had gotten into a fistfight.

Sirius had allowed Peter to goad him into confronting Remus about concerns he did not previously know he had about Mía. It had been too close to the full moon, and both of them had spoken without thought to the consequences.

*"You're hiding something! You were never surprised that she had secrets! She shared them all with you!" Sirius snapped. "What aren't you telling me, Remus?!"*

*"Are you accusing me . . . ? You think I . . ."* Remus growled down at him.

*"Don't you growl at me, Moony. For all I know, maybe Snivellus is right and you're the reason that she—"*

*Sirius never finished the sentence. The last thing he remembered was a searing pain in the side of his left cheek followed by Remus shouting.*

*"You're not the only one that loved her! You're not the only one that misses her every fucking day, Padfoot! I couldn't hurt her any more than you could. I'd rather die than betray Mia . . . or any of you, even if you've been nothing but a pain in my arse since she left."*

The pair had not seen one another since.

"I'm just saying I think we should take a minute to rethink things," Sirius told James. He bounced Harry in his arms, occasionally blowing at the mess of black hair on the toddler that periodically threatened to slip up Sirius's nose.

James was moving from one room to another, picking up toys that were scattered about the floor before Lily could come in and lecture them all about making a mess. "There's nothing to rethink, mate; you're the bloody Secret-Keeper. Albus already cast the charm," James insisted. "Remember? You were there."

Sirius sighed in frustration, not minding when Harry got his tiny fists tangled in his long hair. The kid was always tugging on *someone's* hair—Sirius suspected the boy was probably jealous of everyone who did not look like they had been hit with one of Lily's Static Charms. He briefly smirked at the thought of how Mia should be here for this. Harry's hands would have gotten permanently stuck in her wild mane.

Pushing thoughts of the witch and the associated pain aside, Sirius turned his attention back to James, who looked like he was not in the mood to argue. The Fidelius Charm *had* been cast, but Sirius was terrified that somehow he would screw up and put his friends in danger. Sirius Black, the Secret-Keeper for the Potters? Nothing could be more obvious.

"Then we recast it. Lily could do it easily," Sirius said, gesturing to her as she entered the room.

"Well, *that's* true," Lily said with a smile, watching in amusement as James cleaned up the floor. "But I hardly see the point."

Sirius scowled at her for betraying him and siding with James. James was an idiot. How could she not see that?

"You heard Snivellus at the last meeting, Lily!" He ignored the reproachful way she looked at him for using Snape's nickname. "I'm being targeted. They're coming after me, and if *I'm* dead then the bloody charm wears off and the three of you will be next!"

Lily pursed her lips and held her hands out. "Give me Harry. If you're going to start yelling like a crazy person, you don't get to hold the baby."

Sirius pulled away from her like a child who was having his favourite toy taken away from him. "No," he said with a pout. "I'm . . . I'm fine. He's fine. Aren't you, pup?"

"Pup!" Harry squealed. "Fine!"

"See? Says so himself. Smart lad."

Lily rolled her eyes. "He's just repeating everything you say. And that worries me."

"Oh, calm down, he doesn't repeat everything I say," Sirius insisted. "Besides, it's not like I said *fuck*."

"Fu—"

Eyes wide, Sirius quickly clasped a hand over the boy's mouth.

Too late. Lily saw and heard. "Give me my son!"

Sirius pouted once more but reluctantly handed the boy over to his mother, who immediately carried him away. "Merlin, is it just me or has she gotten a lot bossier since having the kid?"

James shook his head incredulously. "Mate, we've been stuck in one safe house or another for a year and a half. We're *both* a little on edge."

"I can see that."

"Don't start," James snapped before collapsing on the sofa, running a hand through his hair. "At least you, Remus, and Peter get to *do* something in this fucking war. Frank and Alice feel the same. We're all going mental not being able to contribute anything."

Sirius took a seat beside his best friend and patted his shoulder. "Your job is to keep that boy safe, Prongs. Even if keeping him safe means doing nothing."

James kicked the nearby table in frustration. "And how many people die while I sit and do nothing? Fenwick, Dorcas, Dearborn, the Prewetts, Edgar Bones and his whole fucking family were murdered, same with the McKinnons! And now you!"

"I'm not going anywhere, mate. At least murder-wise. I do need to get the fuck out of Britain for a while, though, since apparently I'm being targeted." Sirius sighed, wondering what the plan was going to be. He had known it was a bad idea coming back, but he had been holed up with Dark wizards, Voldemort loyalists, and future Death Eaters for months in Bulgaria and needed an escape before he completely lost his mind in the process.

"You should go find Moony. Keep each other safe," James suggested.

Sirius scowled as he remembered his last encounter with the werewolf. "Fuck Remus."

James's hazel eyes widened, and he looked between his best friend and the door, which Lily left through, waiting for a moment as though she would come running back in to hex them both for yelling and cursing within Harry's hearing. "What the hell is *that* about? Are you two still on about that fight you had? That was almost a year ago. And you know you were *both* wrong. You need to get over it."

Sirius sighed in consternation. "Just . . . It's nothing. I'm paranoid," he said, scrubbing his palms down his face. "I'm having some trust issues with him. Plus, it's not like the bloody fucking wolf writes me."

"Isn't he undercover with a pack?"

"That's what Dumbledore says."

James nodded as if Dumbledore's word was final in all things. Despite his own admiration of the man, Mia's dislike of Dumbledore always made Sirius rethink his loyalties. Then again, Mia'd had issues with a lot of people, and Dumbledore was doing his damndest to keep James, Lily, and Harry safe.

"If it's what Dumbledore says, then it's true," James insisted. "Pads, I've never understood the relationship you have with Moony, especially when you throw my sister in the middle of it. But he's family. He's Pack. Hell, he's the whole *reason* we're Pack. I trust him the same way I trust you and Wormtail. It's dishonourable to mistrust your friends. We're all each other has left in this world."

Sirius looked at James, who embodied Charlus the same way that Mia always embodied her mother. Dorea and Mia were loving, determined, cunning, and a little scary because they were so intimidating; Charlus and James were loyal to a fault. It made Sirius feel inadequate most days.

"I know. I'm sorry. But there *is* a mole in the Order. I know when Snape brought it up a while ago, I initially tried to shake the idea off, but even Dumbledore confirmed it. I need to leave Britain to go into hiding, and I'm just . . . I can't leave you, Lily, and Harry unprotected. If they do get me—"

"What do you suggest then mate?"

"Be your own Secret-Keeper?"

James shook his head. "Can't. Spell doesn't work like that, at least not yet. They're supposedly working on a modification. Too bad Mia's not around to—"

"Yeah, I know," Sirius interrupted with a clipped tone. He gave James an apologetic look when he raised a brow at him. "I know. She was really good at modifications.

"It has to be Wormtail, then. Moony's too involved in battle and so am I," he lied, knowing that his reason for keeping Remus out of the Fidelius Charm was because he currently did not trust him, no matter what promises he had made to Mia prior to her disappearance, no matter that he had assured both James and Lily that he would apologise to Remus the next time they saw one another. "It's either that or have either Alice or Frank do it, but they'd have to come out of hiding, and that puts them in danger. I'd prefer Wormtail, though. He never goes into the actual fight, not since Mary died. He's too afraid to."

James nodded thoughtfully. "Makes sense."

"So get the little tosser over here and don't tell anyone else. The fewer people know, the safer the three of you will be, and the safer the three of you are, the fewer people I have to murder if something bad happens."

James frowned. "That's not funny, Pads."

"Do I look like I'm having a laugh?" Sirius narrowed his eyes. He knew, thanks to letters from Lily, that James was worried about his descent down a darker path as a result of the new role he had to play in the Order, but Sirius could not deny the fact that Harry's life being threatened had caused him to tap into his heritage a little. James said that he was coming close to crossing a line, making Sirius remember Mia's words:

*"That's your problem, Sirius! You still think there is a line!"*

"If something happens to us, you've got to keep your head on straight," James demanded, actually grabbing Sirius, hands on either side of his head. "You're Harry's godfather, and it's *your* job to keep him safe if *I'm* not around to do it."

Sirius shook his head, not wanting to even think about such a scenario. "The two of you wrote your bloody wills, didn't you?"

"Of *course* we did," James scoffed, shoving Sirius as he released him. "It'd be stupid if we didn't. If something happens to us, Harry gets everything, obviously; and you get Harry."

"And if *I* die?"

"Remus."

Sirius sighed. "Not Peter?"

"Not since he accidentally dropped Harry when he was six months old," James said and then laughed. "Thank Merlin that Lily was there with a Cushioning Charm. Anyway, if something happens to Remus, then Harry goes to Alice and Frank. Worst case scenario is Harry and Neville can grow up like brothers. Dumbledore knows our wishes; he'll take care of everything. The important thing is that Harry stays with family."

"And as long as it's not Lily's family."

Both wizards laughed loudly.

"Don't even *suggest* that," Lily said with wide eyes as she walked back into the room, Harry positioned on her hip. "I'd rather he be raised by dragons. Isn't that right?" She smiled at the boy in her arms, who laughed loudly, wrapping his fingers in her long, red hair. "Would you like to be raised by dragons?"

She reached into a small box in the corner of the room, handing the toddler a stuffed Hungarian Horntail which he eagerly gripped, releasing her hair for the plushie.

"Now, if the two of you are done being incredibly depressing," she said, eyeing the men, "dinner's ready."

"You cooked?" Sirius chuckled. "Where's Tilly? I haven't had treacle tart in a year."

"We sent her to the manor to clean," James replied. "She was going stir crazy over here."

Sirius nodded as he stood, reaching for the toddler and grinning when Harry practically jumped into his arms. "C'mon Harry. Let me show you how to transfigure broccoli into cake!"

"Is everything okay?" Lily whispered, wrapping her arms around her husband's waist.

"No. I worry about him." James frowned, his voice tense. "Losing Mia just . . . broke him."

"It broke us all a little," Lily admitted. "Have you heard from Remus lately?"

James shook his head. "His last letter was pretty vague. Something about a pack up north. Said he'd be home for Christmas, though. Wanted to know if Pads would be around for the holidays. I'd like to think it's because he knows they need to fix whatever happened, but a part of me thinks he asked so he could try and avoid him."

"We should do something nice for Christmas. Just the family. Something needs to happen to get those two fixed. Even if we have to lie to get them both in the same room. I love and respect Dumbledore and appreciate all he's done for us, but I very much dislike him for sending Sirius and Remus out on separate missions. I know the Order needs it, and the Order comes first, but you and I have each other, and without Mia . . . Those two depended on one another, and now they're both so alone."

"Christmas it is, then," James decided. "Hopefully this war will be over, we'll all be safe, and we can bring Remus and Sirius home to patch up whatever the hell went wrong with the two of them."

Lily smiled and leant up to kiss his cheek. "Well, before we even think about Christmas, what do you want to do for Halloween?"

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### **October 31st, 1981**

Sirius sobbed against Hagrid's chest, large arms wrapping around him. How had he gotten here? How had everything gone so terribly wrong? He looked around the broken cottage that had, until recently, been his home. Been the home of his friends.

And his friends were . . .

Sirius had gone to check on Peter, who had been switched out as the Potters' Secret-Keeper only days ago. Despite trusting Peter's judgement, Sirius still worried about him, and with Lily and James now safe, he felt it was his job to look after Peter—at least until Dumbledore had them both moved to separate safe houses.

When Sirius arrived at Peter's flat to find him gone, he immediately panicked. Wormtail *knew* he was not supposed to leave, which meant something terrible must have happened.

He had jumped on his motorbike and flew to Godric's Hollow as fast as he could.

It had not been fast enough.

Sirius forced himself through the rubble of the house with no care for his own safety, following the sound of Harry's cries coming from the upstairs nursery. He willed his gaze upward as he ascended the stairs, purposely trying not to look at the ground, where his peripheral vision told him James's body was still and cold. He let the adrenaline move him forward knowing that his heart would break later—later, when he knew that Harry was safe.

When he made it to the nursery he found Hagrid holding his godson, large tears dripping down his cheeks as he cradled Harry in his massive arms. Harry screamed in Hagrid's gentle grip, green eyes brightening at the sight of Sirius in the doorway, tiny hands reaching out for him.

"Hagrid," Sirius choked out, allowing himself to look down in front of Harry's crib where a mess of red hair lay on the floor behind Hagrid's feet. He swallowed back the sobs that were threatening to tear their way out of his throat. "Hagrid, give me . . ." he said, reaching out, "give me my . . . my boy."

The half-giant hesitated for a moment before nodding and passing Harry over, and Sirius clutched the boy tightly, clinging to him like a lifeline. Harry calmed down, and Sirius was able to look him over, taking notice of the wound on his forehead. He growled at the sight, the first emotions of pure rage making themselves known.

"Give him back, now," Hagrid said through his own sobs. "Dumbledore said I'm to take him."

"Peter . . . Was Peter here?" Sirius asked, breathing in the scent of Harry's hair.

Hagrid shook his large head, reaching out for Harry.

Sirius passed the child over hesitantly. "I need to find Peter. You'll keep Harry safe? Take him straight to Dumbledore until we can find out what happened?"

Hagrid nodded before taking Harry in one large hand, wrapping his free arm around Sirius. At the physical touch, Sirius finally broke into sobs, tightly gripping Hagrid's large

cloak to prevent himself from collapsing. "Dumbledore gave me orders. I'll take him straight there."

Sirius did not ask where "there" was, though he supposed he should have. All he knew now was that Harry needed to be kept safe, and Dumbledore would know what to do. James had said Dumbledore knew what he and Lily had wanted. Dumbledore would take care of everything.

"Take my bike. I know you're not supposed to be using magic," Sirius said while wiping the tears from his face, forcing himself to keep his eyes from looking down at Lily's body. "I don't want you to risk Apparition while carrying Harry, and the bike will get you where you need to go safely and fast."

Hagrid nodded and moved to leave, but Sirius stayed the man's hand and leant forward, pressing a kiss to Harry's forehead before whispering, "It'll be okay, Harry. I'm . . . I'm going to take care of things and then come for you. I'll see you soon."

He watched as Hagrid left the house, Harry in tow. Once they were out of his sight, Sirius collapsed at the top of the stairs of the cottage, burying his head in his hands and wailing loudly as grief completely overtook him.

Frozen on the precipice of utter devastation, all he could think about was that Mia would know what to do—how to move forward. She would know what to do about James and Lily, she would know how to contact Remus or whether or not he could even be trusted. She would know how to find Peter; or Peter's body, considering the man *had* to be dead. Then again, she probably would not have wanted to. Mia had never gotten on well with Peter.

*"I just mean . . . Peter and I aren't close like I am with the pair of you."*

When they were kids, she had a right to her opinions, of course. Peter was not the brave sort. He did not jump into the fight like the rest of the Gryffindors. It was why he was perfect for a Secret-Keeper.

*"What'd Peter ever do to you?"*

*"Did he do something to you? Say something?"*

*"No. He just . . . I don't know. I don't trust him."*

If Sirius thought long and hard about it, Mia had had a point. Peter had a habit of speaking without thinking. His reaction to Remus being a werewolf had not been as

accepting as the rest of them, and everyone knew that Remus was a sore spot when it came to Mia.

*"Why shouldn't they let him into Hogwarts, Peter? Should they have cast him out? Maybe even locked him up? Like an animal?! Who would be next, Peter? Round up all the Muggle-borns?!"*

Merlin, she was dramatic when it came to protecting Remus, and he was not as perfect as she always thought he was.

*"Sirius found a secret passageway into Hogsmeade last year. He wants us to go looking for more while we're down there today."*

*"Oi! That was a Marauder secret! Remus, you're the worst secret keeper ever!"*

*"He is not!"* Mia had snapped at him. *"In fact, Remus should always be your secret keeper."*

Maybe James was right, Sirius wondered. Maybe Mia was right. Maybe Remus should have been the Secret-Keeper. Of course, Mia had not known about it at the time. She'd had no idea what would have happened. Or had she? They had always joked about her being a Seer. She always knew about things before they happened.

*"Leave it to Remus to bail on his mates and tell all our secrets to his bloody girlfriend."*

*"Remus didn't tell me anything, you should always trust Remus, Sirius. If your secrets aren't being properly kept, maybe you have a rat in your midst. I've told you repeatedly, Peter's a terrible secret keeper."*

Sirius could feel as the colour began draining from his face as the memories flooded back. No . . . It couldn't be. That was years ago, and she . . . She just had a grudge. That was all. That had to be it. Mia had a grudge against Peter. With good reason, of course. He had spied on her having sex with Remus.

*"He's been spying on our conversations. It's been months since I've slept with either of you. That means he's had this information for a while and has just been sitting on it until it became useful for some reason."*

*"I don't think Pete would purposely—"*

*"Stop trusting Wormtail!"*

Sirius felt his chest tighten painfully. "No."

*"Maybe you should talk to Dumbledore,"* Mia had said to Peter. *"He can help you. Keep your family safe."*

*"You don't understand, Mia."*

*"Peter, your friends will protect you! That's what they're there for. They would die for you, just like you would die for them."*

And Peter *had* died for them. Died trying to protect James and Lily's secret. *Hadn't he?* Of *course* he did. How else would the Fidelius Charm have been broken? How else would Voldemort have gotten in? Peter was a member of the Order, a Marauder. He had fought trying to save Mary's life when Wilkes had betrayed them. Regulus had said so himself.

*"Sirius, you're being betrayed!"*

*"No shit!"*

Sirius had been there; had seen it with his own eyes. Wilkes betrayed them all and then even tried to murder Peter while his back was turned. Sirius killed the traitor trying to get Peter out of there—trying to save Mary who died in his arms.

*"Mary, oh Merlin, I'm sorry."*

*"Siri . . . Sirius . . . T-Trap . . ."*

*"I know, I know. Wilkes betrayed us. I'm so sorry . . . Mary I . . . I don't know what to do."*

*"P-Peter . . . Peter . . ."*

*"It's okay, Peter got out safely. He just hurt his arm. Peter will be fine."*

*"N-No. Peter . . . T-Trap."*

"Oh fuck," Sirius muttered as a pain shot through him and panic set in.

*"How's the arm, Pete?"*

*"Better, thanks. Healers said it might take a long while to heal. Maybe never, even. Said it must have been a dark curse that hit me."*

His forearm. He had been hit in the forearm. Had they seen it uncovered after that day? Had they *ever* seen the scar left behind from the wound? *No, it couldn't have been.* Sirius was certain. *Remus* was the spy. He had been gone for so long and living among other werewolves, and even Snape said that the spy had to either be Sirius or Remus. But when did he ever agree with Snivellus?

"Fuck!" Sirius screamed in frustration as he stood, pacing the stairs, wishing like hell that Mia was there to run her fingers through his hair, to make everything right with the world again. Wishing he could reverse time and save his family and friends. "What am I supposed to do?"

*"Sirius?"*

"*Yeab kitten?*"

"*Promise me something?*"

"*Anything, love.*"

"*Promise me that . . . that you'll always trust Remus. Always remember that he'd never hurt anyone. And . . . and when he needs you the most, please take care of him for me.*"

"*I promise.*"

"What have I done?" Sirius cried, knees buckling, he fell to the ground. "What have I done?!"

"*Sirius don't t-trust W-W-W—Shit!*"

"Wormtail," he spat, his fists clenched tight, fingernails digging hard enough into his palms to draw blood.

"*Not the future . . . not the future. Maybe the past . . . Sirius, the Shrieking Shack. The first time we were there. Instincts. Trust your instincts.*"

"*My instincts are telling me I need some fresh air.*"

"*No! Then trust my instincts!*"

Her instincts were always right. She had known everything all along, and they had always deferred to her for advice, help, or just a guiding light. Her instincts were *always* right. And that first night in the Shrieking Shack her instincts had told her to *kill* Wormtail.

His grief gave way to blinding rage.

Sirius growled viciously under his breath, reaching into his pocket for his last-ditch effort. The eleventh-hour weapon he had planned on using in the vain hope that the worst case scenario would likely be a rescue mission. If Peter had been abducted and needed Sirius to come and save his arse, he would be able to use the Tele-Portkey to track down the location of his friend and hopefully Apparate them both to safety.

That was not the worst case scenario anymore—*this* was; and it was not a *rescue* mission.

It was one of pure vengeance.

He pulled out the small Sickle from his pocket, the one he had charmed into a Tele-Portkey—its twin having been slipped inside Wormtail's robes days ago when Sirius had last seen him.

He gripped the coin tightly in his fist and snarled out the incantation, "*Portus!*"

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Peter Pettigrew moved quickly through the streets of London in an area that bordered between a Muggle shopping district and a Wizarding residential area, though the Muggles could not see the wizard homes, which had been placed under heavy Muggle-Repelling Charms.

Despite being so close to his own kind, Peter felt safe among the crowds of Muggles. Safe for now. He would be protected now. He had done what had been asked of him, no matter the cost. The Dark Lord would keep him safe, honoured, and elevated in the new world, just like he had promised.

Something shook in the pocket of his robes and he glanced down just as a bright blue light erupted from his cloak, and something heavy launched him forward against the concrete. He stumbled as he tried to stand back up, taking note of the way that the surrounding Muggles were gasping loudly at the sight.

Peter turned around to look into the blazing silver eyes of Sirius Black, and all colour drained from his face.

The line of sanity that Sirius rode, thanks to the Black family genetic traits, was threatening to choose a side as he stared into the small, watery eyes of the traitor in front of him. The friend he had known since he was eleven years old. The little boy who was picked on by Lucius Malfoy. The young Marauder, who had pranked with him, shared a dorm with him for seven years, who had fought alongside him—or so he had thought. This wizard in front of him had been a friend, but in the end had taken from Sirius everything important he had ever loved. James and Lily, his family. Harry, whom he would need to collect once this matter was attended to. Remus, whom Peter had helped turn him against. And Mia . . . Was Peter responsible for her death? Her kidnapping? Her leaving?

"Pettigrew!" Sirius screamed as the shortest Marau—no, the shortest *Death Eater* made a break for it. He was running, which Sirius had expected. Peter *always* ran.

Sirius raised his wand, ignoring the strange looks that the gathered crowd of Muggles were giving him, ignoring the fact that he probably looked crazed, eyes manic as he held back the urge to shift into Animagus form and tear Peter apart with his teeth. No,

this needed to be done man to man. He would trap him with a wand and then break every bone in his body with his bare hands.

To his surprise, Peter turned on the spot and stared up at him, wand in hand but held behind his back.

"How could you!?" Peter shouted, and Sirius snarled. "Lily and James. How could you betray them to the Dark Lord?"

Sirius's eyes widened, realising what was happening. He moved to strike but, like before, he had underestimated Wormtail, who was, surprisingly, faster on the draw.

Sirius had barely seen the wand, had scarcely seen the flash of light and brief glimpse of blood coming from Peter's hand, had hardly noticed the curse Peter breathed. There was fire and blood and broken chunks of gravel in the air, and Sirius was thrown backward into a brick wall, the breath knocked out of him.

His sense of smell came back first, followed by sight. The explosion had temporarily deafened him, but he could still hear muffled screams as he launched forward toward a large crater in the centre of the street where he could see the outline of Peter's robes. Sirius ignored the bodies of the Muggles strewn about, seeking only the prize he required before it escaped his reach. He gripped Peter's blood-soaked robes tightly, noticing the severed finger as it fell to the ground.

"Where is he?! Where's that fucking rat!?"

In fury and grief, his sanity finally shifted to the other side of the line, and Sirius began laughing maniacally as he understood what had happened. He had been tricked. He tore at the bloodied robes in his hands, roaring in rage, just barely aware that he was now surrounded by a team of Aurors lead by Bartemius Crouch and Cornelius Fudge.

Images of Lily's and James's bodies came to the forefront of his mind as the smell of blood continued to assault his senses. The laughing gave way to tears, and Sirius buried his face in his hands, mournfully crying, "It's my fault. I killed them. I killed them."

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**November 3rd, 1981**

Remus stared at the large headstone, reading the names of his friends. He wanted to be angry. Wanted to feel rage and a sense of vengeance the way he knew he should, but instead he just felt empty. He had returned home to London after the owl from Dumbledore had arrived in the small village where he and a scattered pack of rogue werewolves had been staying. Inside the sealed envelope had been a note and a Portkey.

The note simply said:

*Come home.*

He had spent months in the remote village with those of his own kind, doing his best to get on their good sides and figure out where their allegiances rested. Food was scarce and a good night's rest was even harder to find. Halloween had been spent tossing and turning all night, gripping painfully at his chest as he felt something cold and hollow inside of him where something warm and solid used to be. *Too much time away from his family*, Remus reasoned.

Dumbledore's letter, while vague and worrisome, had felt almost like relief. Permission to come home, to be a man again, and to be with his loved ones.

Remus had begun packing his things to leave when he heard other werewolves speaking outside his room.

*"Guess he won't be needing us after all. Went and got himself killed, he did. A bloody baby, too, they're saying. Some Dark Lord."*

*"Who was killed?" Remus asked, peeking his head out of the door and catching the eyes of the group of wolves he had come to know over the past few months.*

*"You-Know-Who. Went into the nearby town this morning and wizards were shooting off fireworks and dancing in the bloody streets, praising some kid's name like he's Merlin come again."*

*"What kid?" Remus asked.*

*"Some orphan. Harry Potter."*

Remus had gripped the Portkey tight enough to make his skin bleed as it carried him home. Home to a destroyed world with his friends dead or imprisoned, leaving him alone, nowhere to go but forward—whatever that meant.

Looking away from the headstone, unable to stare at it a moment longer, Remus tensed when he felt Dumbledore approach him from behind.

"It's good to see you, Remus," the older wizard said, setting a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I'm glad to know you've made it out of the other werewolf pack unscathed."

"No point in being there now, is there? War's over."

"Yes. And we've won."

Remus growled, violently shaking the man's hand off of him. "Two of my friends are in the ground beneath our feet, another was eviscerated, two more have been taken to St Mungo's, and the last . . ." He winced at the very thought of Sirius. They had fought the last time they had spoken—both angry, bitter, and stressed over too many things. Too many unanswered questions. Mia had been at the forefront of Sirius's issues, of course, and thanks to the Merlin-damned Unbreakable Vow that *Dumbledore* had forced him into, Remus had not been allowed to tell Sirius a bloody thing. Not for another thirteen years. Not that it mattered now, with Sirius in Azkaban, sent there for life.

Remus had been surprised at the lack of a trial but knew there was nothing to be done about it, nor would he care to try. Sirius betrayed Lily and James to Voldemort. He had tried to sacrifice his own godson, and Remus was suddenly very glad that Mia had not been around to see the aftermath of this war.

"None of us could have known what Sirius was capable of," Dumbledore offered.

"Mia could have. Mia knew." He winced at the thought. Had she known this would happen? Or had things changed? She could not have known. Known that the love of her life would betray her brother and sister-in-law, set the whole family up to be murdered? *No. Mia hadn't known.* She would never have loved Sirius if she had known, Soul Bond or not.

"Perhaps. It took a little . . . negotiating, but I was able to secure Sirius's things for you." Dumbledore handed over a small box that had clearly been resized.

Remus took the box and waved his wand to enlarge it before opening it. Inside, he saw that it held an Undetectable Extension Charm. He reached in and could feel the leather of Sirius's jacket and a small silver chain that Remus knew was Sirius's secret emergency Portkey to Potter Manor. At the bottom, Remus took hold of and removed the long chestnut wand.

He growled, looking down at Sirius's wand in his hand. "Why would I want this?"

"I thought perhaps the items might have sentimental value," Dumbledore suggested. "I know he and Miss Potter shared many things."

Anger finally swelled up inside of Remus, and he dropped the box before gripping the wand at either end, eager to snap it in half. However, the second that he put pressure on the wood, he felt a sharp pain sting into his hand, and he dropped the wand entirely. Looking wide-eyed down as it fell into the open box, he sighed in frustration.

"Interesting," Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "It appears the Unbreakable Vow is still at work."

Remus rubbed his injured hand, bitter over the warning that the Vow had given him. "I vowed to defer to her requests and judgments in all things regarding the future. I promised her I'd . . . For some reason, I still have to take care of that traitorous bastard by keeping his wand intact. Damn her. Damn them both!"

Dumbledore sighed. "You bear too many burdens, Remus; for that, I am sorry."

"Where's Harry, Albus?"

"With his family."

"*I'm* his family," Remus insisted. "I'm the only family he has left."

"Not so. Hagrid and I delivered him to Petunia and Vernon Dursley."

Remus felt his stomach drop in shock and outrage. "You did *what*? Are you *mad*? Have you *met* those Muggles? He's supposed to be in *my* care! You think I wasn't privy to Lily and James's will? It's *my* job to take care of him. *My* job to keep him safe!"

"Then help me keep him safe, Remus. Aurors have seized Sirius's flat, so to my knowledge, you've no place to live."

Remus sucked in a sharp breath as the news hit his ears. He had no home to go to. He had lost everything: his parents, his best friend, his family, and now his home.

"Recent anti-werewolf legislation has passed, preventing you from legally being bound as Harry's guardian," Dumbledore continued. "If I were to hand him over to you, the Ministry would just take him away, and he would be in *their* grip. The boy is special. Important. He, merely an infant, defeated Voldemort. Left amongst the Muggles, he will not be studied, used, or attacked. I dislike the discrimination that comes along with your condition, my boy, but would you add to the attention Harry will receive by sharing your burden with him?"

Remus swallowed hard. "No. Of *course* not."

Apparently, that was enough to let Dumbledore believe that Remus would not do anything rash in regards to Harry's safety. He continued speaking, but Remus tuned him out as he stared at the graves of his freshly-buried friends. He wished that he had been there to protect them. He wished that he could visit Frank and Alice, but werewolves were now barred from entering St Mungo's. He wished that there was enough of Peter left behind to bury.

He hoped that Sirius was suffering in Azkaban.

*"Remus, I love you."* Mia's last words to him came into his mind, washing over him with a strange unsettling guilt. *"You're my best friend, and I love you. Please take care of him. Remember what I said: trust Sirius. Always Sirius."*

*"I promise."*

Why had he promised her such a thing? Why had he put that Time-Turner around her neck? It changed everything. It ruined everything.

Remus was certain that in trying to save her, he had ruined the future she had come from.

# BOOK THREE

*The Promise*

## Chapter One Hundred One

### *Belong*

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*If this is the moment I stand here on my own  
If this is my rite of passage that somehow leads me home  
I might be afraid, But it's my turn to be brave*  
(Brave - Idina Menzel)

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**July 18th, 1990**

Several streets from Charing Cross Road where the Leaky Cauldron was nestled snugly between a bookshop and a record store, sat a small, lovely house with a blue door and cream-coloured curtains hanging in the windows. Inside the charming home, Richard and Helen Granger sat around their dining room table, smiling as their soon-to-be eleven-year-old daughter attempted to eat her breakfast—porridge with blueberries instead of raspberries—with one hand while holding a book in the other, her chocolate-brown gaze glued to the pages.

"What do you want for your birthday, Hermione?" Helen asked her daughter. "Only two months away."

"Books please," Hermione responded, her voice slightly monotone as she carefully turned the page of the novel in her hand, her attention entirely taken up by the story.

"Always books," Richard said with a laugh, making eye contact with his wife, who only shook her head in amusement.

As he stood and began clearing away the dishes, Richard went to reach for Hermione's empty bowl only to find it missing from the table. He blinked several times in confusion and turned to the kitchen where he saw the small dish already sitting in the sink. He paused for several moments, trying to remember if he had already taken his daughter's empty bowl, or if he had seen his wife or child stand up from the table at any time in the last few minutes. He tried to brush off the confused feeling, but it was getting harder and harder these days when strange things occurred in their home more often.

The first time Richard thought he saw something peculiar occur, Hermione had only been a toddler. She had been going through an attachment phase and cried every

morning when her father had to leave for work. It just so happened that when she could not be consoled, he would suddenly lose his car keys only to find them in her crib. After the fifth day in a row that this happened, Richard decided to take the tube to work.

After so many years of strange occurrences, Richard Granger might have thought himself mad, or at the very least suffering from some sort of neurological problem, but thankfully—if he could truly be thankful for such a thing—his wife experienced similar oddities. Neither could figure out what was happening. Nor did they wish to follow the rabbit hole so far as to land on the cover of a tabloid, talking about haunted houses and alien sightings, especially since all strange happenings in or out of their home had a common factor: Hermione.

Instead, they merely agreed that their child was special and quietly left it at that.

And special was an understatement.

Pulled from his thoughts by the rapping on the front door, Richard looked at his wife. "Expecting someone?"

"Not this early," Helen said as she stood from the table, affectionately smoothing down Hermione's bushy brown hair as she moved past her; a part of her hoped that the locks would move past this frizzy stage quickly. She knew that the other children in Hermione's class teased her about her hair. It did not help that her front teeth were overly large as well, but both Richard and Helen had agreed that braces could wait.

Helen opened the front door with a smile, half expecting their neighbour, Mrs Smythe, to come looking for her lost cats again—the pesky little beasts had a habit of finding their way into their house, specifically Hermione's bedroom. Just another quirk in the lives of the Grangers.

When the door fully opened, Helen did not see Mrs Smythe looking for her cats, but she saw instead an older woman with black hair pulled back into a tight bun, square spectacles covering stern but kind eyes, wearing a strange-looking black and emerald dress with a hemline that swept the ground.

"Helen Granger?"

"Yes, may I help you?"

"Actually, *I'm* here to be of service to *you*, my dear," the woman said with a polite smile. "My name is Minerva McGonagall, and I am a professor and the deputy headmistress

for a very exclusive and special school for gifted children. I've come today to speak with you about your daughter, Hermione."

Elsewhere in the home, Hermione stood in front of the bathroom mirror after brushing her teeth, grumbling a bit at her reflection as she attempted to pull her overly thick and bushy hair back into a hair tie that snapped after one twist. She angrily threw the broken hair tie in the bin, feeling static electricity run through the unmanageable mane.

As she made her way back to the dining room to fetch her book from the table, she heard the sound of her mother screaming and, in a fit of reckless courage, went running to see what had happened. She came into the living room to see her mother and father clutching one another desperately, staring wide-eyed at a small tabby cat sitting on the couch in front of them.

"What happened?" Hermione asked. "Is that another of Mrs Smythe's cats?" She looked at the small animal that seemed . . . different. "I told her I wasn't stealing them, they just like me," the little girl said with pleading eyes, not noticing the way her parents were now staring at her as though she'd grown a tail of her own. "What's wrong?"

Then, right before her eyes, the cat on the couch transformed itself into a tall woman with black hair. Hermione gaped at the sight—though, instead of the fear that her parents were displaying, Hermione felt excitement and wonder bubbling up inside of her.

"I knew it! I knew magic was real!" she said, heart racing. "Are you a shapechanger from Homana, like in my books?!" She rushed to the dining room table and pulled off of it the small novel she had been reading that morning.

The older woman stared down at Hermione, looking at her with a similar expression that her own parents were using as they gawked back at the stranger. Hermione got the distinct impression that she was at a loss for words—uncomfortably so. Eventually, the woman looked at the book in Hermione's hand, and her brows furrowed. "No, my dear, I am not a *shapechanger* from . . . wherever you mentioned," she said, clearing her throat. "I'm a *witch* from Scotland."

"A witch?" Hermione dropped her book onto the coffee table, turning expectantly to the woman, ignoring the strange way her mother was squeaking. "Like Glinda from *The Wizard of Oz*? Or the White Witch from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*? Or the Three Witches from *Macbeth*? Or like Circe, Nimue, and Morgan le Fay?"

The woman—*the witch*, Hermione corrected—gazed at her for several long moments before answering, "No, no, no," followed by "yes, yes, and yes. Though, considering your current taste in reading material," she continued, eyeing the book on the table, "I doubt you've heard of the latter three in a proper, historically accurate context. Do you read anything other than fiction?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Hermione replied excitedly. "I read anything I can get my hands on."

"Good." The woman reached into her robes, removing a small box. She then pulled out a long piece of wood and waved it over the box, which magically enlarged. "Then I have something for you. An early birthday gift, my dear."

Hermione took the box gratefully and opened it. There, nestled inside, was a book. "*Hogwarts, A History*," she read aloud. Tucked inside the front cover of the book was a cream-coloured envelope with green writing. She looked down at it and smiled, running her finger over the scripted lettering across it that read:

*Miss Hermione Granger  
First Bedroom on the Second Floor  
146 Vulpe Drive  
London, England*

She quickly opened the letter with excitement and read the inside.

*HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY*

*Dear Miss Granger,*

*We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment. Term begins on the first of September.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Minerva McGonagall  
Deputy Headmistress*

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An hour later, Richard and Helen Granger were visibly much calmer as they asked Minerva McGonagall as many questions as possible. Hermione, as predicted, asked more.

Minerva assured them that they had another year to think about whether or not to send the girl to the magical boarding school in Scotland, and the Grangers—save for Hermione—seemed to be pleased they had time to process the news of having a Muggle-born witch.

After a polite conversation over tea, Minerva rose from the sofa, said farewell to Hermione—who immediately rushed off to her room to read her new book—and then turned to say goodbye to the Grangers.

"I have one last question I hope you might be able to answer," she said as she stepped through the front door. "Does the name 'Mia Potter' mean anything to you?"

"No," Helen said, shaking her head. "Should it?"

"I don't think so. A former pupil of mine," Minerva said with a tight smile. "Your daughter reminds me very much of her. She was bright and eager to learn, though your Hermione appears to be a great deal more polite," she said pointedly, recalling far too many detentions with the young witch and her Marauder entourage. "The former pupil of mine, Mia, has a nephew who will be attending Hogwarts next year as well. I imagine he could use a good friend like your girl."

Minerva made her way back to Hogwarts via Apparition to the Leaky Cauldron and then a quick Floo trip into Albus Dumbledore's office. She stood in front of the large desk, arms folded and the cross-eyed look on her face she could possibly summon.

"Good afternoon, Minerva." Albus smiled, blue eyes twinkling. "Lemon drop?"

"No, I do not want a bloody lemon drop!" The older witch hissed. "Would you care to inform me as to why I stumbled upon a rather interesting coincidence this afternoon?"

"That depends upon the coincidence."

"The coincidence I speak of is the fact that a young Muggle-born witch I met today bears a striking, near mirror image resemblance to that of a former student of mine. I imagine the name Mia Potter rings a bell?"

If he tried to hide the brief flash of guilt, he didn't do it very well, and Minerva caught it immediately. "Albus! Explain yourself right this minute, or I swear to Circe, I will transfigure you into a newspaper and set you beneath Fawkes's perch!" She huffed. "Is it really her? How?"

Albus nodded and then simply said, "Time-Turner."

Minerva gasped. "So is she Hermione Granger or Mia Potter?"

"Both, though at this moment in time she is merely Hermione. One day in the future, I imagine, the two will converge into one."

"Merlin help me if that day should ever come." She groaned and then collapsed onto the chair in front of the headmaster's desk. "This girl has quite a bit less attitude than Miss Potter. How will this work, Albus? If *I* was able to recognise her even with the subtle differences, what about people who *knew* the girl? Poppy, Pomona, Filius . . . Merlin, what will we do about Severus?! Do you know how often I had to put that little witch in detention for striking him? And now he's to be her professor? He's already known for having a sour disposition with the students."

"Perhaps a subtle Notice-Me-Not would do the trick," Dumbledore suggested with a smile.

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### July 31st, 1991

Hermione Granger joyfully followed behind Professor McGonagall as she was led through the Wizarding shopping district called Diagon Alley. After setting up an account at Gringotts Wizarding Bank, they began collecting all of her books—and to Hermione's delight, there were so very many—a cauldron, potions supplies, inkwells and quills, and even an entire wardrobe of robes that Professor McGonagall explained would change in colour once she had been sorted into a specific House.

"Professor? Would it be all right if I went back into Flourish and Blotts?" Hermione pleaded. "There were just a few extra books I thought I could read in my spare time, or at least between now and September first."

Professor McGonagall looked down at the girl thoughtfully. "Certainly, Miss Granger. I need to step into the Magical Menagerie to pick up a few things for my cats. Unless you think you'd like a familiar now?"

Hermione shook her head. "I doubt I'll have much time to look after a pet what with all the studying I'll need to do. I've so much to catch up on already. An entire history of the Wizarding world I was never taught because I'm Muggle-born."

"Being Muggle-born is nothing to be ashamed of, Miss Granger. I can see quite a bright future for you." When Hermione beamed up at her, Professor McGonagall cleared her throat. "Now, we'll meet at the Magical Menagerie in ten minutes or so, yes?"

"Thank you, Professor." Hermione smiled and turned toward the bookshop just as Professor McGonagall stepped away.

A slender, beautiful blonde moved quickly past Hermione on the right, her feet gracefully carrying her as she sped away from the bookstore. Her bright blue eyes looked back once, her mouth set in a tight line of impatience. "Draco, hurry. Your father has a meeting later, and I've promised him that we'd be done by then!"

"What about my robes?" a boy behind Hermione asked.

"Fine, run off to Madam Malkin's and have her charge the account. Your father's inside getting your books, and I'll meet you at Ollivanders," the boy's mother called back to her son.

Hermione turned around to follow the woman's gaze, but as she moved, she collided with something and lost her balance. "Ow!" shouted the voice of a young male. Hermione looked up into a pale, pointed face with silver-grey eyes narrowed menacingly at her.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she mumbled, shocked by the way the boy sneered at her.

"Watch where you're going!" the blond snapped and shoved her out of his way.

Hermione tripped forward. She tried to recover her balance, but fell to the cobblestone road, her knees and palms scratching against the rough surface of the street. She watched the blond boy storm away toward Madam Malkin's. "Rude." Hermione sniffled and looked down at her skinned knee, frowning as a few other people in fancy robes passed her by.

She reached into the bag she'd obtained from the robe shop earlier, using the edge of one of the black sleeves of a robe to dab the blood away from her cut before shoving everything back in and standing up. No longer wanting to head back into the bookshop, Hermione turned around to move toward the Magical Menagerie where she was to meet Professor McGonagall. Eyes on the ground in dejection, she did her best to navigate the unfamiliar street while catching bits and pieces of conversations happening around her.

"Listen, Harry, would you mind if I slipped off for a pick-me-up in the Leaky Cauldron? I hate them Gringotts carts."

It was incredibly odd to hear such foreign shops referred to so casually, and Hermione wondered if she would ever feel like she belonged amongst the witches and wizards or if she would always feel a bit out of her element.

She turned once more, losing her way as she walked past Madam Malkin's and again found herself on the ground after being run into by another boy. She growled as her books scattered across the cobblestone.

"Sorry," a kind voice spoke above her.

"It's all right. I'm starting to think it's just me," she commented with a sigh as she gathered her things. She stood up, dusting off her clothes, smiling when a hand held out her dropped copy of *A History of Magic*. "Thank you."

The skinny, black-haired boy in front of her nodded awkwardly, smiled at her, and then without another word walked into the robe shop behind her. Hermione's gaze followed him, smirking slightly at the way his hair stuck up straight in the back. "At least *some* people here are nice," she said to herself.

After a short lunch at the Leaky Cauldron, Professor McGonagall and Hermione made their way to a narrow, shabby-looking shop ahead of them. Peeling, gold letters over the door read, *Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 B.C.* Hermione smiled brightly up at the sign as they entered the shop.

"Good afternoon." Ollivander smiled as he approached the counter, glancing down at the little witch and then looking up at Professor McGonagall. "Professor, always a pleasure. You won't believe who came into my shop not ten minutes ago!" the older wizard said excitedly.

"I can imagine," Professor McGonagall said with little patience.

"Harry Potter!"

"Harry Potter?" Hermione looked up at the man curiously. "Is that someone famous?"

Ollivander stared at her as though she were speaking another language.

"Read this one," Professor McGonagall said to Hermione, pointing to her copy of *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century*. "As excited as we all are that Harry Potter has returned to the Wizarding world, Mr Ollivander, this young witch needs a wand, and we haven't all day."

"Yes, yes." Ollivander grinned. "*New* wand you say?" He turned back to look at the young witch curiously, as though he were looking for something but was unable to figure out exactly what. "Are you—?"

"Yes, a *new* wand!" Professor McGonagall snapped impatiently. "This is Hermione Granger; she'll be starting Hogwarts this year."

Ollivander looked at her as if he were shaking off a lingering, unspoken thought. "Yes, yes, of course. Hold out your arm. That's it." He measured Hermione from shoulder to finger, then wrist to elbow, shoulder to floor, knee to armpit, and round her head. As he measured, he said, "Every Ollivander wand has a core of a powerful magical substance, Miss Granger. We use unicorn hairs, phoenix tail feathers, and the heartstrings of dragons. No two Ollivander wands are the same, just as no two unicorns, dragons, or phoenixes are quite the same. And, of course, you will never get such good results with another witch's wand."

The wandmaker then turned to the shelves, letting his hands hover around the boxes for several minutes before he paused, looked back at Hermione, and then said, "Hmm," while tapping his index finger against his chin. Finally, he walked into the back and returned with a long box in his hand.

He removed a small wand from the box and held it out to her. As Hermione took it, a warmth filled her fingers like soft bathwater. She grinned. "This feels . . . good."

"Ah, wonderful!" Ollivander smiled. "Ten and three-quarters inch, vinewood with the core of a dragon heartstring," he explained and Hermione stared at the man excitedly.

"Dragon heartstring?"

"Yes, Miss Granger, very powerful. The dragon that donated the heartstring for your wand was an old Ukrainian Ironbelly. It donated three strings in total quite some years ago. One I used for a willow wand that I sold to a young Muggle-born girl just like you," he said, holding back tears in his eyes as though he were reflecting on the witch in question. "And another vinewood I sold that same year, just a bit shorter than this. The girl who bought it was . . . was . . ." He smiled thoughtfully as he looked her over, a strange confusion in his eyes. Eventually, he shook his head and cleared his throat. "Both were quite amazing witches."

Hermione was grinning madly as she held her wand delicately in her fingers.

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**September 6th, 1991**

"Seamus Finnigan," Professor Snape drawled as he went over the roll, just as each professor had done in the rest of her classes.

"Here."

"Gregory Goyle."

"Here."

"Hermione Granger."

"Present!" Hermione said, raising her hand, immediately drawing the professor's attention.

Black eyes fell on her, and suddenly she felt as though she'd done something wrong. The professor stared at her, a look of concentration on his face as though he were trying to place her. After a moment, his gaze drew away from her, though he had a sudden sneer fixed to his face. As his focus moved on to the next name on the list, Professor Snape reached a hand up and subconsciously rubbed at his jaw as though it ached.

Snape's eyes drew back to the list where his gaze narrowed further. "Ah, yes," he said softly. "Harry Potter. Our new . . . celebrity."

Hermione turned to look at Harry. He had been nice to her on the train despite his red-headed friend being a bit of a prat, and Hermione couldn't help but feel a little bad for him over all the unwanted attention he was receiving. She'd read up on his story in *Modern Magical History*, *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts*, and *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century*, and despite the fact that the books all focused on Harry's supposed defeat of You-Know-Who, Hermione couldn't help but feel the grief over everything that the boy had lost.

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making," Professor Snape began. Hermione focused her entire attention on him, eager to begin her studies under an actual Potions Master. "As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I do not expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses . . . I can teach you

how to bottle fame, brew glory, even put a stopper in death . . . if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

"Potter!" he said suddenly. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

*Draught of Living Death!* Hermione thought excitedly as her hand shot into the air.

Harry and Ron shared a confused look that caused Hermione to roll her eyes. Eventually, the black-haired boy answered, "I don't know, sir."

Snape's lips curled into a sneer. "Tut, tut . . . Fame clearly isn't everything."

Hermione continued holding her hand up high, but Professor Snape ignored her.

"Let's try again. Potter, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

*The stomach of a goat!* Hermione stretched her hand back into the air as high as it would go.

"I don't know, sir," Harry replied.

"Thought you wouldn't open a book before coming, eh, Potter?"

Hermione's hand quivered in the air.

"What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

*Nothing! They're the same plant!* she shrieked inside of her head and then actually stood up, her hand stretching toward the dungeon ceiling.

"I don't know," said Harry quietly. "I think Hermione does, though, why don't you try her?"

*Yes! Yes! Ask me! I know it!*

"Sit down!" Snape snapped at Hermione.

Hermione fell into her chair, a frown overtaking her face as she looked down at her open Potion book, silently wondering what the heck she'd ever done to Professor Snape to earn such disdain from the man. While she quietly began her brew and listened closely as Professor Snape continued to berate Harry and Neville, Hermione wondered if she'd made the right choice in coming to this school. Less than one week in and she had already angered one of her professors, hadn't made a single friend, and half of her own House couldn't stand to be around her. She wondered to herself if she even really belonged in the Wizarding world.

Suddenly a hissing cloud of acid green smoke filled the dungeon. Hermione darted a glance to the side where Neville, Seamus, Harry, and Ron were moving quickly away from

their table. Seamus's melted cauldron spewed their destroyed potion across the floor. As the liquid touched the first set of shoes, melting them, everyone jumped on their stools to avoid it. Hermione frowned as she heard Neville crying in the corner, wincing as red boils sprang up over his limbs.

*Probably added the porcupine quills before taking the cauldron off of the fire,* she thought to herself.

"Idiot boy!" Snape snarled as he cleared away the mess, glaring down at poor, frightened Neville. "I suppose you added the porcupine quills before taking the cauldron off the fire?"

Hermione briefly smirked to herself. Maybe she was exactly where she belonged.

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## **June 20th, 1992**

One mountain troll, a three-headed dog, a baby dragon, a giant chess set, and two new best friends later, Hermione Granger was thrilled to be a witch. Granted, her current level of excitement sprang from the news that not only had she passed her end of year exams, but she had the highest scores of her entire year. Harry and Ron were just pleased to have not been kicked out, but winning the House Cup was an incredible bonus.

Oh, and surviving an attack by You-Know-Who.

The three friends gathered in the back of the Hogwarts Express, sharing stories and Chocolate Frogs.

"I got Armando Dippet," Ron stated, showing off his card before practically swallowing the Chocolate Frog whole. "He used to be Headmaster of Hogwarts before Dumbledore."

*"Professor Dumbledore,"* Hermione corrected as she opened up her copy of *Hogwarts, A History*.

"Why're you always reading that thing, 'Mione?" Ron asked.

Hermione made a face. "Don't call me that, I don't like nicknames," she informed him. "And I'm always reading it because it's my favourite book. You don't understand because you grew up in a Wizarding family. But when I found out I was a witch, it was like

all the missing pieces of my life started fitting into place. I feel like a puzzle, and this book helped to show me what the final picture should be when I'm all put together."

Harry nodded. "I know how you feel."

Hermione smiled. "You both are two of the pieces," she explained. "Just two pieces of the big puzzle that is Hermione Granger, Muggle-born witch," she said proudly as she flipped the page of her book. "It's just amazing to see the history that Hogwarts has. Even this train has an incredible history. Did you know it's over one hundred and fifty years old?"

"Looks like it." Ron chuckled as he noted the scratch marks all along the door of their carriage.

Hermione turned to observe the marks that had been placed over the many years, shaking her head in disappointment. At the very top of the doorway, carved in strangely elegant script for vandalism, read: *Marauders Only. All Others Will be Cursed*. She rolled her eyes dramatically until her focus fell to a pair of initials inside of a heart scratched into the wall near her seat.

*S.B. + M.P.*

Hermione pursed her lips, returning her attention back to her book, muttering, "So disrespectful."

## Chapter One Hundred Two

### *Prisons and Cellars*

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*I hurt myself today, To see if I still feel  
I focus on the pain, The only thing that's real  
What have I become? My sweetest friend  
Everyone I know, Goes away in the end  
Beneath the stains of time, The feelings disappear  
You are someone else, I am still right here  
(Hurt - Johnny Cash)*

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**July 31st, 1993**

Far away, on an island in the North Sea, sat a man in a prison cell. Just one of many prisoners lost in a blur of dirty clothes and empty eyes; just one of many prison cells lost in a blur of dirty floors and empty water buckets. Empty because the water could be used for drinking or bathing but not both. Somehow dehydration trumped filth, though it had been known that several prisoners chose death in the end; that is, if they could get away with it before some Auror had them stunned, bound, and brought before a Healer. It usually took just a few days before they were back to survivable health, living in their own filth once again and wishing for death.

Sirius Black *never* wished for death.

During the first year, he wished for nothing but vengeance. The following *five* years, he wished to be left alone, which worked out in his favour as there was no one—not even in Azkaban—who wanted to associate with him. Aurors, Healers, and visiting officials thought him to be a secret Death Eater, You-Know-Who's *supposedly* favourite servant, the man who betrayed the Potters. *Actual* Death Eaters living in Azkaban with him knew the truth, knew of his innocence, though none would say a word in his defence. Even if they did . . . who would believe them? To them, he was a blood-traitor, the last of a pureblood line gone to shit. Sirius was of the opinion that his family had gone to shit long before he was ever born.

For the last few years, Sirius wished for his family—his *real* family; the family he had chosen for himself.

In the beginning, he tried not to think about them too often. Dementors sensed his brief happiness and would flock to his cell to rid him of it. Terrified that they would steal away his memories—the last vestiges of humanity he retained—he focused instead on his innocence. Focused on Peter. Focused on his hate.

But hate has a way of breaking a man.

And Sirius Black refused to break.

He waited for short-lived relief when dementors were not in sight. He waited for times when Aurors changed shifts, carrying their Patronuses with them through the halls to protect themselves, or when escorting visitors, official or otherwise. Sometimes, there were even days, like today, when the highest of the Ministry came for inspections.

Surrounded by silvery Patronuses that drove away the dementors, Sirius breathed a sigh of relief at the absence of the horrid creatures, and leant his head back against the cement wall of his cell, wishing it was a giant pillow and that, instead of a cold, damp floor, he was in the warmth of a four-poster bed. Instead of the mouldy prison uniform, he wished for Muggle jeans and his leather jacket. Instead of devastating loneliness, he wished for a witch in his lap—*his* witch—running her fingers through his hair and kissing that spot just above his collarbone before descending down the rest of his body.

"Still alive, Black?" a voice called from outside his cell, pulling him out of his dreams.

Sirius Black was not *actually* a murderer, but he could kill for such an offence. His eyes turned upward to look into the smug, round face of Cornelius Fudge. *Minister Fudge* as the Aurors called him. He stood there in what had to be an outdated by now pinstriped cloak with the ugliest green bowler hat on top of his balding head, a rolled up *Daily Prophet* tucked under his arm.

"Here for the inspections," Fudge informed him as though they were acquaintances meeting for lunch instead of a convicted—as far as one could be considered convicted without having an actual trial—murderer, and one of the men who had put him in that very cell and *literally* branded him a danger to society.

Sirius silently scratched at the raised scar on his chest that identified him as an Azkaban prisoner. Just one of the few scars he had received upon being dumped on the wasted island in the North Sea. Another was a tattoo on his wrist, the only tattoo he had not chosen for himself: a prison number. Because that was all he was now: a number; one number in an ocean of screaming lunatics.

"And how are the inspections going, Minister?" Sirius asked. He had thought not to speak to the man, but a genuine conversation came so infrequently throughout the years, and he had taken note early on that being a smartarse earned him nothing except beatings.

"Quite well. Any complaints?" Fudge asked with a snort.

There had been one point in his lifelong sentence that would have seen Sirius throwing himself against the bars in an attempt to smack the look off of the man's face. As it was, he no longer had the strength. His body had been starved nearly to the point of death so many times that it took genuine effort to lift a spoon to his mouth to eat. Not that he was afforded the luxury of things like spoons, but he liked to think of a time when things like silverware were not something he yearned for. It was almost funny to hear new prisoners look at their first meal inside of Azkaban, wondering aloud how they were supposed to eat gruel off of a plate without the aid of a utensil and no wand in hand to transfigure one. Thankfully, Sirius had a canine Animagus living inside of him, and he cared little for what other prisoners or guards thought at the sight of the man eating off of the floor like a dog.

Sirius cleared his dry throat "Well, the room service is abysmal, and the champagne I was brought was a 1962 vintage when I *clearly* asked for the 1974."

Cornelius Fudge laughed at the joke, and for a split second Sirius Black almost felt human.

"Didn't think after what you did to the family you'd be inclined to celebrate his birthday," Fudge said, his previous laugh gone from his eyes—disdain left behind in the wake.

"What birthday?" Sirius asked.

"Harry Potter's," Fudge said and threw in his copy of the *Daily Prophet*. There at the top was the date: the thirty-first of July.

*Thirteen*, Sirius thought. His godson, his boy, was thirteen now. He would be starting his third year of Hogwarts—an important year, picking his elective classes. Sirius wondered if he would be like Lily, Remus, and Mia and pick things like Runes and Arithmancy, or if he would try for something more adventurous like Care of Magical Creatures. Sirius had wondered many things about Harry Potter over the years.

There had not been word about his godson for ten years following the death of Lily and James and Sirius's subsequent imprisonment, but two years ago, when Harry first went

to Hogwarts, Sirius heard about him all the way across the North Sea. Aurors, Healers, and guards were terrible gossips.

*"Harry Potter! Can you believe it!" one guard exclaimed. "My boy's a year ahead of him at Hogwarts. From what I hear he looks just like his father."*

Except the eyes, *Sirius thought*. Harry had had Lily's eyes.

*"Well, of course, Harry Potter would end up in Gryffindor," a Healer mentioned to her friend in passing one day. "Weren't both of his parents in that House? He would have been a boon to Ravenclaw if you ask me."*

*Gryffindor. Sirius had grinned at the news like a proud father would have. Like James would have.*

*"Saw it with my own eyes when I was visiting my daughter. She's a Chaser for Slytherin. He's not the best flyer, mind—broom was thrashing about—but there, in the end, Harry Potter caught the Snitch with his mouth!" An Auror laughed with his partner in the corner of the hall next to Sirius's cell. "Youngest Seeker in a century, they say."*

*Sirius had not dared to ask questions or even let on that he listened in on their conversations, too afraid that they would stop talking around him, and he needed to know anything and everything about Harry—the one good thing he felt he had left in this world. A world that had taken everything else away from him. News about Harry Potter was life-sustaining.*

*"Living with Muggles," a Ministry assigned Curse-Breaker had said as he passed through one day, evaluating the security wards. "Can you believe it? Harry Potter living with Muggles all these years."*

*"What?" Sirius had actually muttered out loud, though no one seemed to hear him.*

*"Well, wasn't his mum a Mudblood?"*

*"Yeah, they're her kin, I imagine."*

*Sirius had rushed to the bars in a rage. "What?!"*

That incident had been over a year ago, and Sirius had to be stunned in order for a Healer to force a special prison-brewed Calming Draught down his throat. He woke up two days later bruised and broken but still just as pissed off about finding out that Harry—for some fucking reason—had been raised by Petunia and Vernon Dursley.

*What the fuck had Dumbledore been thinking?*

He had known about the fates of the Longbottoms. Unlike the rest of the prison population, who all constantly denied the crimes they had committed, Bellatrix and the Lestrangle brothers were all too pleased with themselves when they had been brought in

shouting tales of their triumph. Still, even if Alice and Frank were incapacitated, that left Remus. *Why wasn't Remus raising the boy like James and Lily wanted?* It made Sirius worry about the ultimate fate of his friend—a friend he thought had been a traitor—but it was not as though Sirius could request information about anyone on the outside, especially a werewolf.

He traced his thumb over the date on Fudge's newspaper as though it were Harry's face, remembering thirteen years ago when he had woken from an alcohol-induced coma just in time for James to punch him repeatedly and for Lily's water to break. Lost in his thoughts and memories, Sirius did not even notice when Fudge left with the Aurors. Clinging to the paper in his hands, he felt immensely grateful for something to read. Despite his youthful reputation for laziness, Sirius had stockpiled knowledge like a weapon he might one day find useful. To let his brain go to waste here in Azkaban alongside his body over the years was as heart-breaking as it was to touch his filthy, matted hair. He could remember a time when his black mane was clean and soft enough for a witch—*his* witch—to run her fingers through.

He looked over recent Quidditch news and the reports of the upcoming World Cup that would take place the following year. Merlin, how he missed flying. He glanced down at the centre of the paper where a family photograph sat.

#### MINISTRY OF MAGIC EMPLOYEE SCOOPS GRAND PRIZE

*Arthur Weasley, Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office at the Ministry of Magic, has won the annual Daily Prophet Grand Prize Galleon Draw.*

*A delighted Mr Weasley told the Daily Prophet, "We will be spending the gold on a summer holiday in Egypt, where our eldest son, Bill, works as a Curse-Breaker for Gringotts Wizarding Bank."*

*The Weasley family will be spending a month in Egypt, returning for the start of the new school year at Hogwarts, which five of the Weasley children currently attend.*

"Good for them," Sirius commented to himself as he remembered a young Arthur Weasley, one of Mia's friends from the Ministry. He recalled that the man had numerous children and there was some joke going on where he and Mia were betting on the gender of the most recent. Sirius wondered who would have won.

His eyes scanned over the photograph of the lovely family: proud parents and excited children. He wondered how many children he and Mia would have had by now. He wondered if Remus would have found his mate and settled down to pop out a few pups. He wondered if James and Lily would have had more than just Harry. Sirius decided that Harry could have used a sister. James and Mia were a perfect pair growing up, and he was certain that Lily would have insisted on having someone like Mia there to temper the ego that Harry would have certainly inherited from his father.

Smirking at the thought, he scanned the photo again, taking notice of the two youngest children in the picture. The brother had his arm wrapped around his sister, both smiling brightly, and there on the boy's shoulder was a rat.

Sirius's smile faded as he noticed something strange about the rat's toes: one was missing.

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### **August 3rd, 1993**

Remus groaned as he woke up in the dark cellar. He hated this cellar even more than the Shrieking Shack. He longed for the Potter Orchards where he could actually run around but, as it was, his only available space was the bloody cellar that had been properly warded against his wolf form. The same form that made its appearance each and every month, taking full control of his body and leaving him broken, wounded, and exhausted the following morning.

Shutting the cellar door behind him, Remus locked it with a tired wave of his wand in a futile attempt to make it disappear for another month. He stretched his sore muscles and stopped in front of a mirror that hung on the wall in the hallway to check if he had inflicted any more permanent damage to himself.

"No scars," Remus whispered to himself thoughtfully. "Just bruises. Much obliged, Mr Moony." He winced as a deep-set pain shot through his lower back. Sighing, he stared at his reflection. For being only thirty-three, Remus figured that he looked much closer to forty. His skin was pale and sallow, his sandy blond hair was turning grey, and the dark

circles under his eyes made him look haunted, which was often how he felt, especially post full moon.

He walked out into the kitchen where he put the kettle on, turning to look at the three remaining tins of soup he had left from the groceries he bought a month ago thanks to a temporary job he had been able to take working as a janitor at a Muggle grocers. *Muggle* because there were no laws preventing him from working there. *Temporary* because even in Muggle London, he was still a werewolf and had to call in sick several days each month. After the first two months, he had been taken aside and told that he was developing an attendance pattern and needed to break it or else they would find someone who could do the job properly.

At least his last cheque was able to fill the cupboards with food. Now it was running out, and Remus was wishing like hell that the garden he had attempted to plant earlier that year had taken root. He mentally kicked himself for dropping Herbology sixth year.

He yawned as he walked into the small living room, eager to sit down on the sofa and relax the morning away with a good book. Unfortunately, the sofa was occupied.

"Mother of fucking Merlin!" Remus shouted in shock, jumping back at the sight of another wizard in his home. The hot tea sloshed over the sides of the cup and onto his hands, burning him. He winced, dropping the mug entirely. "P-Professor Dumbledore?"

"Good morning, Remus." Dumbledore's blue eyes twinkled. "I apologise for causing a fright."

"How . . . ?" Remus began, heart racing and breath unsteady. "How did you get through my wards without me being alerted?"

Dumbledore merely rose an incredulous eyebrow.

"Is there something I can help you with, sir?" Remus asked, reaching for his wand to clean up the mess of spilt tea and shattered glass on the floor. He ignored the burns on his hands entirely. What was one more injury? "I rarely entertain, but I could offer you tea if you'd like."

"No, thank you," Dumbledore answered with a smile that faded into a soft look of pity that Remus was all too familiar with. "I was sorry to hear about your father."

Remus frowned. "Thank you."

"The two of you reconciled before he died?"

He nodded. "Something like that."

After losing his flat in Diagon Alley, Remus had nowhere else to go and came pleading to his father for refuge. Lyall Lupin accepted him back with the stipulations that Remus not get involved with anyone else—as it was his relationship with Mia Potter that had apparently kicked Lyall's worries into full force. Remus knew that his father had a problem long before he ever became involved with Mia, but there was no sense in arguing, not when Remus had no desire to take a witch—especially back when the only one he was *destined* for had not even entered Hogwarts yet—so he had agreed to the ridiculous rules.

Over the years, he cared for his ailing father, who still drank too much, but nowhere near what Remus had previously seen Sirius do. Lyall, for instance, never put himself into a coma. Though, in the end, he *did* drink himself to death. Cirrhosis was something that rarely killed wizards and witches—Sirius Black was living proof of that. A wizard could withstand much more damage to their organs than a Muggle, but it was not impossible. Lyall Lupin had eventually succumbed to the decades of disease, leaving Remus the cottage and not a Sickle more.

"I hear you're looking for work," Dumbledore commented thoughtfully. "A friend of mine says you come by the Ministry several times a month to drop off applications."

Remus's eyes widened slightly. He had, in fact, dropped off several applications at the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office and various other departments located on Level Two inside the Ministry. He reapplied *at least* once a month, always knowing that he would never get the job. What the application *did* offer him, however, was a brief glimpse into the Auror Office where a recent Hogwarts graduate with occasionally purple hair had taken to following old Alastor Moody around, peppering him with questions, requesting assignments, and—at least twice a day—tripping over the bin in the corner of the room.

With only a murderer locked away in Azkaban as the single solitary remaining member of his pack—save for Harry, of course, whom he was forbidden from contacting—Remus silently kept watch over his mate throughout the years. First, by coinciding trips to Scotland to overlap with Hogsmeade weekends where he could watch from a distance to make sure she was safe and happy, knowing that he could offer her nothing else. Later, when she graduated only to join the Aurors, he had been overwhelmed by fear and the driving need to protect her. It was only the memory of Mia's comforting words that kept him from seeking out Nymphadora Tonks. Mia knew them in the future,

which meant that Nymphadora—who liked to be called Tonks—was safe . . . *for now*. Of course, that all depended on whether or not Remus had ruined that potential future that Mia had come from.

"I'm looking for a job *anywhere*, to be honest," Remus casually replied.

"Lovely collection," Dumbledore commented, scanning Remus's bookshelves that were covered from floor to ceiling in every subject imaginable, most of them regarding defensive measures against Dark Arts, Ancient Runes, and a few selected titles on Time Magic.

Remus had everything from *Most Macabre Monstrosities*, and *Merpeople: A Comprehensive Guide to Their Language and Customs*, to *A Compendium of Common Curses and Their Counter-Actions*, and surprisingly *Lupine Lawlessness: Why Lycanthropes Don't Deserve to Live*.

Dumbledore's fingers drifted over that particular book. "Have you read *Wanderings with Werewolves*?"

Remus snorted and folded his arms across his chest "Absolutely not. Gilderoy Lockhart is an idiot in a class of his own."

"He was, until recently, our Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor," Dumbledore said with a smile.

Remus gaped in shock. "With all due respect, have you simply run out of people to take the job? They weren't *all* awful when I was in school, but even the anti-werewolf Death Eater that tried to kill us during fifth year wasn't *entirely* useless."

"It is quite a difficult position to fill," Dumbledore admitted, looking amused by Remus's irritation. "A problem I was hoping to rectify right now. How would you like a job at Hogwarts?"

It was as if the air had been sucked out of the room. *A job? A real job with money. Not just money, but a place to live that was not in dire need of repairs. Not just any place to live, but Hogwarts, a place that had been a second home to him for the most important years of his life. The home where he met his best friends, formed his pack, spent nights revising in the library and mornings eating together at the Gryffindor table where—Food! A job that provided three square meals a day!*

Remus was shaking at the very thought of not scraping by.

"The pay isn't quite as much as I'd like to offer," Dumbledore explained, evidently taking Remus's silence as a negotiation tactic. "But there is room and board, of course, and

you'll be able to design your own curriculum. We'll have a substitute on hand for the full moons, not to mention I'm certain Poppy would be happy to look over your health once again. Oh, and we've a Potions Master who is willing . . . or *will be* willing," he corrected himself, "to brew your Wolfsbane Potion."

Remus felt his knees buckle, and he fell to the floor.

Dumbledore ignored the reaction. "I'm not sure where you purchase your Wolfsbane Potion now, but I can assure you there is no better Potions Master than the one we have at Hogwarts."

"I don't." Remus choked the words out in a whisper.

Dumbledore leant his ear forward. "Beg your pardon?"

"I . . . I *don't* purchase Wolfsbane Potion," Remus said through a shaky exhale. "I can't . . . It's too . . . The cost is . . ." He closed his eyes, remembering the last time he'd had his own mind during the full moon. *Years*. It had been almost fourteen years. Fourteen years since Mia vanished.

"I'll take the job," Remus finally uttered with a grateful smile.

"Delightful!" Dumbledore said brightly and moved to stand. "Oh, and there was, of course, a reason I came first to you for this position. Have you been following the *Daily Prophet*?"

Remus shook his head. Papers cost money. "Haven't seen one for a few weeks. Why?"

Dumbledore reached into his robes, the smile gone from his face as he withdrew a folded copy of the WIZARDING paper.

Remus took it with trepidation and glanced down at the image of a face he had not seen in twelve years. "No," he muttered under his breath.

### BLACK STILL AT LARGE

*Sirius Black, possibly the most infamous prisoner ever to be held in Azkaban fortress, is still eluding capture, the Ministry of Magic confirmed today.*

*"We are doing all we can to recapture Black," said the Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge, this morning, "and we beg the magical community to remain calm."*

*Fudge has been criticised by some members of the International Federation of Warlocks for informing the Muggle Prime Minister of the crisis.*

*"Well, really, I had to, don't you know," said an irritable Fudge. "Black is mad. He's a danger to anyone who crosses him, magic or Muggle. I have the Prime Minister's assurance that he will not breathe a word of Black's true identity to anyone. And let's face it—who'd believe him if he did?"*

*While Muggles have been told that Black is carrying a gun (a kind of metal wand that Muggles use to kill each other), the magical community lives in fear of a massacre like that of twelve years ago, when Black murdered thirteen people with a single curse.*

"How is this even possible? You can't escape Azkaban." He stared, horrified, at the screaming image of Sirius Black—once his friend, once his pack. A man he thought could never harm those he loved. A man whom Remus was still, somehow, inexplicably *Vowed* to take care of thanks to a promise he had made to Mia fourteen years earlier before she vanished out of his life.

He remembered the Unbreakable Vow. He had promised Mia that only after fifteen years would he reveal to Sirius her true origins. Specifically *this* year. His mouth fell open as he realised that somehow, he must have not broken the timeline after all. But that also meant something much more horrific: she had known. She had known about Sirius and Azkaban—about Lily and James. She knew he would escape this year. Why? Why any of this?

Remus had reflected on his Vow from time to time over the years, usually when stumbling upon the box of Sirius's things that Dumbledore had given him at James and Lily's funeral. Remembering that he could not snap Sirius's wand without getting a painful warning, he had tried to push the thoughts of his former friend to the back of his mind knowing that it was pointless. It was all pointless as Sirius Black was stuck in Azkaban for the rest of his miserable life. And no one escaped Azkaban.

Except . . . Sirius Black had done just that.

## Chapter One Hundred Three

### *Memories*

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*I know who I am, but who are you?  
You're not looking like you used to  
You're on the other side of the mirror  
So nothing's looking quite as clear  
(Sunday Morning - No Doubt)*

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#### September 1st, 1993

Remus's nose twitched as a familiar scent wafted by.

*A forest after a rainstorm.*

The first of September just so happened to be the day before the full moon. Despite knowing he was going to feel absolutely horrible even back on the Wolfsbane Potion—hand delivered by Dumbledore himself—Remus insisted that he would travel to Hogwarts via the train instead of Floo or Apparition. Dumbledore had made some amusing comments about nostalgia and reliving one's childhood, but really Remus knew it had little to do with his past and more to do with the fact that Harry would be on the train, and he was worried that Sirius would somehow try to get to the boy then.

Remus had spent the month leading up to the start of term doing only two things: preparing his upcoming lessons and owling Dumbledore about Harry.

*We've got eyes on him, Remus.  
The boy is looked after for the time being.*

Dumbledore's reply did little to ease Remus's concerns considering he failed to inform Remus *where* Harry was or *who* was looking after him. He had assumed it was the Dursleys, but when Dumbledore said something about the Minister for Magic getting Harry's school books for him, Remus had to imagine that, at some point, Harry had left Little Whinging.

*It's probably for the best,* he thought. Sirius could easily break into a *Muggle* home.

He arrived at King's Cross Station early, wanting to avoid the crowds of frazzled mothers, excited children, and confused Muggles. Pushing his trunk onto the train securely, he exhaustedly made his way to a familiar compartment in the back, glancing up and taking

note of the *Marauders Only. All Others Will Be Cursed* carving above the door. He reached up, affectionately touching the vandalism like a good luck charm, remembering the moment that they had carved it into the train on their way home for Christmas during their seventh year.

*"Hurry the fuck up, Moony," James snapped at Remus, who was perched on his shoulders. "I still don't know why I'm holding you up. You're taller than I am. I should be on your shoulders."*

*"You're not up there because if we let you carve our names into history, no one would be able to read it," Sirius announced from his seat across the compartment where he was busy digging his and Mia's initials into the doorframe.*

*"There," Remus said, gripping the top of the door and pulling himself off of James's shoulders. He dropped to the floor and looked up at the vandalism with a strange bit of pride as James put an arm around him. "You do realise that when Lily and Mia see this, they're going to kill us, right?"*

*"Mate, I've been Head Boy for four months, and this is the worst thing I've done all year. I think I'm owed a little mischief. Now we'll never be forgotten," James said with a grin and glanced over at Sirius, who was putting the finishing touches on a heart that encapsulated the S.B. + M.P. scratchings. "How romantic, Pads," he teased.*

*Sirius grinned up at his best friend. "Piss off, Prongs."*

*Mia appeared in the doorway with Lily at her side. "Why do the three of you look so smug?" Both witches eyed the boys suspiciously before stepping inside the compartment and taking their seats.*

*"We're always smug," James answered as he sat down, pulling Lily onto his lap with a bright grin, burying his nose into her long, thick, red hair and kissing the side of her neck until she giggled.*

*Mia turned to Remus and raised a brow. "Do I even want to know?"*

*Sirius scoffed. "Why do you ask him like he's all innocent?"*

*"Because he usually is." Mia laughed before sitting down next to her boyfriend and kissing his cheek sweetly. "Remus stays out of trouble while—"*

*"The rest of you go looking for it?" Remus suggested with a grin, and Mia laughed.*

*"Can't argue your point there," she admitted with a shrug of her shoulders before cuddling up tightly under Sirius's arm, a look of absolute love and devotion on her face as she stared up into the pale grey eyes of her wizard.*

It was right then that the scent of a rainstorm assaulted his senses, and Remus panicked. The train was full of a variety of scents that brought up the past, but *hers* was the strongest of all and drowned out every other.

Remus scolded himself for not thinking clearly during his preparations for his approaching job. His mind had been so focused on keeping Harry safe that he had actually forgotten who *else* might be on the train—who else might be at Hogwarts, in his classes. Oh Merlin, she was going to be his *student*.

As voices approached the compartment, he looked around anxiously and rushed to the window where he collapsed onto the seat. He pulled his recently repaired, second-hand robes up over him like a blanket, allowing his shaggy hair to fall in his face a bit as he closed his eyes. Like a toddler caught staying up too late, he feigned sleep the moment someone walked in the room.

"Who d'you reckon he is?" a young boy asked.

"Professor R. J. Lupin."

Remus's chest tightened, and his heart pounded at the sound of her voice. That voice belonged to the first friend he'd ever had. The first person to extend him a hand of kindness. The same voice that he awoke to on mornings after a full moon in the hospital wing growing up. The voice that soothed his worries and fears and pleaded for his promises. Remus inwardly smiled over the fact that the first time he heard his best friend's voice in over fourteen years, she was saying *his* name.

"How d'you know that?"

"It's on his briefcase."

"Wonder what he teaches?"

"That's obvious," whispered Mia—*No, not Mia. Her name is Hermione now.* "There's only one vacancy, isn't there? Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"Well, I hope he's up to it," said the boy doubtfully. "He looks like one good hex would finish him off, doesn't he?" Remus furrowed his brow in response. "Anyway . . . What were you going to tell us, Harry?"

Remus then heard a voice that felt strangely familiar even though he had never heard it before. It sounded almost like . . . like James.

"I heard your parents arguing at the Leaky," Harry said. "Talking about Sirius Black."

"The man in the *Daily Prophet*?" Hermione asked. "He looks frightening."

"Hermione, you saw a basilisk last year, and you're afraid of some bloke?" the other boy said with a laugh.

*Basilisk?! Remus inwardly cringed. What the hell has Dumbledore been letting these kids do at school?*

"I'll remind you, Ronald," Hermione said tartly, "that I never actually *saw* the basilisk. Not really. And it was just an animal. You can't fault a creature for acting on instincts." Briefly, Remus was reminded of a little fox in the Shrieking Shack chasing after a rat. "Humans are much more dangerous because they have motives."

"And what is *Sirius Black's* motive for coming after me?" Harry asked, a bite to his tone.

Hermione gasped. "After *you*?"

"Mr and Mrs Weasley were arguing because, apparently, Black broke out of Azkaban to come after me, and the Ministry's covering it up. They've sent guards to Hogwarts to search for him before he can get to me."

"Sirius Black escaped to come after *you*? Oh, Harry, you'll have to be really, really careful. Don't go looking for trouble—"

"I don't go *looking* for trouble," said Harry. "Trouble usually finds *me*."

Remus snorted, and when there was a lull in the children's conversation at the noise, he pretended to snore.

"How thick would Harry have to be to go looking for a nutter who wants to kill him?" asked the other boy, the one Hermione had called Ronald. "No one knows how he got out of Azkaban, no one's ever done it before. And he was classified as a top-security prisoner too."

"But they'll catch him, won't they?" Hermione asked earnestly. "I mean, they've got all the Muggles looking out for him, too."

Somewhere between the kids talking about Sirius, Hogsmeade trips, and a faulty Sneakoscope that Harry had been given, Remus fell deep into his thoughts. Sitting there in the same compartment as him was the son of one of his best friends. The boy that, by all rights, *he* should have raised had the Ministry not thrown up anti-werewolf laws. Harry's voice, so much like James's, was painful to hear, but nowhere *near* as painful as it was to hear the girl, Hermione, talking with him. She was rambling on about the history of Hogsmeade with that swotty tone that Mia used to reserve for proper scoldings when James and Sirius got up to something. It caused Remus's heart to swell and ache. The wolf inside was stirring, wanting to go to her—this girl, his best friend, his Beta—and wrap his

arms around her. But not only would that look incredibly awkward, it was highly inappropriate given that—not only was she his time-travelling ex-girlfriend—she was now his thirteen-year-old student.

"Don't let that thing out!" Ronald yelled.

Briefly, while the children were distracted, Remus opened his eyes and came face-to-face with a giant ball of ugly orange fluff.

*Of course she has a fucking cat.*

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At one o'clock, the plump witch with the food trolley arrived at the compartment door. Remus could smell the treats, and a part of him wanted to sit up and beg her for one of everything off of the trolley. Unfortunately, he still had no money on his person, so he remained still and quiet as before, listening to Harry, Hermione, and the boy he now knew to be Ron Weasley, as they conversed.

"D'you think we should wake him up?" Ron asked awkwardly. "He looks like he could do with some food."

Remus could feel the girl stepping close to him, and he purposely began breathing out of his mouth to avoid a direct blast of her scent, which was already overwhelming him with nostalgia. Eyes closed, he could almost see the look on her face. He had not been taking care of himself properly over the years, and she would be annoyed with him for it. Except she did not know him, *not yet*. She did not know who he was or that he was a werewolf and was sick because of the approaching full moon. Remus was thanking Godric and Circe and fucking Damocles Belby for the Wolfsbane Potion. Merlin knew how he would be acting if *Moony* was on the loose.

"Er . . . Professor?" she said. "Excuse me . . . Professor?"

*Oh fuck, Remus silently groaned. I'm her professor.*

"Don't worry, dear," said the witch running the food trolley. "If he's hungry when he wakes, I'll be up front with the driver."

"I suppose he *is* asleep?" Ron said quietly. "I mean . . . he hasn't died, has he?"

"No, no, he's breathing," whispered Hermione.

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At some point, Remus had *actually* fallen asleep, soothed by the sound of Mia—No. *Hermione's* voice as she read aloud from *The Essential Defence Against the Dark Arts*, the book he had chosen to assign his class for the year.

A short while later, Remus awoke, keeping his eyes shut as he heard an altercation happening inside the compartment. He turned his head a bit, cracking his eyelids just enough to make out some outlines and colours. Three boys stood in the doorway of the compartment, one with white-blond hair. *Oh great*, he thought to himself. Not only would he have to deal with Harry—who was apparently being stalked by Sirius Black—his past-future ex-girlfriend *and* her ugly cat, but Remus had forgotten that Lucius Malfoy somehow managed to procreate.

When Ron stood up to face off against the young Slytherin, the cat's basket fell to the floor with a loud THUNK and Remus snorted, drawing attention to himself.

"Who's *that*?" Lucius's son asked.

"New teacher," Harry replied as he rose from his seat to join his friend. "What were you saying, Malfoy?"

The blond seemed to take Remus's presence into account before acknowledging his cronies. "C'mon," he muttered resentfully and then disappeared.

Harry and Ron sat down again, Ron massaging his knuckles. "I'm not going to take any crap from Malfoy this year," he said angrily. "I mean it. If he makes one more crack about my family, I'm going to get hold of his head and—"

"Ron," Hermione interrupted, pointing at Remus, "be *careful*."

Remus let the corners of his mouth turn up. She was so different now. The witch he had known growing up had not been worried about getting in trouble at all. She had once punched Snape in the face right in front of McGonagall simply because he had said something offensive about Sirius. She had hit him *again* at the beginning of seventh year when he said something rude about her mother. Having this look into Mia's past only endeared the witch to him more. *She was—is—so innocent*, he thought.

He relaxed against the window and once again let sleep overtake him.

He awoke later when the train jolted to a stop and, without warning, all the lamps went out, plunging them into darkness. Remus's eyes opened immediately, and he sat up,

reaching for his wand. His lycanthropy allowed him to easily see through the darkness, and he watched with mild amusement as the three, no four—no *five*—teenagers now crowded in the compartment fell over one another as they scrambled in the dark.

"Sorry. D'you know what's going on? Ouch! Sorry."

"Hullo, Neville."

"Harry? Is that you? What's happening?"

"No idea. Sit down."

"I'm going to go and ask the driver what's going on."

"Who's that?"

"Who's *that*?"

"Ginny?"

"Hermione?"

"What are you doing?"

"I was looking for Ron—"

"Come in and sit down."

"Not here! *I'm* here!"

"Ouch!"

"Quiet!" Remus snapped as he heard something in the distance. He stood, extending his hand. With a nonverbal spell, he cast a hovering ball of fire to light the room, holding it in the palm of his hand. He would normally use a Wand-Lighting Charm, but something told him he would need full use of his wand in the approaching moments.

"Stay where you are," he instructed them all, the howling wolf in the back of his mind telling him that they were in danger and he needed to protect them.

He stepped toward the door just as it slid open, and his eyes widened at the sight of a dementor inches away from him. A *real* dementor hovering there before them all. The children all gasped behind him, but Remus held firm. He felt the signature dementor chill wash over him, digging its way deep into his aching bones. Memories flooded him in the presence of the creature, and Remus took a sharp breath.

He could hear the snarling wolf seconds before pain washed over him, searing him from his shoulder all the way down to his toes as Fenrir Greyback sank his teeth into his flesh while his mother screamed in the distance. "*No! Not my Remus!*"

The memory flashed and suddenly he saw the white walls of St Mungo's. "*She's dead? My mum's dead!?*"

Remus blinked rapidly and let out the breath he was holding before turning his eyes up and glaring at the dementor. "No one here is hiding Sirius Black! Leave!"

From the corner of his eye, he watched as Harry collapsed to the ground in a faint. *Fuck*, Remus inwardly cursed and then held his wand out as the dementor turned its attention to the boy. Remus closed his eyes and thought of the river behind Potter Manor, a fake full moon in the Room of Requirement, Lily and James's wedding, and holding a newborn Harry Potter in his arms.

"*Expecto Patronum!*"

A silvery wolf emerged from his wand, bared its teeth at the dementor, and then literally chased it out of the compartment doorway.

Once the creature was out of sight, Remus lowered his wand and knelt down beside Harry, slapping him lightly on the cheeks. "Harry? Are you all right?" He watched as the boy opened his eyes. In the dim light of the relit lanterns above them, an emerald colour reflected back. Remus took a breath. *Lily's eyes*.

"W-What?"

"Are you okay?" Ron asked nervously.

"Yeah," Harry answered, looking quickly toward the door. "What happened? Where's that thing? Who screamed?"

Remus frowned at the boy's words. He knew that dementors had the ability to make one relive their worst memories. While he experienced the horror of hearing his mother's screams as Greyback bit into him, followed up by the memory of her death, he could only imagine what Harry had seen and heard.

"No one screamed," Ron replied.

"But I heard screaming."

Remus reached into his pocket and removed the large bar of chocolate he had been saving for later when the worst of his symptoms would surface thanks to the full moon. By the look on Harry's face, *he* needed it more.

"Here," he said to Harry, handing him a particularly large piece. "Eat it. It'll help."

"What was that thing?" Harry asked.

"A dementor," Remus replied, breaking more chunks and handing them out to the teenagers. "One of the dementors of Azkaban."

Neville and Ron each took their pieces eagerly, and the small red-headed girl who reminded him of Lily accepted her piece with shaking hands. His gaze then fell on Hermione. Her big eyes were the same colour as the piece of chocolate he was trying to hand her. He noted that her hair was much bushier than he had ever remembered, and her teeth were much too large for her small mouth. He schooled his expression to one of concern before smiling lightly at her when she finally accepted the chocolate. He crumpled the wrapper up and stuck it in his pocket.

"Eat. It'll help. I need to speak to the driver, excuse me."

Remus stood and made his way out of the compartment, rushing down the aisle toward the front of the train. He quickly stepped through the front door of the conductor's compartment. "Any sign of more?"

"No, thank Merlin," the driver said with a sigh. "You the one that drove them off?"

Remus nodded.

"Bloody monsters. What's the Ministry thinking? Letting them loose like that. We should be to Hogsmeade Station in about ten minutes. I'll be drinking myself unconscious at Rosmerta's tonight. That's for sure."

"Wish I could join you," Remus said under his breath before shutting the door and returning to the back compartment. When he stepped inside, Hermione was in a corner with her arm wrapped around the other girl, while Neville and Ron sat on their seats still staring down at Harry, who remained on the ground, piece of chocolate untouched in his hand.

"I haven't poisoned that chocolate." Remus smiled when Harry took a bite and the colour began returning to his cheeks. He felt a weight fall from his shoulders at the sight, but a heaviness settled in his stomach as he imagined the look on Lily's face had she known that he allowed a dementor to come anywhere near her son.

"We'll be at Hogwarts in ten minutes," he told the teenagers before leaning down and looking at Harry properly. His eyes fell on the lightning bolt scar that, up until now, Remus had only heard about.

"Are you all right, Harry?"

"Fine," the boy muttered.

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Remus did what he could to make sure that Harry was all right by sending word ahead to the castle about the event that took place on the train. Then, after handling a small confrontation with the young Malfoy boy, Remus had the most *wonderful* moment of the night: reuniting with a positively enraged Severus Snape, who was the current Potions Professor, as well as the person instructed to brew his monthly supply of Wolfsbane.

Remus ate what he could at the start-of-term feast, every so often glancing along the table only to find Snape glaring at him. He wondered if he would soon find that his Wolfsbane Potion had been poisoned.

He ate in silence, for the most part, occasionally smiling and speaking with Professors Sprout and Flitwick—Pomona and Filius, as he now was able to refer to them, being colleagues and all.

Every so often, he would look across the room to where Harry and Hermione sat with their friends. It was only when Professor McGonagall savagely pinched his arm to get his attention that he realised he had been staring. The older witch narrowed her spectacled eyes at him, and Remus sat back in his chair, looking ashamed. He glanced between the Gryffindor table to the deputy headmistress and then shook his head in shock as he realised *why* she was glaring at him.

"No, I . . . Because . . . Harry . . ." He gestured, stuttering as he discerned that the woman had probably thought he had been staring at the *girl*, which meant that she *knew*—knew that Hermione Granger was Mia Potter. Remus felt angry that not only was he unprepared to see Mia again, but now Minerva would probably spend the entire year watching him as though she would soon catch him ogling the young witch. He was furious with Dumbledore for not preparing him for this.

He made his way to the headmaster's office at first opportunity.

"Did you know?"

"Remus, how are you settling in?" Dumbledore inquired, as he made his way around the large desk to take a seat. Reaching a hand up, he gently stroked his long, pale fingers down the brightly-coloured feathers of his phoenix. "I apologise that I haven't had the opportunity to welcome you back to Hogwarts properly, with the feast and all."

"Albus!" Remus snarled. "Professor," he corrected. "Did you know?"

"I'm afraid I know many things, Remus, you may have to jog an old wizard's memory if you're hoping to find something specific."

"Mia! Did you know she'd be here?" He sighed when Dumbledore just stared back at him. "Of *course* you did. My . . . Mia Potter. Only not . . . Her real name is—Merlin, it's been fourteen years." He groaned and took a seat opposite the older wizard, running both hands through his shaggy hair.

"Hermione," Dumbledore said with a smile. "Her name is Hermione Granger."

Remus turned and glared up at the man. "I know her name."

"A Muggle-born witch," Dumbledore continued as though he had not been interrupted at all. "Very bright for her age, but then again, that has never really surprised me. She's taken on quite the workload this year. I hope you'll be kind to not push her too much in class. It's my understanding that the Ministry has approved Minerva's request for Hermione to borrow her personal Time-Turner in order to accommodate her schedule."

Remus's eyes widened, and he looked up at Dumbledore as the memory of a silver-encased hourglass with blue sand came into the forefront of his mind. "A Time-Turner? Merlin, and my class . . . I'm her *professor*. I can't do this, Albus. I'm sorry, but I can't be at Hogwarts. I can't be her *teacher*."

"On the contrary, I believe no one is more fitting for the job."

"Sir! I can't be her *professor*! You know what she was—what she *is* to me!" He frowned as a deep pain settled in his chest. "That girl was my absolute *everything*: My best friend, my first love, my . . . my *heart* and . . . And now I'm—I'm thirty-three, and she's got to be . . . thirteen." He leant forward, lowering his head between his knees. "Oh, I think I'm going to be sick."

"You already don't look so well, I'd say," Dumbledore commented. "I know the full moon is tomorrow. I apologise that this news has come at a terrible time."

"I need to leave," Remus moaned, still not moving.

Dumbledore took a moment to reach for a sweet sitting in a bowl on his desk, throwing the sugary treat into his mouth before speaking again. "Dementors boarded the Hogwarts Express, Remus. Should I begin to wonder what might have happened to the students had you not been there to rescue them? To rescue *Hermione*?"

Despite not looking in a mirror, Remus could feel the way his eye flashed gold.  
"Don't."

"To rescue *Harry*?" Dumbledore continued. "He looks quite like James, doesn't he?  
But—"

"Lily's eyes."

"Yes." Dumbledore nodded. "He's grown into quite the young man."

Something bitter rose to the surface, and Remus growled. "Something I might have known had he not been *taken* from me. You knew what James and Lily wanted. If something were to happen to them and to . . . and to Sirius, Harry was to go to me."

"Were you capable of caring for an infant?" Dumbledore asked, and Remus ignored him. They'd had this particular argument before, and Remus was merely expressing his guilt over not fighting harder for Harry.

"You sent him to Lily's sister," he said with a scowl. "And don't talk to me about the importance of family, because I've met those particular Muggles myself. It was our—" He paused and then corrected, "It was *my* job to take care of him. *My* job to keep him safe."

"Then do so now. Sirius Black has escaped Azkaban."

Remus winced at the reminder.

"It should have been impossible. It's never been done before. Would you happen to know *how* he could have achieved such a feat?"

Remus had had a month to think about it and yes, he did have a few thoughts. Though he had not any idea as to *how* Sirius had escaped, he was very well aware of why the Aurors had not yet caught him. Sirius was very likely hiding right under their noses as Padfoot. Unfortunately, when he attempted to mention this fact to the headmaster, the Unbreakable Vow gave him a warning by burning his wrist. He held back the sign of physical pain, pulling his hands into his lap.

*"Remus, I love you. You're my best friend, and I love you. Please take care of him. Remember what I said: trust Sirius. Always Sirius."*

*"I promise."*

"No," Remus lied and felt the burn in his wrist go away.

Dumbledore observed him carefully and then nodded. "The Ministry has brought dementors to our doors in search of the man. We can only assume he has come for Harry."

"Don't assume *anything* about Sirius Black."

"Let us speculate then, Remus. No one knows Sirius better than you."

He *had* known Sirius Black, or at least he *thought* he had. "Don't assume anything about *me* either, Albus."

"What do you think Sirius Black would be willing to do to get to Harry?"

Remus shook his head remembering the way that Sirius used to hold his godson after he was born. Like a treasure. Like his *own* son. "Anything."

"And should he find Harry?"

"I . . . I don't know." Remus sighed. "Albus, I'm not . . . I can't be the person to deal with this. I'm too close. I don't know what you're trying to make me do here."

Dumbledore reached into his desk and removed from it an aged piece of parchment. He slowly unfolded it and lay it open to Remus's eyes. "I was once assured, a long time ago, by a very wise witch that Remus Lupin, above all others, could be trusted and depended on."

Upon seeing the letter—*Mia's* letter from him from the future—Remus reached for it, only to have it pulled away from him at the last moment. "Where did you get that?"

"After Miss Potter left us, I managed to acquire it. I could not, in good conscious, let something so dangerous fall into the wrong hands." The implication of those hands belonging to Sirius was left silently hanging in the air. "I'm well aware of your past relationship with Mia Potter and, I suppose, Hermione Granger's future relationship with you—"

Remus grimaced. "Please stop saying 'relationship.'"

"Can the word of Mia Potter be trusted?"

Sighing, Remus answered, "Above all others."

Dumbledore scooted the letter across the desk, nodding with approval as Remus snatched it up into his hands with desperation, like a child would a beloved stuffed animal or security blanket.

"She put a great deal of faith in you, Remus. I feel Harry puts a great deal of faith in *her*, and right now *both* need to be protected. If an unstable Sirius Black somehow enters Hogwarts to find Harry, what do you think the man capable of, should he stumble upon Hermione, a girl who is very nearly identical to the love of his life?"

Remus felt sick at the thought. "I'll stay. I'll stay and protect them both. It's my job. *My* job to keep them safe."

Dumbledore stood and clapped his hands together. "Wonderful news! Now I understand that interacting with Miss Granger may be problematic for you."

Remus's eyes narrowed. "Are you accusing me of something?"

"Not at all, my boy. I am merely suggesting that you might struggle to treat the girl as any other student, knowing your emotional ties to Miss Potter. Memories can be haunting, Remus. Should you have need of it, I can store some of yours for you, keep them safe. You'll still be aware of the past. Pulling the memory out isn't the same as Obliviating it, just takes the sting off of things, if you will."

Remus paused to contemplate the offer. His memories were precious to him and had helped to sustain him over the years. It was during his worst moments when he thought the past to be nothing more than a hallucination, but his strong memories of Mia reminded him that no, it had, in fact, happened. How could he let Dumbledore take those memories from him?

He held the letter in his hands close to his chest and turned to leave the office, unable to look Dumbledore in the eye as he muttered, "I'll consider it."

## Chapter One Hundred Four

### *Boggart in the Wardrobe, Kneazle in the Forest*

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*Now it all seems so clear, there's nothing left to fear  
So we made our way by finding what was real  
Now the days are so long that summer's moving on  
We reach for something that's already gone*  
(September - Daughtry)

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**September 2nd, 1993**

Making his way into the Great Hall and up toward the Head Table for lunch, Remus was thrilled to see that Severus had decided to eat in his quarters. The Potions Master had threatened to do so at breakfast that morning, making some sort of comment in regard to *animals* being allowed to eat at the table.

Remus took the insults in stride, laughing at most of them himself. He had a job, a warm place to live, and food. Not even Severus Snape could sour his mood.

The irritable looks on Harry and Hermione's faces, however, certainly caught his attention.

His gaze landed on the Gryffindor table where the pair were sitting beside Ron, who looked positively miserable.

*One day into classes and already this stressed?* Remus chuckled to himself. Though he knew it was a breach of their privacy, his lupine hearing was extra sensitive the day of the full moon, so he heard their entire conversation with ease.

"Ron, cheer up," Hermione encouraged, pushing a dish of stew toward her friend. "You heard what Professor McGonagall said."

"Harry," Ron said, in a low, serious voice, "you haven't seen a big, black dog anywhere, have you?"

"Yeah, I have," Harry replied. "I saw one the night I left the Dursleys'."

Remus's eyes widened, and he knocked over the cup of pumpkin juice that had been sitting in front of him. He briefly looked to the side where Minerva was eyeing him carefully. He offered an apologetic smile as he began mopping up the mess with his napkin

like a Muggle. When that only drew *more* attention to himself from the other professors, he grimaced and reached for his wand to clean up the spill.

Ron continued, "Hermione, if Harry's seen a Grim, that's . . . that's bad. My Uncle Bilius saw one, and he died twenty-four hours later!"

"Just a coincidence," Hermione said airily, pouring herself some pumpkin juice.

"You don't know what you're talking about!" Ron huffed, beginning to get angry. Remus watched the boy from the Head Table carefully, noting his quick change in temperament. "Grimms scare the living daylight out of most wizards!"

"There you are then," Hermione pointed out in a superior tone that was all too familiar to Remus. "They see the Grim and die of fright. The Grim's not an omen, it's the cause of death! And Harry's still with us because he's not stupid enough to see one and think, right, well, I'd better kick the bucket then! I think Divination is absolute rubbish. A lot of guesswork, if you ask me."

Remus smiled at the girl's irritation, remembering his own third year at Hogwarts and an equally annoyed Mia Potter who had a similar distaste for Divination.

"I saw it myself, 'Mione. There was a Grim in Harry's cup!"

"You didn't seem quite so confident before, when you were telling Harry it looked like a sheep," Hermione shot back.

"Professor Trelawney said you didn't have the right aura! You just don't like being bad at something for a change!"

The boy had clearly touched a nerve because Hermione slammed a large book down on the table so hard that bits of meat and carrot flew everywhere.

"If being good at Divination means I have to pretend to see death omens in a lump of tea leaves, I'm not sure I'll be studying it much longer! That lesson was absolute rubbish compared with my Arithmancy class!"

Remus felt a small pang of sympathy in his chest for the girl as she stormed out of the Great Hall. His focus turned back to Harry, hoping the boy would follow her, but a part of him understood when Harry did not. He was quickly reminded of times growing up when Mia was fighting with Sirius, and Remus almost always stuck by his fellow Marauders, earning him the silent treatment from the witch. Memories of her and everything he had lost haunted him inside the school, especially with an echo of Mia walking around in the form of Hermione Granger.

He sighed while looking down at his plate, realising that Hogwarts food did not taste as good when he had to dish it up himself.

Excusing himself, Remus made his way out of the hall, passing the tables of students without a second glance. His plan was to return to his quarters to catch up on as much sleep as possible, considering he would soon be heading to his warded office to wait out the sunrise.

Turning the corner to the passageway that led to his rooms, Remus caught sight of a head of bushy brown hair sticking out of a nearby alcove. He approached her very quietly, curious when he found her fiddling with a long golden chain around her neck, from which hung a Time-Turner. He took in a sharp breath and watched Hermione with interest as he remembered the last time he saw Mia.

She had been standing right in front of him with a different Time-Turner wrapped around her neck—blue sand instead of white—wearing Sirius's old Quidditch jersey and green hotpants instead of a grey pleated skirt with black and crimson student robes. Her hair was made up of long soft curls instead of bushy locks. Her eyes had been amber instead of the brown he knew they were now.

Hermione gave the Time-Turner one sharp turn in her hand, and Remus watched as she vanished from sight.

*"Oh Merlin, nineteen years. Nineteen years without . . ." Remus looked down at the witch, holding back the tears that were building in the corners of his eyes. "Without you." A part of him wanted to pull the chain back and vanish the Time-Turner entirely. "How am I supposed to live nineteen years without you?"*

*"Fourteen." She wrapped her arms around him tightly. "Remus, I love you," she mumbled through her sobs. "You're my best friend, and I love you. Please take care of him. Remember what I said: trust Sirius. Always Sirius."*

*"I promise," Remus said, holding her as tightly as possible, a part of him wondering if he could just go with her. But no, he had a promise to keep. "I'll see you soon, yeah? You'll get your handsome, grey-haired werewolf back."*

Remus groaned and ran a hand through his greying hair and sighed in frustration. "This is going to be the longest year of my life," he muttered before walking toward his quarters, more eager than ever to sleep the rest of the day away.

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**September 9th, 1993**

Remus was running late for the third year Defence lesson. He shut the wardrobe tightly, practically bouncing on the balls of his feet as he made his way to the classroom. He had planned on jumping right into red caps and hinkypunks, but word reached him that a boggart had been captured in the castle. His eyes had widened, and memories of a lesson with Professor Prewett came into his mind. He could not believe how lucky he was for this to drop straight into his lap.

Postponing his original lesson plan, Remus effectively had the boggart relocated to a wardrobe in an empty staff room and locked it up tightly before rushing down the corridor to his awaiting class. He smiled as he entered the classroom, dropping his old briefcase on the desk before turning and seeing all of his students sitting there with open books and quills at the ready.

"Good afternoon. Everyone put your books away. Today's will be a practical lesson. You will need only your wands."

He noted that some of the students—Harry and Ron specifically—looked relieved to not need their books or quills, while others—Hermione, for instance—appeared mildly put out. He grinned at the sight, making his way back down the aisle toward the door. "Right then. Everyone, follow me."

He led his class toward the empty staff room where he had secured the boggart, stopping only briefly to send a message of warning to Peeves, who had decided to stop and taunt him a little bit. Walking into the room, he spotted Snape, who looked annoyed to have been interrupted. The surly Slytherin made his way toward the door to leave, stopping to look back and narrow his eyes at one particular student.

"Possibly no one's warned you, Lupin, but this class contains Neville Longbottom. I would advise you not to entrust him with anything difficult. Not unless Miss Granger is hissing instructions in his ear."

Remus raised his eyebrows and looked at his class. Harry was glaring at Snape, and Neville was scarlet in the face, which told him that this certainly was not the first time that the Potions Master had called out the boy in front of a crowd.

*"Neville is Frank and Alice's son."*

*"Wow. What's he like?"*

*"Brilliant, when given the chance," she replied in a sweet tone she usually reserved for James. Remus could already tell by how she spoke that Mia thought of Frank and Alice's boy as family. "He's so much like his father, it's amazing. Neville was a very close friend of mine. He was the first person I met on the Hogwarts Express. You could say he was my first friend."*

"I was *actually* hoping that Neville would assist me with my lesson." Remus casually stuck his hands in his pockets, keeping a relaxed stance as he verbally faced off against his childhood rival. Granted, Snape was more James and Sirius's rival than his own. Mia's, as well, in all reality. "And I am sure he'll be brilliant. Just needs the chance to prove himself."

Snape clearly did not like that. He sneered and then stormed out of the room. Remus wondered, once again, if next month's Wolfsbane Potion was going to be poisoned.

A banging noise came from the locked wardrobe, and some of the students jumped at the sound.

"There's nothing to worry about. It's just a boggart," he said and watched their reactions that were mixtures of interest, apprehension, and absolute horror. "Boggarts like dark, enclosed spaces. Wardrobes, the gap beneath beds, the cupboards under sinks . . . I've even met one that had lodged itself in a grandfather clock. *This* one moved in yesterday afternoon, and I asked the headmaster if the staff would leave it to give my third years some practice. So, the first question we must ask ourselves is, what *is* a boggart?"

He smiled when a familiar hand rose quickly in the air.

"It's a shape-shifter," Hermione answered proudly. "It can take the shape of whatever it thinks will frighten us most."

"Couldn't have put it better myself," Remus replied and grinned when Hermione glowed under his praise. "So the boggart sitting in the darkness within has not yet assumed a form. He does not yet know what will frighten the person on the other side of the door. Nobody knows what a boggart looks like when he is alone, but when I let him out, he will immediately become whatever each of us most fears. This means that we have a huge advantage over the boggart before we begin. Have you spotted it, Harry?" he asked, purposely trying not to chuckle as he saw Hermione's hand back in the air, waving desperately.

"Er . . . Because there are so many of us, it won't know what shape it should be?"

Remus smiled proudly at the boy before turning his attention back to the rest of the class and instructing them on how to use the particular charm to fight off the creature inside the wardrobe. When they all seemed to have it down quite well, he brought Neville to the front of the class and grinned when the boy confessed his deepest fear was Snape. Remus felt determined to rid the young wizard of his phobia.

"I would like all of you to take a moment now to think of the thing that scares you most and imagine how you might force it to look comical . . ." He remembered his own lesson back when Professor Prewett introduced the class to their first boggart, and a part of him began worrying that this was a very bad idea. Certainly, there would be the typical fears of spiders, rats, and maybe a goblin or two, but Remus was suddenly worried that deep down there might be a few students who—like himself, Sirius, Mia, and James—had darker fears.

Already, he could see Harry looking uneasy, and guilt settled in his stomach like cement.

A glance to the side showed that Hermione appeared nervous as well. Remus had never had the chance to see Mia's boggart, but she informed him and Sirius that it was visions of *them* telling her that they hated her, something he could not possibly imagine. Certainly, a young Hermione Granger would not have the same fear.

It was *Harry* that worried him. When the boy had mentioned someone screaming when faced with the dementor, Remus had assumed the voice to have been Lily's. That thought, paired with an approaching boggart, had him terrified that Harry's biggest fear would be reliving the death of his parents. It was something Remus could not bring himself to witness. He would certainly have to intervene.

A giant spider, six feet tall and covered in hair, was advancing on Ron, clicking its pincers menacingly.

"*Riddikulus!*" Ron bellowed, and the spider's legs vanished; it rolled over and over. Lavender Brown squealed and ran out of its way, and it came to a halt at Harry's feet. He raised his wand, ready, but Remus hurried forward, jumping in front of him.

"Here!"

*Crack!*

The legless spider vanished and in its place, a silvery-white orb hung in the air in front of Remus. "*Riddikulus!*"

*Crack!*

"Forward, Neville, and finish him off!" Remus shouted as the boggart landed on the floor as a cockroach.

*Crack!*

Snape appeared in front of the room. Neville charged forward, looking determined. "*Riddikulus!*" he shouted, and they had a split second's view of Snape in a lacy dress before Neville let out a great "Ha!" of laughter, and the boggart exploded, burst into a thousand tiny wisps of smoke.

"Excellent! Excellent, Neville. Well done, everyone. Let me see, five points to Gryffindor for every person to tackle the boggart. Ten for Neville because he did it twice. Five each to Hermione and Harry."

"But I didn't do anything," Harry said.

"You and Hermione answered my questions correctly at the start of the class, Harry," Remus said lightly before clearing his throat and turning to the rest of the class. "Very well, everyone, an excellent lesson. Kindly read the chapter on boggarts and summarise it for me. To be handed in on Monday. That will be all for today."

The moment that the door closed behind the last student, Remus pressed his back up against it and slid to the floor, putting his head in his hands. "What the fuck was I thinking?"

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### **October 16th, 1993**

Despite being as thin as he was, Sirius still managed to crack several ribs slipping through the bars of his prison cell as Padfoot. However, that had not been as painful as his leap into the North Sea, nor the miles and miles it took to swim the frigid waters. When he washed ashore, he thought for certain that he would die. *At least I'll die a free man*, he thought before he reminded himself that Wormtail, the traitorous rat, was at Hogwarts.

Harry was in danger. Sirius could not let himself just up and die when his godson needed him.

He rather enjoyed being a dog in Muggle London. Despite his horrid appearance and matted fur, the Muggles were mostly kind and looked upon him with pity. Even if they were horrified by his appearance or thought he was rabid, most were eager to throw him some scraps of food just to get him to go away or to distract him while they ran. By the time he made it to Privet Drive, Sirius had eaten more in one day than he had in the past four months. His stomach actually hurt from being so full.

But neither *that*, nor the broken ribs, nor the frigid waters were as painful as setting eyes on his godson for the first time in twelve years. The boy had stormed out of his aunt and uncle's house, and Sirius could hear Vernon Dursley screaming from inside. He desperately wanted to rush up and bite the tosser in the leg, but Harry was rushing away from the house on foot, dragging a large Hogwarts trunk behind him with an empty owl cage under his arm.

Padfoot followed in the shadows, watching carefully as Harry stopped and dug something silvery out of his trunk. He inwardly grinned at the sight of the old, familiar Invisibility Cloak. He had wanted to go to Harry, explain everything, but before he could even make a move, the Knight Bus had appeared and whisked the boy away.

Sirius spent the next month making his way toward Scotland, stopping here and there to allow Muggle cameras to capture his human form just to distract the Aurors and hopefully lead them in the wrong direction before he would shift back into Padfoot and return on his journey toward Hogwarts.

The smells of Hogsmeade were overwhelming, and he wanted nothing more than to rush into Honeydukes and buy out the entire shop. But not only was his image spread across the front page of the *Daily Prophet*, he also had no access to money. Forcing himself to focus, Padfoot made his way up the road to Hogwarts where he set up camp at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, watching from a short distance—always on the lookout for the rat.

The only diversion from his plans of vengeance had been the night of the full moon. He remained in the Forbidden Forest, watching from a distance as his old friend walked along the grounds wearing—of all *ridiculous* things—professor's robes. He watched Remus make his way back to the castle where he must have had a room securely warded to spend

the full moon because Padfoot kept an eye on the Whomping Willow, and never once saw Remus head for it.

He stared up at the moon as it rose. Silence followed it, but he knew that somewhere inside Hogwarts, Remus was screaming in agony. Padfoot buried his head in his paws and whimpered as feelings of guilt overwhelmed him. How had he made such a mistake? How could he have broken his promise to Mia and not trusted Remus? He had been a jealous fool, and easily let Wormtail manipulate him through his grief in the aftermath of Mia's disappearance. He should have known better.

Sometime toward the middle of October, Padfoot awoke to something warm and fuzzy sleeping next to him. In the early morning, the light fur was almost a reddish-brown and he breathed in deep and smelled the rainstorm . . . but not *quite*. Instead of the little fox that he had hoped would have been there, was a rather large and incredibly hideous, orange cat.

Padfoot growled at the creature, who actually looked to raise a questioning eyebrow at him, looking bored and completely unthreatened. Sirius shifted into human form and gave the beast a little shove. The cat rolled over onto its back, revealing its large belly.

"Seriously?" Sirius scoffed and rolled his eyes, leaning forward to scratch the little monster.

"You're part kneazle aren't you? I was told once that kneazles are incredibly smart, and that you can recognise Animagi. Is that true?" he inquired, watching as the cat turned his head up and looked at him in a way that strangely conveyed a nod of the head.

"Holy shit." Sirius gaped at the beast. "Did you just . . . ? No. I must have actually lost it."

He tried to run his fingers through his hair in frustration, only to have them snag on a tangle and yank on his scalp. He winced at the pain and then sighed in defeat, looking back down at the kneazle.

"Say, you wouldn't want to catch a rat for me, would you?"

The kneazle purred in reply.

"It's a big ugly one. He's missing a toe on his front paw."

Yellow eyes turned to look up at Sirius as though he had said something the little beast understood.

"You know which rat I'm talking about, don't you?" He grinned, the bloodlust rising back to the surface. "If you capture that rat and bring it to me, when I'm done killing it, I'll let you eat the whole thing."

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### **October 31st, 1993**

Sirius's kneazle friend appeared to be trying to hunt Wormtail—if the complaints from the red-headed boy were anything to go by. Sirius had not seen the owner of the large orange cat yet, but the Weasley boy was always whinging about "Hermione and her bloody cat" going after "poor old Scabbers."

Scabbers—a twelve-year-old rat with a missing toe.

Despite not capturing Wormtail, the kneazle had become the only friend Sirius had for the short time he remained hidden in the Forbidden Forest. Sneaking food from the kitchens—apparently, the house-elves were more than happy to indulge in the whims of an already fat cat—and even once, at his request, the little beast sneaked a knife from the Great Hall which Sirius pocketed immediately. A bit more observation told him that Ronald Weasley and his pet rat lived in Gryffindor Tower; a tower that would be mostly empty as the third years and above headed down into Hogsmeade that weekend.

He waited as long as he could before making his way through a secret entrance near the greenhouses where he used to go and sneak cigarettes as a teenager. Despite his large size and it being broad daylight, no one noticed Padfoot slipping through the corridors. He growled at the fact that the school was surrounded by dementors, the occasional Auror, an entire staff of professors, and yet he—a supposed murderer—had slipped in completely unnoticed. Dumbledore was pants when it came to security. It was a wonder any student made it out of the school alive.

Padfoot's eyes widened as he took in the image of billowing black robes and greasy black hair walking down another hallway. Out of curiosity, he followed after the greasy git, slipping into the shadow of an alcove as he watched Snape take a smoking goblet into an open door. A black, furry ear perked up as he listened in on the conversation inside. Immediately catching Remus's voice, he waited for his old friend to pick up on his scent.

When Remus did not make an appearance, Sirius realised that the horrible smell of what he assumed was Wolfsbane Potion must have overpowered any other scents, for which he was grateful.

"Ah, Severus. Thanks very much. Could you leave it here on the desk for me? I was just showing Harry my grindylow."

"Fascinating," Snape drawled. "You should drink that directly, Lupin."

*Git*, Sirius thought bitterly.

"Yes, yes, I will," Remus replied.

"I made an entire cauldron," Snape continued. "If you need more."

"Thanks very much, Severus."

"Not at all," Snape said before walking out of the room, causing Padfoot to duck deeper inside the alcove to wait for him to pass by.

"Professor Snape has very kindly concocted a potion for me," he heard Remus say. "I have never been much of a potion-brewer, and this one is particularly complex. Pity sugar makes it useless."

Sirius could almost grin as he pictured him drinking the nasty potion. There had been plenty of jokes about it growing up. Once, Sirius had borrowed Lily's Muggle camera to take still photographs of Remus's face while drinking the Wolfsbane. The only other person who found them funny had been James. Mia had thrown the empty goblet at his head over it.

While Harry and Remus kept one another occupied, Sirius crept away soundlessly. He refamiliarised himself with the old passageways, evading a few wandering students and silently amusing himself when the moving shadow his body created frightened a pair of snogging teenagers out of an alcove. He waited patiently until the students made their way down to the Great Hall for dinner before he darted through the corridors and up the staircase, until he found himself standing before a very familiar painting.

*Fuck. The portrait.* How had he forgotten about the portrait? Overwhelmed by anger, Sirius shifted into human form and glared at the Fat Lady just as she opened her eyes. "Open."

"Oh, I don't think so!" the Fat Lady shouted. "I remember you, young man, and I know what you've done since leaving this place!"

"Open!" Sirius snarled, his teeth clenched tight.

"You don't scare me, Sirius Black!"

Furious and frustrated that a painting was preventing him from enacting his long-deserved revenge, Sirius flipped his wrist to get the hilt of the knife in his hand. He turned his narrowed eyes up at the painting and growled, "Run."

## Chapter One Hundred Five

### *Three Rolls of Parchment*

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*I'm tugging at my hair  
I'm pulling at my clothes  
I'm trying to keep my cool  
I know it shows  
I'm staring at my feet  
My cheeks are turning red  
I'm searching for the words inside my head  
(Things I'll Never Say - Avril Lavigne)*

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**November 5th, 1993**

"But, sir," Hermione said, unable to restrain herself, "we're not supposed to be on werewolves yet; we're due to start hinkypunks—"

"Miss Granger." Professor Snape's voice was deadly calm, and it left her both annoyed and slightly afraid. She really did not want him to embarrass her again.

How was it that she worked so hard to be the best witch possible—which was *supposedly* the whole reason for attending Hogwarts in the first place—and yet the only thing this *one* professor did was ridicule her for her efforts? His grudge against Harry seemed personal, as he was always pointing out Harry's celebrity status as though it was a privilege rather than the burden Hermione knew it was. But what on earth *she* ever had done to make Professor Snape hate her so much?

"I was under the impression that *I* was teaching this lesson, not you. And I am telling you all to turn to page 394. *All* of you! *Nom!*"

Hermione's book was already open, and the glare Professor Snape was giving her said even *that* had been the wrong thing to do.

"Which of you can tell me how we distinguish between the werewolf and the true wolf?"

Hermione's hand, as usual, was in the air because she had already read this chapter—actually, she had read the entire book. Her objection over the lesson's topic had been for the benefit of her classmates, who seemed not only confused at Snape's change in Professor Lupin's plan but also looked as though they did not even know how to translate the words that had come out of his mouth. Knowing that Professor Snape

considered ineptitude to be frustrating—and frustration turned to anger and the loss of House points when it came to him—Hermione had tried to save them all from the man's wrath. It had worked only in that his attention had hyper-focused on her, even as he ignored her waving hand.

"Anyone? Are you telling me that Professor Lupin hasn't even taught you the basic distinction between . . . ?"

A strange unsettling anger began building inside of her when Professor Snape *dared* to mock Professor Lupin's teaching methods. Hermione had developed an instantaneous respect for the shabby-looking professor, who had saved them all on the Hogwarts Express from a dementor like some noble hero out of one of Lavender's stupid romance novels. Professor Lupin was brave and heroic and brilliant and handsome and how dare Professor Snape mock—*Wait . . . handsome? Where on earth had that come from?*

She blushed at her thoughts, unaware that her hand was still in the air. Thankfully, Professor Snape was now glaring at Parvati who had apparently dared to interrupt him whilst Hermione was daydreaming.

"We told you. We haven't got as far as werewolves yet, we're still on—"

"*Silence!*" Professor Snape hissed. "Well, well, well, I never thought I'd meet a third year class who wouldn't even recognise a werewolf if they saw one. I shall make a point of informing Professor Dumbledore how very behind you all are . . ."

And there it was again. He insulted Professor Lupin.

For some reason, she could *not* allow that to continue. "Sir, the werewolf differs from the true wolf in several small ways. The snout of the werewolf, for instance—"

The professor glared down at her, black eyes narrowed. "That is the second time you have spoken out of turn, Miss Granger. Five more points from Gryffindor for being an insufferable know-it-all."

She slowly lowered her hand as shame rolled over her body; her vision blurred as tears began stinging at the corners of her eyes. She had been called that before, a know-it-all; it was audibly more pleasant than what Malfoy generally called her, and yet this one word hurt more. She could not help being a "Mudblood" as Malfoy had labelled her, but apparently, she *should* be able to stop the need to prove herself to everyone. Prove that she was smart. Prove that she had read all the books and practised all the spells. Prove that she

was worthy of her magic when the rest of the Wizarding world—Slytherins especially—said she was not.

"You asked us a question and she knows the answer! Why ask if you don't want to be told?" Ron snapped.

Professor Snape began issuing detentions.

Hermione softly smiled at her friend for standing up for her. Of course, she wished that he had not needed to do so. She also wished that he had not called her a know-it-all *himself* just that morning when she asked if he had completed his Transfiguration essay, because no, he had *not*, and apparently, the fact that *she* had—a week before it was due no less—was an offence to the very nature of Ron's lazy attitude in regards to education.

It was then that she realised *why* she enjoyed Professor Lupin's class so much. He never made her feel like her overly-extended efforts were an offence to magic. Plus, he seemed to genuinely care for Harry's well-being—calling him by his given name instead of "Mr Potter" like the rest of the staff. Professor Lupin was relaxed and informal, and it made her feel like he *knew* them all and respected them as well. It also did not hurt that when he smiled at her, she felt like . . . Hermione's face warmed again at the thought.

*Great*, she silently scolded herself. *Another crush on another professor*. Harry and Ron would never let her live it down. Not after everything that happened with Professor Lockhart last year.

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### November 6th, 1993

Her fingers were stained with ink, which was not unusual in the slightest. The two rolls of parchment required for Professor Snape's essay had been finished long ago, and she was just now adding the final touches to the third roll, silently wondering if he would actually take points from her for not following directions properly. He had only asked for *two* rolls of parchment, but in her defence, the amount of information she had found would not have fit on *just* two rolls.

Still, in studying up on lycanthropy, she found strangely little information. Basic facts like how the virus was transmitted (through a bite from the mouth or scratch from a

claw via a fully transformed werewolf and *only* during the full moon), how lycanthropy could be cured (it could not), and far too much prejudiced information regarding how to capture, maim, kill, and ultimately cast out werewolves. It sickened her—most especially when, while reading about how to rid werewolves from society, she spotted a handwritten note in one of the margins that said: *Just like Mudbloods.*

"How are these even allowed in the school?" Hermione wondered aloud, making a mental note to add it to her growing list of books she found inappropriate for students. It was a list she planned on eventually giving to Professor Dumbledore in the hopes of having them either removed entirely or, at the very least, placed in the Restricted Section.

Turning her attention back to her essay, she scowled at the title: *How to Recognise and Kill Werewolves.* She shook her head. Professor Snape might as well have asked them to write a confession of premeditated murder. Did he really expect a group of teenagers to willingly learn how to kill someone?

*A werewolf is a human being who, during the monthly full moon transforms into a deadly and terrifying monster.*

Hermione frowned, tapping her wand on the parchment to erase the last four words.

*—transforms into a potentially dangerous creature resembling that of an actual wolf with varying differences including a shorter snout, more human-like eyes—though the colour is almost always gold—and a tufted tail.*

*Werewolves suffer from a condition called lycanthropy which is incurable, though a potion invented by famed Potioneer Damocles Belby called Wolfsbane Potion helps werewolves retain their human mind during the transformations.*

She briefly looked over her history regarding the Wolfsbane Potion, which in itself was limited other than to say how expensive it was and near impossible to brew without being a Potions Master. Though it was not a required part of the essay, she included what little information she found regarding werewolf packs and mating habits.

*The safety of a mate is a werewolf's primary instinct. It goes above and beyond that of the need to hunt, even. Rivalled only by the need to protect one's pack. Werewolves mate for life, though often until the proper mate is found, an Alpha wolf will engage with another female of its pack, generally*

*his Beta. It is impossible to tell the difference between a wolf's mate or individual pack due to the fact that werewolves always bite to mark between the neck and shoulder. This is thought to be because werewolves are savage beasts who, when in beast form, eagerly seek to kill.*

Hermione frowned once again and reached for her wand to amend the previous sentence. She looked over the symptoms of lycanthropy, which looked to be terribly painful. Her heart hurt just to think of what an unfortunate existence it would be, especially to know that the Wizarding world judged these people for a condition they could not control.

*When without a mate or pack, symptoms of lycanthropy worsen. Before and after full moons, werewolves will appear sickly pale, complain of stomach problems, muscle pain, headaches, and sensitivity to light, smell, and sound. Because of the severity of their symptoms, werewolves are known to prematurely age—*

*Hub.*

She thought back to a few days earlier when she watched Professor Lupin holding his head in his hands by his desk, looking pained before politely requesting that Seamus and Dean *quietly* read instead of actively gossiping as they had previously been doing.

She had not realised it at the time, but since she had already finished her own work, her eyes had been glued to Professor Lupin, noting the beautiful colour of his hair. Blond, but darker, like the colour of wet sand on a beach, with little flecks of grey scattered among the strands. She had thought it strange at first, considering she had overheard someone mention that Professors Lupin and Snape attended school together at some point, which meant they were near the same age, and yet Professor Lupin looked *years* older.

"Oh my goodness," Hermione muttered to herself.

Professor Lupin had been sick all week. Yesterday, Professor Snape substituted for his class.

*Last night was the full moon.*

She added it all up in her head quickly. The way Professor Lupin had looked sick the prior week, as well as the day they had all stepped foot on the Hogwarts Express—which had, coincidentally, been the day before the full moon as well. The grey in his hair despite his young age, the headaches and noise sensitivity, the boggart that changed into

the moon, the scars on his face—*the scars!* How had she not put it all together before? Better yet, how could Professor Dumbledore have hired a *werewolf* to teach at a school?

*No.* Hermione reprimanded herself for even *thinking* such a horrible thing. Of *course* he should teach here. Professor Lupin was brilliant—the best Defence teacher they'd had yet. Suddenly, she felt awful that she had so quickly judged a man based on his condition, an action she had been disgusted with earlier. Not only that, but after reading the symptoms once again, she realised that her favourite teacher, a man who had saved their lives from a dementor, was suffering.

Without another thought, Hermione pulled her books and parchments together, loaded up her book bag, and rushed out of the library.

She excused herself early from lunch and sneaked back to the dorms where she dug into her trunk and pulled out a large bar of Honeydukes chocolate that she purchased when she and Ron had gone to Hogsmeade. Though she was not overly fond of sweets, she remembered that Professor Lupin had given it to them following the dementor attack, insisting that chocolate would make them all feel better. With Harry's reactions to the creatures, Hermione thought it would be prudent to stock up on a few bars, just in case.

Heading down the stairs, she found her way into the hospital wing where she literally ran into Madam Pomfrey.

"Oh! Miss Granger. Are you feeling well?"

"I'm sorry, Madam Pomfrey. Yes, I'm well. I was just wondering if Professor Lupin was here. Professor Snape mentioned that he had taken ill," Hermione said and began looking around the hospital wing for the man, noting that there was a bed at the end of the aisle secluded by a large curtain.

"He's well looked after, my dear," Madam Pomfrey promised, though the way she eyed Hermione felt suspicious. "Unfortunately, he's not taking visitors."

"I understand. Would it be all right if I left something for him?" Hermione asked, holding out the large bar of chocolate. "I'm not sure if it'll help, but he gave us all chocolate after the dementor attack, and I, well, even if it doesn't make him feel better, I'd just be repaying him."

"I'll take it, dear." Madam Pomfrey nodded with a strangely tearful smile. "It's very kind of you to think of him."

"He's a wonderful professor, and . . . it made me sad to think of him being ill," Hermione said and then turned to walk away.

Moments later, Madam Pomfrey opened the curtains that surrounded Remus's bed. He had overheard the entire conversation, drawn from sleep by the sound of Hermione's voice. He was badly bruised and exhausted from the full moon, but the Wolfsbane Potion that Snape had given him had not been poisoned, so he spent the night warded in his rooms—docile but lonely.

Madam Pomfrey pinned him with a look. "She knows about your condition?"

"Apparently," Remus replied and reached for the bar of chocolate. He took a moment to breathe in the scent as he tore at the wrapper. "Poppy, how do you, Minerva, and Professor Dumbledore remember Hermione as Mia, but no one else does? Severus clearly *loathes* her, and with good reason considering how often she hit him in the face growing up, but I'd think that if he knew who she really was . . . his disdain would be quite a bit more obvious."

"Minerva put a charm on the girl when she first entered the Wizarding world," Poppy explained. "She recognised Miss Potter almost immediately and insisted that the headmaster explain himself. I believe it was exactly *because* of Severus that Minerva put a modified Notice-Me-Not on Miss Granger. She has to renew it once a year when the girl returns to Hogwarts. Frankly, I doubt either Minerva or the headmaster had planned on telling me, except that Hermione is in the hospital wing so often thanks to her adventures with Misters Potter and Weasley that I was bound to catch the charm on her sooner or later."

Remus snorted in amusement. "Notice-Me-Not. That used to be one of Mia's favourite charms. She'd find it hilarious that it was being used on her."

"If I remember correctly," Madam Pomfrey said with a smirk, "Miss Potter was more inclined toward Skin Blemish Hexes and manipulated potions."

Remus grinned at the flood of memories. "So, when people look at her and begin to recognise her, their minds get distracted?"

"Something like that. Clearly it doesn't prevent the lingering feeling of resentment, though. If Severus's reaction to Miss Granger is any indication, I'd be terrified to think of what would happen if any of your former *Ravenclaw* classmates caught sight of the poor girl."

"How come *I* can remember her? How come I know exactly who she is and will become?"

"That, I believe only *you* can answer," Madam Pomfrey replied with an irritable sigh, clearly annoyed that she did not have all the answers herself. "Eat that up, and then get some rest."

*The Pack Bond*, Remus thought to himself as the mediwitch left his side. Hermione did not have his mark on her neck like Mia had, but it still existed in some form because it existed for *him*. Mia was still alive somewhere, inside Hermione, waiting to return to the world, and the wolf in him knew it. Knew that she *lived*, that she was there, and that she still belonged to him.

It was a thought that warmed his heart. Unfortunately, if *he* could recognise Mia in Hermione because of the Pack Bond, that meant that because of their shared Soul Bond, sealed or not, Sirius would know the girl upon sight.

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### November 8th, 1993

"Cheer up, Harry," Hermione said as she patted him consolingly on the shoulder. "Maybe if you ask Professor McGonagall, she could arrange it so you could get another broom?"

She did not see the point but, then again, she barely saw the point of Quidditch at all. It was brutal and barbaric, but she was not about to say anything like that right now with Harry still mourning the loss of his Nimbus.

"Even if she *did* get him a new broom, it wouldn't be as good as the last," Ron pointed out. "I still can't believe Snape—"

"*Professor* Snape," Hermione corrected.

"—took fifty points just because I threw that crocodile heart at Malfoy. He didn't do a bloody thing—"

"Language," Hermione reprimanded him.

"—when Malfoy was acting like a dementor just to have a go at you, Harry. Next time I see that pointy-faced prick—"

"Language!" Hermione hissed.

"Ease off, Hermione," Harry said.

"If Snape's teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts again, I'm skiving off," Ron declared as they headed toward the Defence classroom. "Check who's in there, Hermione."

She peered around the classroom door and smiled brightly at the sight of Professor Lupin. "It's okay!"

The class entered the room all welcoming back their professor, not with kind words asking about his health, but with complaints about Professor Snape and the unfair treatment and ridiculous assignment.

"It's not fair, he was only filling in, why should he give us homework?"

"We don't know anything about werewolves—"

"—two rolls of parchment!"

"Did you tell Professor Snape we haven't covered them yet?" Professor Lupin asked, frowning slightly.

The babble broke out again.

"Yes, but he said we were really behind—"

"—he wouldn't listen!"

"—*two rolls of parchment!*"

Professor Lupin smiled at their indignation. "Don't worry. I'll speak to Professor Snape. You don't have to do the essay."

"Oh, *no*," Hermione said disappointedly. "I've already finished it!"

Professor Lupin laughed and then knelt down in front of her desk with a kind smile that made her cheeks feel hot. His attention felt both exciting and comfortable all at the same time.

"Hermione, I would be delighted to read your essay. If you'd like, I will consider giving you extra credit for all the hard work I know you put into it."

She smiled brightly and let out a loud sigh of relief.

After class ended, Remus watched Hermione pack up her things. He noticed her eavesdropping on Harry and Ron, who he could hear were having a conversation about Malfoy. A conversation that Remus noted he should, as a professor, be interrupting.

"I'm serious, Harry, the next time I see him I'm going to punch him in his stupid face," Ron announced.

"Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent," Hermione quoted to her friends, who both looked at her with furrowed brows.

"Did you just call me stupid?" Ron asked, confused.

"Isaac Asimov," Remus said, drawing their attentions back to the front of the room. At Ron and Harry's perplexed expressions, he chuckled softly. "Hermione was quoting a famous Muggle author."

"You've read *Foundation*, Professor?" Hermione inquired with a smile.

"I read quite a bit," he answered, "and I have a knack for memorising quotes. For instance, 'People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf.'"

"George Orwell!" Hermione exclaimed excitedly.

"I see you play the game," Remus said with a challenging smirk, nostalgia wrapping around his heart snugly. "How about this one: 'Violence does, in truth, recoil upon the violent, and the schemer falls into the pit which he digs for another.'"

Hermione grinned, looking just a bit smug. "Another famous Muggle author. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle."

"*Half* right. Wizard."

"Really?!" Her eyes lit up excitedly.

The reflecting light from the nearby window made the chocolate brown of her irises almost look amber, and the snug comfort in Remus's chest pinched in painful reminder of who the girl both was and was not yet.

Harry and Ron stared between the two.

"If you're done talking Gobbledygook with the professor, can we go?" Ron asked.

Hermione visibly bristled and then turned around to reach for her bag. Remus watched as she noticed a piece of paper on her desk that had not been there before. She reached down and picked up the paper—a chocolate bar wrapper with the Honeydukes logo printed on the front.

He smiled as she read the note he had written on the inside of the wrapper.

*Thank you for your kindness.*

A blush spread across her cheeks, and she looked up at him as Harry and Ron disappeared through the door behind her. She offered Remus a bright smile before darting out of the classroom.

He had wanted to convey his appreciation for her concern, and maybe even let her know that he was aware that she knew his secret and appreciated that she had not gone running to Professor Dumbledore, demanding what he was thinking hiring a monster to teach at the school. He wanted her to know that he was grateful for her.

However, Remus took notice of the blush on her cheeks as she sped from the room as though Fiendfyre was licking at her heels. He raised a confused eyebrow before his heightened hearing caught the exact way her heart rate accelerated, and his eyes widened slightly.

*Oh no, he thought. This is unfortunate.*

---

"Take the memories," Remus said once the Dumbledore's door had shut behind him. "Get them out of my head."

"Good afternoon, Remus." Dumbledore smiled, ignoring the strange outburst. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your company? Lemon drop?"

"No!" Remus snapped angrily. After a moment of silence, he reconsidered and reached his hand into the small bowl of sweets, withdrawing several pieces. "I'm taking you up on your offer to remove my memories."

"Has something happened?" Dumbledore asked. "You look a bit distressed."

"She . . . Hermione . . ." Remus grimaced. "The girl has a *crush* on me."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled in amusement. "I see."

Remus glared at him. "This isn't funny."

Dumbledore actually had the nerve to smile, which told Remus that the headmaster found it at least *slightly* amusing.

"I'll take out *some* of my memories . . ." Remus informed him, "and I need you to keep them safe for me. They're . . . specific and precious, and I'd appreciate it very much

that no one look at them. If I'm to do my job, it might be prudent to *not* have flashbacks of my ex-girlfriend lingering in my subconscious while I attempt to educate her fourteen-year-old self. Also, she has a *crush* on me."

"So you've said," Dumbledore replied, actually chuckling under his breath.

"Merlin, this is mortifying."

"You worry too much, Remus," Dumbledore insisted with a smile. "I'm well aware that you would not look at Miss Granger with inappropriate thoughts; you're a good man—"

"Would you mind informing Professor McGonagall of that?" Remus asked in a clipped tone.

Dumbledore went on as though he had not been interrupted. "I am also aware that the situation can be quite distressing, so I will do what I can to help. Remember, you'll still be conscious of the memories. You won't have lost them."

Remus nodded, feeling grateful to be relieved of the burden, but guilty of wanting to part with his memories in the first place. That, and he was honestly terrified of anyone viewing them without his permission. "Hopefully it'll take the sting away, as you've said. And make me feel less like throwing up when I look at one girl and remember the other."

## Chapter One Hundred Six

### *Black, Buckbeak, and Broomsticks*

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*Could you remind me to forget?  
The things I did, the things I said  
I hope that you can bring me back  
I gotta make it right  
(Crash and Burn - Lifehouse)*

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**December 18th, 1993**

Padfoot watched from the edge of the Forbidden Forest while the students made their way down to Hogsmeade, looking for a red-headed boy and the rat he generally kept stashed in his pocket. When he finally did spot the boy, he could smell that the rat was not in his possession. Which meant that Wormtail was still inside the castle. He thought to try and make his way back in again, but he knew that they would be looking for him. Not to mention, he still did not have the password to Gryffindor Tower.

Eager for food, he made his way down to Hogsmeade to play "adorable puppy" for the students. Most would likely be willing to part with a few treats from Honeydukes, maybe a slice of bread or two from the Three Broomsticks, and Merlin bless *anyone* who might be willing to offer a stray dog a sip of butterbeer. Firewhisky, of course, was out of the question.

It was just outside of Honeydukes that he saw it: a familiar shifting against the air that so few would ever be able to properly spot, but Sirius knew it well. James's Invisibility Cloak—*Harry's* Invisibility Cloak now.

He inwardly grinned and ducked behind the buildings as he followed the slightest bit of a change in the view as Harry trailed after a pair of students into the Three Broomsticks. Padfoot stopped at the door knowing that he could not venture inside. Instead, he crept around the building and sat at the open back door where Rosmerta had placed a large stack of empty butterbeer crates. It was not the best spot, of course, and the smell of Rosmerta's lamb stew was so powerful he had practically forgotten his name before he remembered why he had gone there, to begin with. Putting a little more focus on his sense of hearing instead of smell, he tried to spy on his godson.

Unfortunately, it was not *Harry's* voice that he heard.

"You know that the dementors have searched the whole village twice?" Rosmerta asked, a slight edge to her voice. "Scared all my customers away. It's very bad for business, Minister."

*Sorry about that, Rosie*, Sirius thought to himself. He had seen the dementors moving through Hogsmeade earlier that week, which was exactly why he had not been back down to the village until now, leaving him starved. His kneazle friend could only sneak so much out to him at a time.

"Rosmerta, m'dear, I don't like them any more than you do. They are a necessary precaution, very unfortunate, but there you are. They're in a fury against Dumbledore. He won't let them inside the castle grounds."

Padfoot growled under his breath as he recognised the voice belonging to Cornelius Fudge. Their recent "conversation" during his inspection of Azkaban was at the forefront of Sirius's mind. The idiot Minister had thought it smart to mock him. Innocent or guilty, Sirius was *supposedly* a crazed murderer with nothing to lose; only his strict plans of vengeance and the thin thread of morality he clung to prevented him from tearing the Minister for Magic apart right on the spot.

"I should think not!" Minerva McGonagall insisted sharply. "How are we supposed to teach with those horrors floating around?"

"Hear, hear!" Professor Flitwick squeaked.

"All the same," Fudge said in a haughty tone, "they are here to protect you all from something much worse. We all know what Black's capable of."

Padfoot could feel the fur rise up on his neck and back.

*Mate, you have no fucking idea what I'm capable of.*

"Do you know, I still have trouble believing it," Rosmerta mumbled thoughtfully. "Of all the people to go over to the Dark, Sirius Black was the last I'd have thought. I mean, I remember him when he was a boy at Hogwarts. If you'd told me then what he was going to become, I'd have said you'd had too much mead."

"You don't know the half of it, Rosmerta," Fudge stated gruffly. "The worst he did isn't widely known."

"The worst?" Rosmerta asked, her voice alive with curiosity. "Worse than murdering all those poor Muggles, you mean?"

"I certainly do," Fudge replied.

"I can't believe that. What could possibly be worse?"

"You say you remember him at Hogwarts, Rosmerta," Minerva murmured. "Do you remember who his best friend was?"

"Naturally," Rosmerta answered with a small laugh. "Never saw one without the other, did you? The number of times I had them in here. Oh, they used to make me laugh. Quite the double act, Sirius Black and James Potter."

"Precisely," McGonagall said. "Black and Potter. Ringleaders of their little gang. Both very bright, of course—exceptionally bright, in fact—but I don't think we've ever had such a pair of troublemakers."

"I heard the stories all the way down here in the village," Rosmerta chimed in with a chuckle. "Those boys and that sist—" she started to say, but McGonagall cut her off loudly by clearing her throat.

Hagrid took the opportunity to cut into the conversation. "I dunno," he said with a chuckle, "Fred and George Weasley could give 'em a run for their money."

"You'd have thought Black and Potter were brothers!" Professor Flitwick chimed in. "Inseparable!"

Padfoot inhaled sharply, still not used to hearing James being spoken of aloud. So many years in Azkaban fighting off the dementors, clinging to the knowledge that he was innocent in order to retain his sanity, and yet isolation had damaged him instead. There were times when he almost thought his life had not been real. James and Remus and Lily.

Even now, as he breathed in the familiar scents of Hogsmeade, he could smell it—smell *her*. She smelled like the forest after a rainstorm, and over a decade later, it was almost as if she were still right there in front of him. The half-empty Soul Bond in his chest thrummed, reminding him that he was alive and that a part of him was missing. Missing but maybe not dead. Sirius had never been able to tell.

"Of *course* they were," Fudge said. "Potter trusted Black above all his other friends. Nothing changed when they left school. Black was best man at Potter's wedding. Then he named him godfather to young Harry. Harry has no idea, of course. You can imagine how the idea would torment him."

Fudge's words pulled Sirius out of his thoughts, and he growled low. They had not even told Harry who he was? *No*. He shook his head. *Why would they?* To them, he was a

murderer, a traitor, and a bloody fucking Death Eater. It was better that Harry had not been told.

"Black was the Potters' Secret-Keeper?" Rosmerta whispered.

"Naturally," McGonagall answered. "James Potter told Dumbledore that Black would die rather than tell where they were, that Black was planning to go into hiding himself . . . and yet, Dumbledore remained worried. I remember him offering to be the Potters' Secret-Keeper himself."

Sirius cursed himself for being so blind and stupid. He had spent years worried that he would put his loved ones in danger because Death Eaters were always after him. It was why he had insisted James and Lily change Secret-Keepers. He had been certain that he would be found and killed, and then their location would be revealed. But fuck . . . how many times had Mia and Lily—and even Dorea—told him that it was not his fault that Death Eaters and Voldemort were always attacking people he loved? How many times had they pleaded with him to let it go, and he just ignored them each and every time?

"But James Potter insisted on using Black?"

"He did," Fudge said heavily. "And then, barely a week after the Fidelius Charm had been performed . . ."

Padfoot tore away from the back door and ran from the building. He knew what had happened barely a week after the Fidelius Charm had been cast and did not need a retelling from Cornelius fucking Fudge—someone who did not know the whole story. Someone who did not know what had *actually* happened that night in Godric's Hollow or the massacre that took place in London shortly after.

Overwhelmed by guilt, Sirius needed to focus on something else before heading back up to the Forbidden Forest to plan his next move. That was when, from the corner of his eye, he spotted a familiar head of white-blond hair.

"Mr Malfoy!" A portly man in finely made robes approached the blond wizard, extending his hand. "What brings you all the way to Hogsmeade this afternoon?"

"Hogwarts business," Lucius Malfoy replied with a sneer, accepting the extended hand reluctantly. "In case you haven't heard, that imbecile headmaster has the great giant oaf parading around as though he were an actual professor. Not to mention, they've allowed a wild herd of hippogriffs to run rampantly through the grounds, attacking children."

The portly wizard gasped. "You don't say? I thought you weren't a school governor anymore."

"Official position or not, I am a humble parent concerned for the welfare of the future generations of our world."

Sirius felt blood rush to his head at the sight of the Death Eater. The *actual* Death Eater walking around wearing fine, clean robes, looking well-fed and . . . and . . . fucking *free*. Lucius Malfoy was a free man. Standing there all smug with his coin purse just hanging out of his robes like—*Wait* . . .

Padfoot's eyes widened at the sight of the small, yet obviously heavy pouch, and he inwardly grinned. Without thinking, he rushed forward. With no small amount of joy, he leapt on top of Lucius Malfoy, knocking him to the ground. He used his back legs to kick Malfoy's serpent-headed cane away from reach just as his teeth clamped down on the purse.

"Get off me, you wretched beast!" Malfoy shouted, struggling against Padfoot's not-insubstantial weight. "Someone kill this bloody thing!"

Padfoot jumped away and darted off as quickly as possible, ducking behind several large buildings just in time for Malfoy to reach his cane—and, therefore, wand—and begin shooting hexes off into the distance, completely unaware that he had just been robbed.

Making his way back up to the Forbidden Forest long before the students were to return to the castle, Padfoot settled himself inside the small campsite he had created for himself. He shifted briefly into his human form to open up Malfoy's coin purse and count how much money he now had. Though he knew he could not go into any Wizarding shopping district for food, there was still a chance that he could Apparate into a Muggle town to make a few quick purchases, except, he realised too late, that he would need to exchange the Galleons for Muggle currency. There was no way he could make it through Gringotts without Aurors being called in. Cursing himself under his breath, he wondered if he could just steal what he needed. It was dangerous, of course, and considering his appearance, he would draw immediate attention, but it had to be better than living off of scraps that his kneazle friend brought him every few days.

"No." Sirius sighed and threw the coins back into the pouch. He knew he could not risk being seen. *Not yet*. Not while Wormtail still lived and was much too close to Harry for Sirius's liking. Six feet under would be *much* more preferable.

He shifted back into Padfoot and flopped down to rest. From this angle, he could see the Whomping Willow. He remembered his first year at Hogwarts when some of the older students—the Prewett twins if he remembered correctly—thought it would be fun to try and decorate the violent tree for Christmas. It landed several of them in the hospital wing in the end, much to the amusement of the rest of the student body. Christmas was coming. Sirius sighed at the thought, wishing that there was something he could do for his godson to make up for all the Christmases and birthdays that he missed over the years.

But short of buying the boy a new broom to replace the one that the Whomping Willow destroyed a month ago, Sirius could not think of anything worthy enough.

He looked to his left where the orange kneazle appeared at his side, pawing curiously at the small bag of Galleons sitting on the cold ground. Padfoot inwardly smirked as he wondered whether Broomstix still offered mail-order services.

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### **December 25th, 1993**

With his most vivid memories of Mia being kept safe by Dumbledore, Remus could put more effort into his lessons as well as helping Harry. Hermione's presence was always a distraction; though, without the constant string of nostalgia, he *had* hoped to be able to better separate his young student from the best friend he knew she would become. And while he tried to keep an eye out for *both* Hermione and Harry, it was the boy who needed his help more.

Remus sat in his chambers, nursing a headache thanks to the approaching full moon, trying to distract himself by reflecting on his most recent conversation with Harry.

*"When the dementors get near me, I can hear Voldemort murdering my mum."*

He had not realised that his own hands had started shaking at the revelation, and it took all of Remus's strength not to pull Harry into his arms and offer him what little comfort he had to give. But he had to keep his distance, at least for now. Harry was much too inquisitive, and he knew that when he discovered just *how* close Remus had been to his parents, the boy would have questions. Questions that Remus did not know if he could answer, thanks to Dumbledore's insistence that Harry be kept in the dark about several

things; not to mention the Unbreakable Vow that prevented Remus from saying almost anything about Mia, and just as little in regards to Sirius—depending on the question and who was asking.

He felt for the boy. Though he had not seen his own mother die, he *had* been in the same building when it happened. On the other hand, Dorea had been like a second mother to him, and he had watched her leave the world with her entire family gathered at her side. Proudly, he had been considered a part of that family. But Dorea had passed peacefully in her sleep. Lily had been murdered and, according to Harry, she died screaming.

Clenching his eyes tight, Remus tried to block out the vivid imagery that his imagination was creating against his will.

*"Why did they have to come to the match?" Harry asked bitterly.*

*"They're getting hungry. Dumbledore won't let them into the school, so their supply of human prey has dried up. I don't think they could resist the large crowd around the Quidditch field. All that excitement . . . emotions running high . . . it was their idea of a feast."*

*"Azkaban must be terrible," Harry muttered.*

*Remus nodded grimly. "The prison is on a small island, out on the North Sea, but they don't need walls and water to keep the prisoners in—not when they're all trapped inside their own heads, incapable of a single cheerful thought. Dementors cause most of them to go mad within weeks."*

*"But Sirius Black escaped from them," Harry slowly said. "He got away."*

*Remus dropped his briefcase as Sirius's name fell from Harry's mouth. Our job, he thought to himself. No, my job. My job to keep him safe. My job to keep them safe. Safe from Sirius.*

*"Yes. Black must have found a way to fight them. I wouldn't have believed it was possible. Dementors are supposed to drain a wizard of his powers if he is left with them too long."*

It was *that* thought that stayed with Remus as he forced his way out of his chambers, eager to head toward the kitchens to get something to eat. He had no tolerance for the company of his fellow professors. It was Christmas, and he was not in the mood to deal with Minerva's judgemental eyes or Snape's underhanded comments about flea baths and housebreaking. It was bad enough that he now had to avoid Sybill Trelawney, who seemed to be most eager to crystal gaze on his behalf. He had originally thought her to be mental, recalling Mia's dislike of Divination. It did not help that Sybill smelled like cooking sherry and incense, assaulting his overly sensitive nose. But when he had heard word that Harry

had seen a Grim in his tea leaves while in her class, Remus began wondering if there was not a little more to the supposed Seer.

Just in case, he began avoiding her at all costs.

After a quick meal in the kitchens, he thanked the house-elves for all of their hard work and headed back to his quarters. Just as he turned the corner, he heard someone crying. Remus furrowed his brow and turned to investigate, hoping that it was nothing serious, but considering the dangers present around the castle, he knew he could not be too careful.

As he walked around another corner, he spotted her.

Hermione sat in the shadows of a small alcove, her knees brought to her chest as she sobbed into her folded arms. Bushy brown hair covered her face.

Much to Remus's relief, she looked unharmed, at least physically, but the sound of her weeping was painful. With it being this close to the full moon, the wolf inside of him was louder than ever, and the voice he'd come to identify as *Moony's* was growling in his head, yelling at him for not properly taking care of his pack.

*She's not Pack, yet,* Remus silently argued.

Moony fought back. *Marked or not, bonded or not, she belongs to us just like the rest of them.*

"Hermione?" Remus whispered, kneeling down in front of her in concern.

The little witch jumped, startled by his sudden presence. She immediately began wiping away at her tear-stained cheeks. "Professor Lupin . . . I . . . I'm sorry . . ."

"What are you sorry for? Have you done something wrong?" he asked with a smirk on his face, hoping to get a smile out of the girl.

His failed attempt at a joke triggered something, and suddenly the girl was sobbing once again.

Remus sat back on his heels, incredibly uncomfortable, not knowing how to proceed. "I'm sorry, Hermione, I . . . It was supposed to be a joke. I know you'd never actually do anything wrong," he assured her, reaching out and patting her on the back.

"But I *did!*" she cried and turned to look up at him, her chocolate brown eyes wet with tears. "And now they hate me!"

*"My boggart would have been the two of you telling me how much you hated me."*

Remus winced at the memory, noticing quickly that the sting Dumbledore told him would fade upon removing the memories was *still* just as strong as before. He blamed his

lycanthropy. He might have removed the memories, but *Moony* apparently had his own that he clung to on instinct.

"Hermione, I don't think anyone is capable of hating you," he promised her. "You're too good—too kind."

She looked up at him incredulously. "*Everyone* hates me."

"I don't."

Hermione sniffled and smiled sadly up at him. "All the Slytherins hate me because I'm Muggle-born, especially Malfoy."

She uttered the boy's name with so much disdain that Remus could actually see a glimpse of Mia inside of the girl.

"All my roommates hate me because I care more about books than makeup. Professor Snape hates me because I'm a little know-it-all." She hiccupped. "And now even Ron and Harry hate me."

"Come on," Remus insisted as he stood up, wincing a bit as his knees creaked. "I'll fix us a cup of tea, and you can tell me all about it."

"I'm sorry, Professor, I . . . I didn't mean to burden you with my problems. It's stupid," she said, continuing to sniff through her words.

"You are not a burden, Hermione," Remus promised her. "It's Christmas, and it appears we're both not good company for others, so indulge this old man a cup of tea and some nice conversation, will you?"

Hermione smiled sadly. "You're not old, Professor."

"I'm old enough to be your professor." Remus snorted and made his way into his office, waving his wand to levitate a small kettle to a nearby burner that ignited. He turned around as she entered his office. The place was cluttered, filled with books, parchments, and old artefacts and objects he was hoping to show for the following term's lessons. Instead of being appalled at the untidy state of the room, Hermione looked intrigued by the large stack of books on his desk.

He smiled at her curiosity. "Feel free to browse."

Her red-rimmed eyes brightened, and she sat down in a chair opposite his desk to peruse his collection of books. "Am I *allowed* to read these? I have to imagine some would belong in the Restricted Section of the library."

Remus chuckled at the fact that, even now, she was obeying the rules. "Consider this a temporary pass to read what you'd like. My Christmas gift to you."

He watched as her small fingers ran over the spines of the tomes, her attention drawn to a slender book with a red cover. *Taboo of Time Magic* was written in faded black ink across the front. She silently opened the book and leafed through it leisurely. Remus smiled when she grimaced at the notes written in the margins. He wondered if she would recognise her own handwriting.

On a blank page next to a chapter on Time-Turners were written a series of advanced Arithmancy equations that he figured would be too advanced for her at this point in her life. At the bottom of the page, it read: *Impossible to move forward* followed by *Return?* and several faded notes about Portkeys that Remus had transferred to a notebook that he kept locked up and warded.

"It belonged to a friend of mine."

*"Remus, do you have room on your bookshelves?" Mia asked as she walked into his room, a small red book in her hand.*

*He sat up from his position on his bed, a novel he had borrowed from Lily in his hands which he immediately turned away from Mia's gaze, suspiciously placing the cover face down next to him. "Umm . . . I suppose so. Have you run out already?"*

*Mia smirked. "Not yet. But I can't keep this one in our room where Sirius could find it."*

*"What is it?" Remus asked.*

*"The only book on time-related magic that Professor Dumbledore could find. When I first arrived here, I had thought about trying to return to my own time," she explained. "Or at least I tried researching how. Albus found this book for me, and I tried to figure out how to charm the Time-Turner to go forward."*

*She handed the book to him, and he thumbed through a few of the pages.*

*"I assume you couldn't figure it out?"*

*"Why would you assume that?"*

*"Because you're still here." Remus chuckled, but he looked up to see her frowning. "What?"*

*"Remus, I stayed here because I didn't want to leave," she said with a sad smile. "Anyway, I hadn't finished all the equations on how to return, but I've given you a pretty decent head start on figuring out how to charm the Time-Turner to send me back in the first place."*

*Remus nodded, swallowing hard. "I'll keep it safe."*

"It's dangerous to meddle with Time Magic," Hermione muttered as she closed the book and placed it quickly back on the stack, reaching for another. "You have *Fowl or Foul? A Study of Hippogriff Brutality*? Professor, could I . . . Do you think I could borrow this? It's just that I've been trying to help Hagrid with Buckbeak's case. The Ministry's trying to have him executed over what happened with Malfoy."

Remus nodded as he pulled the kettle from the burner, burying the feeling of disappointment as he watched her so casually disregard the book on Time Magic. He knew when he was supposed to send her back—the date was burnt into his mind—but he could not help but miss Mia the more he got to know Hermione. She felt so close and yet still so far away. Remus still had years to wait before he could do a thing.

"I heard about that little incident. You're more than welcome to borrow it, Hermione. It's very kind of you to offer to help Hagrid with his hippogriff."

"Well, it's not Buckbeak's fault that Malfoy didn't pay attention in class. He was only acting on instincts. You can't blame a poor animal for attacking someone who—" She stopped speaking when her eyes fell back to the books on his desk.

He curiously followed her gaze where it landed on his worn copy of *Lupine Lawlessness: Why Lycanthropes Don't Deserve to Live*. He studied the girl carefully as she reached out to touch the text, hesitantly as though it were infected with something.

"Tea?" he asked, interrupting the suddenly awkward silence.

She looked back up at him and offered a hesitant smile as she reached for the cup he was extending to her. "Yes, thank you." She took a sip and smiled. "Oh, you sweetened it."

"Sorry? I just assumed that . . ." he began, but Hermione cut him off as she peered into his cup, which was a lighter shade than her own, indicating that he had fixed his with milk.

Remus immediately realised his mistake. He had known how she took her tea because it was how *Mia* took her tea. It would have been one thing to sweeten *both* cups or leave hers alone entirely, but he had fixed hers specific to her tastes and then his own, showcasing that he knew she did not like milk in hers.

Hermione smiled, a blush creeping across her face. "No, it's fine."

*Oh Merlin*, Remus frowned at the sight. He decided to see the silver lining in the awkward situation. For one, Hermione knew nothing about their shared past—or future;

secondly, whatever awful schoolgirl crush she apparently had on him was distracting her from the fact that he had made such a colossal mistake.

"Why don't you tell me why you think Harry and Ron hate you," he said, hoping to further distract her. He felt a bit guilty but relieved at the same time when she frowned as she remembered why she had been crying earlier.

"Harry was gifted a very expensive broom for Christmas," Hermione whispered. "Too expensive. And anonymously. And recklessly, he and Ron were ready to go running off to test it out on the Quidditch Pitch, ignoring the fact that it could very well have been sent to him by Sirius Black."

Remus frowned at the news. If the broom had, in fact, been sent to Harry by Sirius, he could not understand the motive behind it. Certainly, the broom *could* be jinxed, but it seemed stupid and pointless to purchase something so expensive, put all the work into spelling it, only to hope that someone would not catch it? Plus, Sirius was on the run. Where would he even *get* enough Galleons to buy a broom? And why go to all the effort at subtlety when he had clearly already been able to break into the castle to try and attack Harry?

A nudging voice that sounded an awful lot like Mia was telling Remus that Sirius bought the broom because Harry was his godson, and it was Christmas. He remembered listening to a young Sirius Black go on and on with James after Harry's birth, talking about how they would teach the boy to fly and how to play Quidditch. Sirius had insisted that he could teach Harry how to be a Beater, but James told him that Mia said he would grow up to be a Seeker. Because, of course, Mia had already known.

"So I told Professor McGonagall," Hermione continued, "and she took Harry's broom away."

"It's only a broom, Hermione." Remus tried to smile at her, offering what little comfort he could.

"It was a Firebolt."

Remus choked on his tea and stared at the girl wide-eyed.

Hermione's frown deepened. "I know."

"No, no." Remus cleared his throat. "Still just a broom . . . just a . . . a broom. Besides, once Professor McGonagall looks the broom over, and I'll help, it'll be returned to Harry, and things will be fine. I promise."

Hermione looked up at him. "Professor, I know this is more Hagrid's speciality, but would you happen to know anything about kneazles?"

"Unfortunately, no." Remus shook his head. "Just that they're quite intelligent and loyal creatures. Very independent, too. I'm told they can be interbred with common cats."

"I have one; it's my familiar. And he's causing another problem with Harry and . . . well, it's mostly just Ron. My kneazle has apparently taken a dislike to Ron's pet rat. He's curious, is all," she said defensively, wearing the same affectionate expression on her face as Mia wore when her vicious cat would claw and bite anyone except her. "It's just that it's started several fights, and if I can get Crookshanks to behave, maybe it'll make things easier."

"Training a rat-seeking kneazle." Remus smirked. "I wish you all the luck, Hermione."

"Thank you for the tea, Professor, and . . . and for listening."

"I am always here to listen if you need someone," he promised her. "And I know he won't say it himself, so I'll thank you on Harry's behalf for looking out for his well-being. You're a good person, Hermione. Don't forget that."

Hermione just shrugged her shoulders. "He's my best friend."

The words briefly stung, but Remus shoved the jealousy deep down, remembering that Mia had once promised him that she considered Remus and Harry *both* her best friends. He felt a little silly but mostly lonely. It had been many years since he enjoyed anyone's friendship.

"Happy Christmas," he said to her in parting before closing the door behind her as she left.

Remus turned around and let out a long sigh. A full moon in a few days, a crying witch, Sirius Black on the loose, dementors surrounding the castle, and now he had to worry about a potentially jinxed broom. He groaned as he made his way back to his desk to look over the lesson plans for when classes were back in session. He reached across a stack of parchments for a book on vampires when he noticed his copy of *Lupine Lawlessness: Why Lycanthropes Don't Deserve to Live* was missing.

Standing up, he walked around the desk, wondering if the tome had fallen on the floor while Hermione was looking through his collection. Curiously, he scanned the rest

of the room and, there in the corner, he spotted the cover of the volume sticking out of the bin.

Remus chuckled under his breath at the sight. *Cheeky witch.*

## Chapter One Hundred Seven

### *The Map Never Lies*

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*What I've felt,  
What I've known  
Never shined through in what I've shown.  
Never free.  
Never me.  
So I dub thee unforgiven  
(Unforgiven - Metallica)*

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**February 5th, 1994**

Watching Harry play Quidditch was a dream.

It had been a risk, of course, knowing that Remus would be at the pitch watching the game as well, but Sirius stayed in his Animagus form, observing from a distance as Harry flew above the pitch like he had been born on a broom. He had hoped to see Harry fly opposite Lucius Malfoy's kid, all the while knowing that it had been Malfoy's stolen Galleons that had paid for Harry's Firebolt but, as it was, the Gryffindors were facing off against Ravenclaw and not Slytherin.

*I should be in there,* Sirius thought to himself as he stared at the stands.

He closed his eyes at the thought. A lot of things should be different. James and Lily should be alive. Mia should be there at his side, married with a couple of kids of their own. Remus should not be alone in the stands right now, watching Harry as though he were a painful reminder of what could have been. Sirius stared up at his one remaining friend in the world, who was not even his friend anymore. No, Remus thought that he was a murderer, a traitor, a Death Eater. And who could blame him?

Suddenly, he noticed a furry figure approach him from the side. He gave a nod of greeting to the orange kneazle and Sirius thought, *Well, I guess I have one friend.*

He briefly lost focus when he heard someone scream, "*Expecto Patronum!*"

Fear flashed through him at the thought of dementors, and he looked around in a panic. He stared ahead where he watched as Harry flew downward, wand extended and a massive Patronus shield emerging from the end of it. He rushed to the side as Harry was enveloped by his team, all cheering loudly, hoisting him into the air as he held the small

golden ball in his hand. Padfoot turned his attention to the edge of the pitch where four Slytherins were fumbling out of a set of long black cloaks, disguised as dementors.

Padfoot's attention was drawn away from the crowd when the kneazle beside him nudged his hind leg. The cat opened his mouth, and a crumpled ball of paper fell out. Curious, Padfoot nudged the parchment open with his muzzle, and excitement grew in his chest as he saw written at the top of the parchment: *Passwords*.

*Tonight, Wormtail*, Sirius thought. *You're dead*.

---

Trying to keep his composure as he approached the portrait late that night, Sirius shifted into human form, glad to see that the Fat Lady was nowhere in sight. Instead, a knight in armour stood waving a sword as Sirius approached.

"Come to fight me, you mangy cur?"

Sirius raised an impatient brow but let the irritation fade and amusement take its place. It was nice to *not* be recognised. "Fight *you*, sir? I dare not. I come seeking entrance to your fine tower this good eve."

"Entrance to the tower you say? 'Tis a dangerous place," the knight whispered. "Only the very bravest dare to enter."

"You are, then, very brave to guard such a place," Sirius commented thoughtfully. "I suppose you need a password, good knight?"

"You suppose right, sir!"

"Very well," Sirius said and reached into his pocket, retrieving the list. "*Caput Draconis*, Pig Snout, Wattlebird, *Fortuna Major*, Flibbertigibbet, Oddsbodikins, Scurvy Cur, Braggart."

The knight laughed. "*All* the passwords?"

Sirius grinned. "I'm very thorough."

"Then enter, my brave comrade, and good eve to you." The knight welcomed him, and the portrait opened.

"And to you," Sirius said darkly as he entered the old familiar common room.

Once inside, he made his way straight to the stairs of the boys' dormitories, but a short inhale had him stopping in his tracks. *Forest after a rainstorm*. He turned toward the

direction of the girls' dormitories and frowned. The tower still smelled like Mia after all these years. It was painful, and it took him a second to collect himself before remembering *why* he was even there.

*Wormtail. Wormtail. Must kill Wormtail.*

Sirius silently crept up the stairs and into the room where the third years were sleeping soundly. He used the now familiar scent of Harry to guide him. Unable to stop himself, he first went to Harry's bed. Slowly and silently, he opened the curtains to look down at the boy—*his* boy.

*Almost grown up*, Sirius thought to himself as he stared at his sleeping godson. The last time he'd had a chance to do such a thing, Harry had been only a year old.

Sirius reached a hand out, tempted to brush the messy, black hair from the sleeping boy's forehead, but he caught sight of his own hand in the moonlight. Filthy skin and long, dirt-encrusted fingernails. He pulled his hand back, not wanting to taint Harry further by his presence, let alone physical contact. He closed the curtain quietly and turned around to face the other bed where the kneazle told him that the rat often slept with the red-haired boy.

Hands shaking, Sirius gripped his knife tightly and, unable to stop himself, sliced the blade straight through the curtains, pulling them aside in search of the rat. When there was no sight of Wormtail, he panicked. *No, no, no . . .*

"Where is he?" Sirius growled under his breath, unaware that he'd done so aloud.

A pair of cerulean blue eyes slowly opened, and Sirius stared down into the face of the boy who looked up at him with fearful recognition.

*Fuck*, Sirius thought, just as the young wizard began screaming.

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### **February 6th, 1994**

Remus had thought about talking to Harry about Hermione during their anti-dementor lessons, but he decided against being too personally involved. Already, Harry was asking questions that Remus did not know how to answer. It was a constant struggle

being around the boy that Remus should have known his entire life—by all rights, he should have raised Harry himself. Except werewolves did not *have* rights.

Harry was a very talented wizard. Not only was he brilliant at Quidditch and duelling, but he was exceptional at Charms, though nowhere near the bar that Hermione had set for the rest of the school. Through a bit of prodding, Remus discovered that Harry struggled a bit with Potions—something Remus could relate to—and that he was annoyed with Divination. When they were not practising Harry's Patronus Charm, they talked about Quidditch.

Quidditch was something Harry could talk about easily, and with renewed enthusiasm since Minerva had returned to him his Firebolt. Though the identity of the mysterious gift giver remained a secret, Remus still had a feeling that it had come from Sirius. No one else seemed logical, but he could not put together why a man who had a hand in murdering the boy's parents would care to give him a present.

"*Trust Sirius. Always Sirius,*" Mia had said.

A part of Remus really, desperately wanted to, despite all the damning evidence. A part of him *actually* began questioning that evidence . . . that was until the entire castle had been awakened in the middle of the night with rumours of another break-in involving Sirius Black. He had gone to the Great Hall to help monitor the students before breaking away to help search the castle, but Dumbledore remained strangely quiet about where the breach in security had been. Remus had his own theory and had it confirmed the following morning during an emergency staff meeting.

"Perhaps you should consider removing the portraits altogether, Minerva," Snape suggested, "seeing that an escaped convict was able to enter your tower simply by uttering a password to an idiotic painting. I would advise perhaps something akin to Ravenclaw's method of common room accessibility, but basing entrance upon intellect would certainly leave your entire House sleeping on the stairway."

Remus choked on a small laugh that tried to work its way out of his throat against his will. He stifled the urge to remind Snape that Slytherin House had once been forced to sleep in the corridors when they were unable to locate the entrance to their common room.

Minerva seethed with fury. "Is *now* the time, Severus?! I understand that with Remus back in the castle and Sirius Black on the loose, you've felt the need to revert to an adolescent attitude, and a poor one at that, but can you perhaps put aside your personal

issues and House rivalries to be more concerned about the fact that Sirius Black could have *killed* Harry Potter!"

It was then that the rest of the staff decided to voice their opinions.

Remus instead held his head in his hands and tried to push away the growing headache due to all of the noise. Eventually, though, his thoughts got the best of him and he, too, spoke up. "But he *didn't* kill Harry. He didn't even *attack* Harry."

"Well, not for a lack of trying," Pomona chimed in. "I heard that the Weasley boy's curtains were slashed. If he'd gotten the right bed—"

"But he didn't. He got the *wrong* bed. Why would Sirius randomly attack without searching for the proper bed?" Remus asked, perplexed. Of course, he knew that Sirius's canine sense of smell would have been able to help him locate Harry in the dorm room. So, why attack Ron Weasley? "Why put the effort into breaking in, stealing the passwords, and entering the tower only to lose patience at the last moment and attack at random?"

"Who knows the mind of a madman?" Snape sneered. "Black has always been reckless and foolhardy."

"I'm just saying that something doesn't make sense—"

"Why are we not inquiring as to *how* he's getting into the castle in the first place?" Snape demanded, his attention turned to Dumbledore. "Have you asked Lupin how he and his friends used to sneak about the castle when they were all young delinquents? Or maybe he's keeping those secrets because he's aiding Black. It wouldn't be the first time that he put a student at risk."

"I had nothing to do with that, and you very well know it!" Remus snapped, rising from his chair to come face-to-face with Snape. "I am well aware that you have a history with Sirius—*and* with me—but protecting Harry is what is important right now!"

A few more choice words were tossed between the two colleagues, which ended with Remus apologising for his temper and Snape storming from the table, his robes billowing behind him in a pretentious manner that made Remus begin to suspect they had been charmed to do so.

"I, regretfully, must ask again, Remus," Dumbledore began softly as the rest of the staff, save for Minerva, filed out of the room, "do you know of any way that Sirius Black is able to enter the castle?"

Remus tried speaking. His doubts over Sirius were constantly wavering, though, at the moment, they were all but vanished. However, any time he tried to mention Padfoot or the secret passages leading in and out of Hogwarts, he could feel the warning burn on his wrist from where the Unbreakable Vow had been placed. "Unfortunately, Albus, my hands are *quite literally* tied in regards to this situation."

Dumbledore seemed to understand as he gave a solemn nod in Remus's direction. "Well, if that's all—"

"That's *not* all," Remus interrupted him. "I want to talk about Hermione."

Minerva was suddenly back at the table, narrowing her eyes at him.

"Professor . . . *Minerva*." Remus sighed in frustration. "Can you please stop looking at me like I'm the big, bad wolf who's going to throw little red over my shoulder and make her my child bride?! I know who she is, and you *obviously* know who she was, or will be, but have I not proven that I am a man of honour over the years?"

She had the grace to look ashamed. "Forgive me, Remus. I just . . . Miss Granger has not had it easy here, being Muggle-born. With you here and Sirius Black on the loose, it . . . it has made it difficult not to worry about her safety. To think of what that madman would do if he knew who she was. It keeps me up at night."

"It's one of the reasons I agreed to stay on as a professor here," Remus confessed. "I know she's not Mia, not . . . not yet, but that doesn't make me feel as though she's any less *my* responsibility. Both because of what Mia was, and what Hermione will be to me. Also because she's my student and, therefore, under my protection." He ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "Can we be done with this?"

Minerva nodded. "I overreacted, and I deeply apologise. I've known you since you were a boy, and should know better than to think so poorly of you."

*You knew Sirius as well*, Remus thought to himself. Had she been wrong about him too?

"Forgiven. Now, as I was trying to say earlier, I'm worried about Hermione. I know about the Time-Turner, and I think she's overextending herself. She's taken too much on with her classes. I'm also fairly certain she's not eating."

"How would you know that?"

"Because I know the signs. She may not be Mia Potter yet, but she's the same obsessive girl inside, and whenever Mia overly stressed about something, she didn't look

after her own health. I . . . Her friends were always there to take care of her. But Harry has been focused on the dementors and Sirius, and Ron's not currently speaking to her."

"And why is that?" Minerva asked, rolling her eyes.

Remus mimicked her expression of irritation. "Last I heard it's because her kneazle familiar ate his rat."

"That sickly-looking thing? I hope it had a quick death. Though, I've never been fond of rats myself," she said with a smirk that looked much too similar to her Animagus form.

Remus chuckled. "I'm surprised you and Mia didn't get along better, Minerva. She had a similar distaste for rodents."

He remembered that first night in the Shrieking Shack when the fox had chased the rat. The memory made him sad, recalling that even though Mia was still *technically* alive, Peter was not.

"I will keep an eye on Miss Granger," Minerva promised.

He gave her a nod of thanks before adding, "And I'll keep a closer watch on Harry."

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### February 12th, 1994

Keeping a closer watch on Harry was easier said than done. Remus had done his best to look after the boy, but he was absolutely certain that Harry had somehow inherited James's Invisibility Cloak. It made tracking him that much more difficult without looking like a lunatic as he drifted through the corridors sniffing about like a dog.

And, though he was not sure exactly how, Remus was positive that Harry had figured out how to access certain secret passages between the castle and Hogsmeade. The Marauder within him was proud. However, the *professor* was irked by the blatant rule breaking, considering Harry's life was in genuine danger. Remus had never thought Hogsmeade to be so important. Then again, his chocolate stash *was* running low . . .

"I've been up in Gryffindor Tower."

Remus looked up at the sound of Harry's voice. With the rest of the school finally returning from the village, he had been asked to patrol the corridors to make sure certain students were not already setting out pranks purchased from Zonko's.

"Can anyone confirm that?" Snape's voice carried down the hallway.

Remus followed the sounds, not entirely trusting of Snape when it came to Harry. Dumbledore swore to his loyalty, which made Remus believe that the former Death Eater was an honourable man, but it was clear that when Harry was involved, Snape was not capable of being objective.

He found the professor and student facing off against one another in the centre of a corridor. Eager to hear their conversation so that he could judge Snape's treatment of Harry, Remus remained in the shadows.

"So," Snape said, "everyone from the Minister for Magic downward has been trying to keep famous Harry Potter safe from Sirius Black. But famous Harry Potter is a law unto himself. Let the ordinary people worry about his safety! Famous Harry Potter goes where he wants to, with no thought for the consequences."

Had Snape even met the boy? Remus had been teaching Harry for less than a year, and he knew how much Harry disliked being famous, how much he detested preferential treatment. The boy was a teenager who just wanted to play Quidditch with his friends, learn interesting new spells, visit Hogsmeade with the rest of the students, and skive Potions class. He just wanted to be normal. Anyone actually paying attention could see that.

"How extraordinarily like your father you are, Potter."

Remus felt his heart rate increase. He found himself grateful that the full moon was still almost two weeks away. Though gone from this world, James was Pack, and Remus could not help but still feel protective of his fallen friend.

"He, too, was exceedingly arrogant. A small amount of talent on the Quidditch pitch made him think he was a cut above the rest of us. Strutting around the place with his friends and admirers. The resemblance between you two is uncanny."

"My dad didn't strut," Harry retorted.

Remus snorted. *Oh, but he did.*

"And neither do I."

"Your father didn't set much store by rules, either," Snape went on, pressing his advantage. "Rules were for lesser mortals, not Quidditch Cup-winners. His head was so swollen—"

"SHUT UP!"

"What did you just say to me, Potter?"

"I told you to shut up about my dad!" Harry yelled. "I know the truth, all right? He saved your life! Dumbledore told me! You wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for my dad!"

Remus winced and covered his face.

"And did the headmaster tell you the circumstances in which your father saved my life?" Snape asked. "Or did he consider the details too unpleasant for precious Potter's delicate ears? I would hate for you to run away with a false idea of your father, Potter. Have you been imagining some act of glorious heroism? Then let me correct you. Your saintly father and his friends played a highly amusing joke on me that would have resulted in my death if your father hadn't got cold feet at the last moment. There was nothing brave about what he did. He was saving his own skin as much as mine. Had their joke succeeded, he would have been expelled from Hogwarts."

Remus closed his eyes remembering that awful night when Sirius tricked the Slytherin into sneaking beneath the Whomping Willow on a full moon. It had only been *partially* a joke, but Remus had known that a small part of Sirius had wanted Snape hurt. Snape had threatened Mia, which was something that Sirius would not tolerate. Like her overprotective nature when it came to the pair of them; in their eyes, she was always the line people were *never* to cross.

"Turn out your pockets, Potter! Turn out your pockets, or we go straight to the headmaster! Pull them out, Potter! And this . . . What might it be?"

"Spare bit of parchment."

Remus raised a brow and listened closely.

"Reveal your secret! Read it!"

"Mr Moony presents his compliments to Professor Snape," Harry read aloud.

Remus's eyes widened at his adolescent nickname being said aloud—something that he had not heard from another living soul in years. He grinned at the thought, imagining the look on James's face if he knew that somehow his own son had acquired the map that they had created and left regretfully in Filch's office after Peter had lost it.

It was too late before Remus remembered the security measure put into the map.

"—and begs him to keep his abnormally large nose out of other people's business."

There was absolute silence, and Remus held his breath as he waited for Snape to lose it. Unfortunately, Harry continued to read.

"Mr Prongs agrees with Mr Moony and would like to add that Professor Snape is an ugly git."

Remus covered his face, repressing a guilty smirk.

"Mr Padfoot would like to register his astonishment that an idiot like that ever became a professor."

Harry would pay the price for this. Remus knew he would.

"Mr Wormtail bids Professor Snape good day, and advises him to wash his hair, the slimeball."

"Why you insolent little—" Snape began.

Remus took this as a cue to step out from the shadows. "Harry?"

"Professor?"

"Ah, good afternoon, Severus." Remus smiled politely, ignoring the red tint on Snape's normally pale face. "Is everything all right?"

"I have just asked Potter to empty his pockets. He was carrying this," Snape spat, thrusting the Marauder's Map into his hands.

Remus forced himself not to smile at the familiar parchment. He glanced it over briefly as though it were nothing more than a piece of paper before he looked up at Harry, noticing the way that the boy was shaking, whether out of fear of punishment or anger over what had been said about James, Remus did not know. "Are you all right, Harry?"

"That remains to be seen," Snape answered. "Take a look, Lupin. This is supposed to be your area of expertise. Clearly, it's full of Dark Magic."

Remus snorted as he recalled the variety of charms put on the map, none of which were even close to being Dark in nature. The worst of the lot had been the insulting that Snape had just been privy to.

"I seriously doubt that, Severus. It looks to me as if it merely insults anyone who tries to read it." He shrugged his shoulders as he opened the parchment, letting his eyes follow over the page as though it was currently insulting him. "I suspect it's a Zonko product."

"Indeed?" Snape's jaw had gone rigid with anger. "You think a joke shop could supply him with such a thing? You don't think it more likely that he got it directly from the manufacturers?"

Remus repressed a knowing grin. Snape had clearly remembered the nicknames that the Marauders used for one another. *Well, it wasn't like we were subtle about using them in public.*

"I shall pursue any hidden qualities it may possess. As you say, it's *my* area of expertise," Remus responded, taking note of the look of loathing that fell over Snape's face. "Come with me, Harry."

Once inside his own office, Remus shut the door behind Harry and threw the Marauder's Map on his desk before turning around and leaning against it, folding his arms. He looked down at Harry, trying to evoke an expression of disappointment. He had to try and imagine how Lily would look in this situation, since he knew that James would be grinning from ear to ear.

"I don't want to hear explanations. I happen to know that this map was confiscated by Mr Filch many years ago. Yes, I know it's a map," he said when Harry's bright, green eyes showed his surprise. "I don't want to know how it fell into your possession. I am, however, astounded that you didn't hand it in. Did you ever stop to think that this—" He picked up the map as he spoke. "—in the hands of Sirius Black . . . is a map to you?"

Harry looked down, and Remus let out a sigh of relief, hoping that maybe the boy had realised the severity of the danger in which he had put himself. He set the map back down on his desk, eager to place it somewhere hidden and secure, to make certain that Sirius did not come into contact with it.

"Why did Snape think I'd got it from the manufacturers?"

The question caught Remus off guard. "Because . . . Because these map-makers would have wanted to lure you out of school. They'd think it extremely entertaining."

"Do you know them?" Harry asked, a look of excitement on his face.

Remus's mouth formed a tight line. "We've met," he answered shortly. "I think you know that I can't give you back the map, Harry. I would suggest you do your best to avoid Professor Snape for the time being, as well."

Harry turned to leave but paused as he opened the door of Remus's office. "Professor, just so you know, I don't think the map always works. Earlier, it showed someone in the castle. Someone I know to be dead."

*Impossible, the map never lies.*

"And who was that, Harry?"

"Peter Pettigrew."

Remus felt as all the colour drained from his face.

## Chapter One Hundred Eight

### *Sirius Black!*

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*You used to captivate me by your resonating light  
Now I'm bound by the life you left behind  
Your face—it haunts my once pleasant dreams  
Your voice—it chased away all the sanity in me  
(My Immortal - Evanescence)*

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**June 9th, 1994**

Remus had been on his way to lunch in his quarters after giving the sixth years their final exam—something he was quite proud of himself for putting together—when Professor Flitwick approached him.

"You wouldn't happen to be on your way to Gryffindor Tower, would you, Remus?"

Offering a kind smile to his old professor and current colleague, Remus shook his head. "No, but if you're in need of something, Filius, I wouldn't mind heading that way for you."

Flitwick sighed in relief. "Miss Granger missed class this morning and, well, she's never done that before. I would go and look for the girl myself, but I've a class here in just a few moments."

"Not to worry. I'll search for Miss Granger."

After Flitwick offered thanks and scurried away to his classroom, Remus cursed under his breath and headed toward the library instead of Gryffindor Tower. He had told Minerva and Albus *months* ago that Hermione was overexerting herself using the Time-Turner. There was no doubt in his mind that she was *only* using the device to fit in classes and extra revising—not catching up on the sleep she was missing.

Adding in the extra hours to her course timetable, Remus figured that Hermione was extending herself at least three times as much as he had *ever* seen Mia do.

*And this is why*, he thought to himself.

Mia had always tried to keep on top of her health—save the one year she had lost sleep due to stress over spying on Slytherins. She had known her limits because she pushed them too far during her original third year.

As expected, Remus found the little witch slumped over an Arithmancy tome so large that she had to have used a Feather-light Charm just to pull it down from the shelves. He frowned at the sound of her softly snoring, knowing that he would have to wake her. She would surely go into a fit knowing that she had missed a lesson.

He sighed and looked at the small puddle of drool on her book. Wincing at the sight, he silently and delicately Scourgified the book before she could wake up and see that she had slobbered over a three-hundred-year-old text.

Remus sat down in the chair beside her and put a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Hermione?"

Slowly, chocolate brown eyes opened to look up at him. There were dark circles beneath those innocent eyes which made him cringe in concern for her. Hermione, unfortunately, must have taken the look on his face to be anger, and she jumped up.

"Oh! Professor! I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to fall asleep in class!"

"Hermione." Remus tightened his grip on her shoulder to prevent her from moving too quickly. "You're not in class; you're in the library."

"Oh . . . I . . ." Hermione glanced around at the table confused, as if she had forgotten what she was supposed to have been revising.

"You need to go back to the tower and catch up on some sleep."

"No, no." She shook her head, stifling a yawn. "I need to . . . revise . . . for Charms."

Remus winced, not wanting to tell her that she had missed Charms. The thought of doing so flew right out of his head when she reached up to cover another yawn, wincing in pain as she moved her hand.

"Hermione, what happened?" He reached out, tenderly taking her small hand within his own. A large bruise encircled her entire thumb, extending up past the wrist. "Your thumb is broken."

She looked guilty.

"What happened?" he asked again.

"I broke my thumb."

"Obviously." Remus sighed, reaching into his pockets for his wand. "And why didn't you go see Madam Pomfrey? This looks painful."

"I . . . I thought I could fix it myself, but I was already off schedule, and I thought it could wait," she said with a frown. "I didn't want to get into trouble."

"Why would you get in trouble, Hermione?"

She looked up at him with fearful, pleading eyes.

"You can trust me," he promised her, gently holding her hand in both of his.

Hermione took a deep breath. "I punched Draco Malfoy."

Remus's eyes widened ever so briefly, and he had to remind himself more than once that he was a professor and, therefore, *not* allowed to laugh at the fact that the tiny witch had punched what he assumed was her first Slytherin. *The first of many.*

"I see," he noted aloud, leaving it at that as he gently tapped her hand with his wand. "*Episkey.*" He smiled sympathetically when she cringed briefly in pain. "There's nothing to be done about the bruise unless you go down to the infirmary."

"That was . . ." Hermione smiled brightly, flexing her fingers. "Thank you, Professor."

"You're most welcome. Healing Spells come in very handy. You're a very bright witch; I'm sure you'd have a talent for picking them up with great ease. I have a book I can loan you, in fact," he said thoughtfully, knowing that in the future she would need it if she were going to go into the past and help him through some of his worst full moon injuries.

"I would love that." Her smile slowly faded, and she worried her bottom lip between her teeth. "Don't you want to know why I did it?"

"Would it be foolish of me to admit that I trust you had your reasons?" he asked her with a smirk.

Hermione laughed quietly, glancing over her shoulder to where Madam Pince was distracted with reorganising a stack of books. "It would be . . . very suspicious. You're not like the other professors."

Remus frowned, looking down at the bruises on her hand. "I've heard Draco Malfoy say some very unkind things about his fellow students, the world as a whole, and even my own person; which, to be honest, I could not care less about. My self-esteem does not rest on the words of a thirteen-year-old boy." He chuckled when she smiled at him. "I imagine he said something very cruel to you?"

"Yes," Hermione confirmed, her smile fading to be replaced by a familiar look of self-righteous indignation. "Often, but that wasn't why I did it. He was being mean about Hagrid."

Warmth bloomed in his chest, and Remus nudged her chin gently with a knuckle, smiling at her. "Hermione Granger, champion of the underdog. I should probably take away points or issue detention for assaulting another student, but instead I offer advice for the future: 'He who knows when he can fight and when he cannot, will be victorious.'"

She smiled thoughtfully. "Sun Tzu."

"I trust your judgement, Hermione, though I regret to inform you that you may have lost the moral high ground when it comes to instilling a pacifist outlook in Mr Weasley. Feel free to come by my office to pick up those books. Oh," he added quickly as he stood, "in exchange for borrowing from my bookshelves, I insist that you go back to your room and get at least an hour's worth of rest."

When she tried to argue, Remus shook his head. "Please. It would give me relief to know that you're taking care of yourself," he insisted, wincing slightly as his own muscles began to ache.

"Professor? Are you all right?"

"I'll be just fine, Hermione."

She stared at him with those brown eyes that said she *knew* he was lying.

*How did she always know?*

Hermione reached into her bag and pulled out a small box, placing it on the table and sliding it across to him. When he looked down, he saw the little box contained a Chocolate Frog.

"You're too kind, Hermione."

"*You fixed me,*" she said, shrugging her shoulders innocently, as though he was unaware that she had been dropping off various chocolate items at the hospital wing every month during the full moon.

Graciously taking the Chocolate Frog with him, he stopped himself from leaving her as a thought occurred to him. Taking her non-bruised hand, he formed it into a tight ball and tucked her thumb along the outside of her knuckles. She watched him curiously, biting the corner of her lower lip.

"The next time you punch someone—" And Remus knew there would be a next time. "—keep your thumb out so it won't break."

Hermione lowered her head and laughed quietly as he walked out of the library.

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Remus stretched his arms above his head, grimacing in pain despite the moon not rising for another hour or so. Yawning, he looked over the notes he had taken during the day while his students had faced the obstacle course he created for their final exam. He had been so proud when Harry defeated the boggart at the end of the lesson. Though it was, of course, *Hermione* who left the biggest impression on him.

*A part of him had been worried when she stepped into the trunk to battle the creature, whatever it might be, so when he heard the little witch scream, Remus had gone running to her aid with Harry and Ron following closely behind.*

*"Hermione!" he shouted upon seeing her crawl out of the trunk. "What's the matter?"*

*"P-P-Professor McGonagall!" Hermione gasped, pointing to the trunk. "Sh-She said I'd failed everything!"*

He felt terrible for wanting to laugh, which was why he held it in until she had stopped shaking, offering her the Chocolate Frog she had given him earlier that day.

*Knock! Knock! Knock!*

"Come in." He tried to smile pleasantly as Snape walked through the door, smoking goblet in his hands. His smile faded briefly as he glowered at the goblet as though he had a personal vendetta against it. "Thank you very much, Severus."

Snape nodded to him curtly. "Lupin. You'll want to drink that right away," he said, gesturing to the goblet the same way he did every night leading up to the full moon.

"Says you." Remus sighed looking at the cup. "You're not the one who has to drink it."

Snape scowled at him, clearly insulted—likely thinking that his time was being wasted only for Remus to be ungrateful. "Perhaps you'd like it if I stopped brewing it for you. Or maybe you could make it yourself. Tell me, because I seem to have forgotten, what marks did you get in Potions?"

Remus rolled his eyes. "Point well made. I did not mean to appear ungrateful to you. Quite the contrary—despite my obviously poor attitude."

"I see you've kept Potter's parchment," Snape noted, looking behind Remus's desk to the folded Marauder's Map sitting on the shelf beneath a collection of books. "Did you ever happen to discover what magics it contains?"

Remus sighed in frustration, rubbing his hands down his face. "Are we going to play this game forever? Where you insult me, and I try to remain polite to you, despite the fact that you have a habit of being surly and discourteous?"

Snape held a detached expression as he stared down at Remus for several long moments before answering. "Don't fool yourself, wolf. You're the *Defence* professor. You'll be gone by the end of the month."

With that, Snape left the office, slamming the door behind him on the way.

Remus rolled his eyes and turned to the map on his shelf. He retrieved it with a brief thought on the last time he had opened it a few days ago. After confiscating the map from Harry, he tried to pay special attention to it when he could. It had not been difficult to locate Sirius on the parchment, though he seemed to be avoiding the castle in favour of the Forbidden Forest.

Despite what Harry had told him, Remus had yet to see Peter's name appear on the map.

The first time Remus had spied *Sirius's* name, he had wanted to go straight to Dumbledore but, for some reason, *that* was in violation of the Unbreakable Vow he had made to Mia all those many years ago.

Her voice played on a loop inside his head anytime he thought about Sirius.

*"Trust Sirius. Always Sirius."*

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," Remus whispered and watched as the map unveiled before his eyes.

He automatically located himself first, noting that a small dot labelled *Severus Snape* looked to be pacing back and forth down the corridor and around the corner. He chuckled, assuming that Snape was seething with anger and wondering if he should come back into the office to yell at him a bit before storming out once again.

One by one, Remus located each professor, the wandering prefects in the halls, Hagrid down in his hut with Professor Dumbledore, a retreating Cornelius Fudge and Walden Macnair.

Out of habit, he searched for the dot labelled *Sirius Black*, finding it almost immediately near the Whomping Willow.

He frowned at the sight. Sirius had not come so close to the castle since Remus obtained the map. But it was not the dot labelled *Sirius Black* that caused the blood to drain from Remus's already ashen face.

Huddled close together, but moving swiftly across the map he could easily locate *Harry Potter*, *Ronald Weasley*, *Hermione Granger*, and a fourth name among them: *Peter Pettigrew*.

But Peter was dead.

"Ron was trying to do magic to show off," Mia had told him once. "*Said this worthless spell over his pet r-r-r . . . Scab-b-b—Fuck!*"

Remus gasped as a cold chill ran up his spine.

"*I'm surprised you and Mia didn't get along better, Minerva. She had a similar distaste for rodents.*"

His whole body stiffened in a mixture of guilt and rage, and he turned back to the Marauder's Map where he watched the dots labelled, *Sirius Black*, *Ronald Weasley*, and *Peter Pettigrew* vanish beneath the Whomping Willow.

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He was here somewhere. Sirius *knew* it. When his kneazle friend had informed him that the rat bit itself and bled all over the Weasley boy's bed to fake his own death—*again*—Sirius waited patiently, relying on the large feline for as much help as possible in tracking down Wormtail. The orange beast assured him that the rat was nowhere inside the castle, and Sirius trusted the kneazle to track Wormtail's scent, knowing that the cat had been in contact with him more recently.

On the other side of Hagrid's hut: *that's* where the kneazle insisted Wormtail was.

Unfortunately, even from where Padfoot was crouched in the shadows of the setting sun, he could sense that Harry was nearby even if he could not see him—*Probably*

*under the cloak*. Not only that, but he had heard Fudge and Dumbledore inside Hagrid's hut only moments earlier. He would never be able to get Wormtail without being spotted; he was just too big.

*Go*, he told the kneazle and let out a shaky breath when the cat sprang into action and darted across the grass.

"What's the *matter* with him?"

"No, go away, Crookshanks! Go away!"

"Scabbers . . . NO!"

Padfoot's paws were shaking on the ground, eager to lunge forward and bite and claw. Shaking because he had to be patient and wait for the cat—wait for some sign that things would finally turn in his favour. His eyes narrowed across the grass as he saw the cat bounding toward him chasing something small, both being followed by the red-haired boy, a screaming girl, and Harry.

*No, I'm not letting him go again*, Sirius swore to himself and began stalking toward his prey, ignoring the fact that the rat was now being scooped into the hands of the young redhead.

He briefly caught sight of Harry attempting to raise his wand at him, but Padfoot growled and jumped, knocking his godson to the ground and out of the way just in case Peter attempted to shift back into human form and use Harry as a hostage. The situation was unlikely, of course, considering Peter was a coward, but Sirius was not allowing another Potter to be anywhere near the traitorous rat.

He locked his gaze on the rodent squirming inside the boy's pocket, and Padfoot lunged forward, jaws open. The boy moved to defend himself by raising his arm. Already in motion, Padfoot did not stop when he bit down on the boy's forearm, dragging him and the rat to the ground. There was no time to waste, so he gripped tight with his teeth and moved backward swiftly, dragging the boy and the rat beneath the Whomping Willow, which had been briefly calmed by the kneazle, who pressed its paw into the notch of the trunk.

"Ron!"

He could hear Harry shouting over the screams of the boy in his grip. A part of Sirius felt deep remorse when he heard a loud cracking noise followed by a shrill cry as his

leg broke on the way down. But he could not stop now. He would apologise later once the rat was dead.

And then maybe buy the poor lad a new pet.

Padfoot moved quickly, biting down harder any time the boy slipped from his grip. Once he felt secure, Sirius shifted into his human form, releasing the boy only a moment before grabbing him by the collar of his robes and dragging him into the familiar Shrieking Shack.

Despite a broken leg, the boy moved quickly to get away, scooting across the floor and into a corner looking ready to defend himself. He was quickly observing his surroundings, purposely keeping the wall at his back.

"Professor Lupin has taught you well." Sirius chuckled in genuine amusement. "Not well enough, I'm afraid." He held up the boy's own wand and aimed it at him.

"Y-You . . . You're Sirius Black!"

"Very observant," Sirius growled, eyes searching for the skittish rat. "Now hold still. I'm terribly sorry about the leg."

Noises could be heard coming from the other side of the door, and Sirius snarled at the interruption. The door burst open, and he jumped back, dodging the large slab of wood as it just barely missed hitting him.

"Ron, are you all right?" the girl asked, rushing to her friend.

"Where's the dog?" Harry asked.

"Not a dog," the boy—Ron—moaned. "Harry, it's a trap."

"What?"

"*He's* the dog! He's an Animagus!"

Sirius slammed the door shut behind his godson. The moment he and the girl turned, Sirius shouted, "*Expelliarmus!*" capturing both of their wands. He took a step closer, eyes fixed on Harry.

"I thought you'd come and help your friend," he stated hoarsely, not used to speaking so much after being silent for so long. "Your father would have done the same for me. Brave of you, not to run for a teacher. I'm grateful; it will make everything much easier." The last thing he needed was for Dumbledore to interrupt.

"If you want to kill Harry, you'll have to kill us, too!" Ron said fiercely and moved to stand. What little colour he had left in his face drained quickly, and he swayed slightly as he spoke.

Sirius frowned at the sight. "Lie down, lad. You're going to damage that leg even more."

"Did you hear me?" Ron demanded weakly, though he was clinging to Harry to stay upright. "You'll have to kill all three of us!"

"There'll be only one murder here tonight." Sirius scanned Ron's robes in search of any sign of movement so that he could spot where the rat was hiding.

"Why's that?" Harry spat, trying to wrench himself free from his friends. "Didn't care last time, did you? Didn't mind slaughtering all those Muggles to get at Pettigrew. What's the matter, gone soft in Azkaban?"

Sirius shook his head. "Harry, you don't understand—"

"YOU KILLED MY MUM AND DAD!"

Sirius flinched at the accusation, and the last thought that flew through his mind before his godson punched him in the head and then tackled him to the ground was *He has Mia's fondness for violence.*

Harry raged, Ron yelled, and the girl screamed.

Sirius grunted in the struggle, ignoring the fact that the breath had been knocked out of him by a six-stone scrap of a boy who was very close to reclaiming the wand that was firmly gripped in Sirius's hands. Sirius tried to think of a harmless way to regain the upper hand, but everything in his head that he knew to do would end up hurting his godson and he could not risk that.

He coughed as another of Harry's punches landed in his gut, and instinctively Sirius reached a hand out and gripped onto anything to stop the attack. What his hand landed on, however, was Harry's throat.

"No," Sirius growled. "I've waited too long . . ." He tried to push Harry away, not wanting to actually choke the boy, but he had not had time to put a plan into action when someone kicked him from behind.

Sirius let go of Harry. With a grunt of pain, he fell to the floor, gasping for breath. His chest rose and fell rapidly, and he looked up to see Harry standing over him, a wand aimed at his heart.

*I should have been there*, he thought as he looked at the wand. *I should have been the one to take him.*

Blood poured down from his nose into his mouth, and Sirius coughed. "Going to kill me, Harry?"

"You killed my parents," Harry said.

Despite the fact that Harry's voice was shaking with emotion, his wand hand was steady. *Just like James.* Sirius actually smiled at the thought until Harry's words truly reached him. "I don't deny it," he admitted very quietly, "but if you knew the whole story—"

"The whole story?" Harry repeated. "You sold them to Voldemort. That's all I need to know."

"No." Sirius shook his head and tried to sit up only to feel the end of Harry's wand press hard against his chest. "You've got to listen to me," he argued urgently, his gaze flickering to Ron. "You'll regret it if you don't. You don't understand—"

"I understand a lot better than you think." Harry's voice still shook. "You never heard her, did you? My mum . . . trying to stop Voldemort killing me."

Sirius winced in pain at the thought, remembering the sight of red hair sprawled out on the floor of Harry's nursery behind Hagrid's feet. He looked up into Harry's green eyes—*Lily's eyes*—and prepared himself for death.

Before either of them could say another word, there was a flash of movement, and Sirius felt something heavy land on his chest, knocking Harry's wand out of the way. He glanced down to spot the orange kneazle sitting there as though Sirius were a sofa.

"Get off," Sirius growled, trying to push the cat away. The cat replied by sinking his claws into his chest.

Muffled footsteps were echoing up through the floor. Someone was approaching.

"WE'RE UP HERE!" the girl screamed suddenly. "WE'RE UP HERE! SIRIUS BLACK . . . *QUICK!*"

At the sound of his name coming from her lips, the breath stilled in his lungs, and the string inside his soul lit up like a hot needle sinking into his skin and his soul.

Sirius forced himself to look at the girl. His eyes flew wide open just as his memories came rushing back to him, almost as though they had been missing.

*"I am not having this argument with you again, Sirius Black!"*

*"Sirius Black! You did not tell Remus and Jamie you were going off to snog me!"*

*"One more word, Sirius Black, and I will march right out of these dungeons, and this prank is over!"*

*"You keep your filthy paws off of me, Sirius Black!"*

*"I'm warning you, Sirius Black . . ."*

*"You are a good man, Sirius Black."*

*"You are good, Sirius Black. You are good, and kind, and brave and . . . Merlin, so brave."*

*"Don't you 'kitten' me, Sirius Black!"*

*"When I think about the past and the future, the first thing I always think is: I miss Sirius Black."*

*"I love you, Sirius Black."*

"Mia," Sirius whispered so softly he was not even sure sound had left his lips.

It was her. But *how* was it her? Missing—dead; they had told him that she was dead. He had not believed it, but . . . Mia . . . *his* Mia—but too young. Far too young. She had to be fourteen or fifteen. Not *his* Mia. *Remus's* Mia? Her eyes were brown, not amber. But there was something wrong with her hair and her teeth, and the way she was looking at him . . . she was afraid.

Someone in the room shouted, "*Expelliarmus!*"

"Where is he, Sirius?"

Was someone calling him? Sirius's eyes never left her face, her perfectly *terrified* face. Why was she afraid of him? Didn't she know he could never hurt her? The Soul Bond would not allow it even if he tried. Why couldn't he feel her through the bond? Something was wrong with it. It was still there, he could feel it, but she was . . . she wasn't there. Why wasn't she at the other end of it?

"Sirius!"

For a few seconds, he did not move at all. Then, very slowly, he looked up into the eyes of Remus. Confused, he stared at his old friend helplessly.

"Sirius, where is he?" Remus asked again.

Sirius raised his empty, shaking hand and pointed straight at Ron.

"But then . . ." Remus muttered, staring at him so intently it looked as though he were trying to read his mind. "Why hasn't he shown himself before now?"

"Moony, I . . ."

A moment later, Remus's eyes widened as though he was seeing something beyond Sirius. "Unless *he* was the one. You switched, didn't you? You had James and Lily switch, and no one told me."

Very slowly, Sirius nodded, his eyes turning back to stare at the girl.

"Professor," Harry interrupted loudly, "what's going on?"

Suddenly, Sirius was being pulled to his feet. Someone was touching him. Someone was touching him and not hurting him. He almost flinched in reaction, as if to prepare himself for an attack that twelve years in Azkaban had conditioned him for, but instead, he felt long arms wrap around him as the old familiar scent of his friend washed over him.

"Moony," Sirius whispered, his voice shaking as Remus held him tighter. "Am I out? The dementors . . . Did they finally—?"

"I'm so sorry."

"The . . . girl," Sirius's voice broke.

"She's real; I promise you. Don't say a word about her," Remus said quietly, a sense of urgency in his voice. "I'll explain everything later, Padfoot, I swear it. I'm so sorry."

"I DON'T BELIEVE IT!" the girl screamed.

Remus released Sirius and they both turned to look at her.

"You . . . You—!"

"Hermione . . ." Remus held his hands up and slowly approached her.

Sirius twisted his lips in bitter confusion.

*Who the fuck is Hermione?*

## Chapter One Hundred Nine

### *Forgetting Something?*

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*As time passes, things change every day  
But wounds, wounds heal  
But scars still remain the same  
But tomorrow today's gone down in flames  
Throw the match, set the past up ablaze  
(Beautiful Pain - Eminem)*

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**June 9th, 1994**

"Hermione, calm down," Remus pleaded with her as she stared at him like he had betrayed her personally. Those eyes—those chocolate brown eyes were filled with hurt, and it killed him to see her look at *him* like that.

"I didn't tell *anyone!*" Hermione shrieked. "I've been covering up for you!"

"Hermione, listen to me, please! I can explain everything."

Could he? The Unbreakable Vow said that he could only tell people who already knew about her time travelling, in addition to being able to tell Sirius fifteen years after the Vow was made, which was, apparently, now. It meant that Mia had *known*. Mia had known that Sirius had been innocent, would escape this year, and would need to know the truth about her.

Remus looked at Sirius, who was still staring at the girl with a mixture of devastating grief and the slightest hint of fear-tainted hope. His heart broke for his friend, who must have been so confused at the very sight of her.

"I trusted you!" Harry shouted at Remus as he turned to face the boy. "All this time you've been his friend!"

"You're wrong. I haven't always been Sirius's friend, but I am now. Let me explain—"

"NO!" Hermione screamed. "Harry, don't trust him, he's been helping Black get into the castle. He wants you dead too! He's a werewolf!"

The way she said the word cut him to his core, and Remus physically flinched as if stung. During the entire time he had known Mia, she never once referred to him or his

condition with such a tone in her voice; hearing it now hurt more than he was willing to admit.

Once the word left her lips, Hermione gasped and covered her mouth as though she had cursed, regret in her eyes.

Remus did what he could to remain calm in the situation despite the fact that Harry and Ron were now staring at him, horrified.

"Not at all up to your usual standard, Hermione," he said with a slight smile, trying to hide the hurt. "Only one out of three, I'm afraid. I have *not* been helping Sirius get into the castle, and I *certainly* don't want Harry dead. But I won't deny that I am a werewolf."

Ron made a valiant effort to get up again, but he fell back with a whimper of pain.

Frowning at the sight of the injured boy, Remus instinctively moved to help.

Gasping, Ron shouted, "Get away from me, werewolf!"

Remus stopped dead and swallowed down the anger and familiar feeling of rejection that came with discrimination. Then, with an obvious effort, he turned to Hermione, who looked mortified over what she had done. Despite already knowing the answer, he asked, "How long have you known?"

Hermione frowned, clearly upset with herself. "Since Professor Snape set the essay."

"You really are the brightest witch of your age, Hermione," he said with deep admiration.

There was a long breath of silence that hung in the air until a quiet squeaking sound came from Ron's pocket, and Remus felt more than saw Sirius lunge forward. He turned to catch his friend in his arms, using his superior strength against Sirius, who struggled to free himself.

"We're wasting time! He dies. Now! If you won't do it with me, Remus, I'll do it alone!"

"Wait! Padfoot—"

Sirius pushed away from Remus and shouted, tears in his pale grey eyes as he pounded his fist against his chest. "I *did* my waiting! Twelve years of it! In Azkaban!"

Remus finally noticed the filthy clothes that Sirius wore; they were Azkaban clothes, no doubt: dirty and mildewy and very nearly shredded. Sirius's chest was easily visible, and there, in the centre was a scarred brand marking him a prisoner. Remus frowned at the

sight before his eyes drifted to the side where he could still clearly see the tattooed name scripted across Sirius's chest: *Mia*.

"All right, then." Remus nodded and held a wand out to Sirius. "As you wish."

"No!" Harry moved to step in front of his friends. "You betrayed my parents! You sold them to Voldemort!"

"That's a lie!" Sirius growled. "I *never* would've betrayed James and Lily!"

"Harry," Remus said softly, calmly. "You have to listen—"

"Did *he* listen?" Harry shouted, pointing a finger at Sirius. "When my mother was dying! Did he hear her screaming?!"

Sirius winced at the words. "No! I wasn't there when it . . . I wasn't there to stop it. And I'll regret it the rest of my life!"

Harry looked murderous, and Sirius looked broken. Remus knew that if the boy attempted anything, Sirius would not defend himself. Harry would kill his own godfather and suffer so greatly for it when the truth *did* come to light. Remus needed to act fast. Harry had the temper of both of his parents and Black blood to boot.

Remus stood protectively in front of Sirius. "Someone *else* betrayed your parents, Harry. Someone in this room right now. Someone who, until quite recently, I believed to be dead."

"He's as good as dead," Sirius added viciously from behind Remus's arm. "Come out, come out, Peter. Come out, come out and play."

"You're not helping, asshole," Remus muttered.

"Peter Pettigrew?" Harry stared at Sirius. "He's dead! *He* killed him twelve years ago!"

"I *meant* to," Sirius snarled, "but Peter got the better of me. Not this time, though!" He lunged forward at Ron, who fell with a yelp of pain as Sirius's weight landed on his broken leg.

"Sirius, NO!" Remus yelled, launching himself forward and dragging Sirius away from Ron again, "WAIT! You can't do it just like that. They have a right to know why! We need to explain!"

"We can explain afterward! There will likely be a lot of explaining." Sirius glared at him, his grey gaze darting quickly to Hermione, who stood protectively near Harry.

"No! They've got a right to know *everything*, Sirius!" Remus snapped, ignoring Sirius's occasional attention toward Hermione; there would be time for that later if they all survived this. He turned quickly to Harry. "Everyone thought Sirius killed Peter; I believed it myself until I saw the map tonight. Because the Marauder's Map never lies. Peter's alive."

"And he's right there," Sirius announced, pointing a finger at Ron.

The redhead paled. "M-Me?"

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Not you, you idiot. Your rat."

"Scabbers?" Ron protectively cupped the rat that was hiding in his pocket. "Scabbers has been in my family for—"

"Twelve years?" Remus knowingly asked.

Hermione spoke, in a trembling, would-be calm sort of voice, "But Professor Lupin, Scabbers can't be Pettigrew. It just can't be true."

"Why can't it be true?" Remus asked her calmly, a hint of tenderness in his voice as though wanting to let her know that he was not angry with her for her earlier outburst.

"Because . . ." Hermione hesitated for a moment. "Because people would *know* if Peter Pettigrew had been an Animagus. We did Animagi in class with Professor McGonagall. And I looked them up when I did my homework. The Ministry of Magic keeps tabs on witches and wizards who can become animals; there's a register showing what animal they become, and their markings and things. I went and looked Professor McGonagall up on the register, and there have been only seven Animagi this century, and Pettigrew's name wasn't on the list."

"Right again, Hermione. But the Ministry never knew that there used to be *three* unregistered Animagi running around Hogwarts." Remus took note of the incredulous way that Sirius was now looking at him, presumably because he had caught the lie.

"Hermione, you are right that *I am* a werewolf. I was bitten when I was a very young boy," he said and sighed when he saw the look of pity cross her face. "I didn't even think I would be able to come to Hogwarts, but Professor Dumbledore pulled some strings, and I was able to get a proper education. I was prepared to be very lonely. The Whomping Willow was planted the summer before my first year because this shack was the designated place for me to transform. It was set up so I could go to Hogwarts and still keep people safe."

"Apart from my transformations, I was happier than I had ever been in my life. For the first time ever, I had friends, *great* friends," he said and patted Sirius on the back. "Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew, and your father, Harry: James Potter."

Harry stood, still shaking, looking confused.

"Now, my three friends could hardly fail to notice that I spent every month in the hospital wing—"

"Migraines," Sirius scoffed sarcastically.

Remus glared at him before turning back to Hermione, Harry, and Ron. "Eventually, they figured out what I was—"

"More like stumbled upon it and got yelled at," Sirius retorted petulantly, interrupting him again.

"Do *you* want to tell the bloody story?" Remus snapped.

"No, I want to murder the bloody traitor!" Sirius growled. "Hurry the fuck up!"

Remus took a slow, deep breath and continued speaking, "Instead of abandoning me like I thought they would, my friends did something for me that would make my transformations not only bearable but the best times of my life. They became Animagi."

"That's impossible," Hermione said, her mouth hanging open in shock. "It's not only incredibly difficult, it's highly dangerous, and for students to attempt it . . . It would take—"

"Years?" Remus smirked and nodded. "It did."

"For *most* of us," Sirius muttered.

"Peter, as the smallest, would slip beneath the Whomping Willow's attacking branches and touch the notch that freezes it. Sirius and James transformed into such large animals, they were able to keep the werewolf in check," Remus explained.

Sirius cocked his head to the side. "Forgetting something?"

Remus ignored him. "So you see, Snape's been right about me all along."

"Snape?" Sirius turned and gaped at him. "What's Snape got to do with anything?"

"He's here, Sirius. He's teaching here as well."

"I know *that*." Sirius groaned. "I saw his stupid face wandering the castle. I go to Azkaban, and Snivellus gets a job offer?"

"Why does Snape hate you?" Harry asked Remus.

"Because he's a dirty, rotten, greasy git!" Sirius snapped.

"Because," Remus began, ignoring Sirius's outburst, "Professor Snape and your father were long-time rivals. Slytherin versus Gryffindor. House prejudices played out much like they do now."

"It had nothing to do with House rivalries," Sirius interrupted. "He started it."

"You see Harry, Sirius played a trick on Snape which nearly got him killed," Remus said, eyeing his friend and taking note of the way that Sirius averted his gaze. "A trick that involved me, a full moon, and this very shack."

"Oh, he deserved it. At least a little bit," Sirius grumbled. "He was always sneaking around trying to get us expelled for one thing or another, and he threatened . . ." He growled and let himself trail off as his attention flickered to Hermione.

"Sirius tricked Snape into going beneath the Whomping Willow. Had he gotten as far as this shack he would have come face to face with a werewolf. Luckily, your dad found out what Sirius had done and saved Snape just in time. Dumbledore forced Snape to keep quiet about my condition."

"So that's why Snape doesn't like you," Harry said slowly, "because he thought you were in on the joke?"

"That's right," said a cold voice from the wall behind Remus. "I told Dumbledore you were helping your old friend into the castle. And here's the proof. *Expelliarmus!*"

"Brilliant!" Sirius said loudly after losing the wand in his hand. He applauded as he stared ahead into Snape's black eyes with disdain. "And—as usual—dead wrong. Now give us our wands back. Remus and I have a bit of unfinished business to tend to."

"Give me a reason," Snape dared, approaching Sirius swiftly and sticking the end of his wand against the man's throat. "Give me a reason to do it, and I swear I will."

Sirius was shaking with obvious hatred as Snape glared into his eyes.

"Don't be a fool, Severus!" Remus snapped.

"He can't help it. It's habit by now," Sirius mocked.

"Shut up, Sirius!"

"Listen to you two," Snape sneered at them. "Quarrelling like an old married couple. The creature and the criminal."

"Piss off!" Sirius spat.

"Professor Snape," Hermione quietly said from the corner of the room, her voice small. "It wouldn't hurt to hear what they've got to say, w-would it?"

"Miss Granger, you are already facing suspension from this school. You, Potter, and Weasley are out-of-bounds, in the company of a convicted murderer and a werewolf. For once in your life, hold your tongue!"

She tried again, "But if . . . if there was a mistake—"

"Keep quiet, you stupid girl!" Snape shouted, looking suddenly quite deranged. "Don't talk about what you don't understand!"

Sirius growled loudly and, despite the wand against his neck, he advanced toward Snape with a murderous expression. "You watch your fucking—" he began to say, but was cut off by a loud shout of, "*Expelliarmus!*"

Snape flew backward into the wall, and Sirius and Remus both turned back to see Harry standing there with his wand aimed high.

"Thank you, Harry," Sirius said with a proud grin.

Hermione was shaking, brown eyes wide. "You attacked a teacher!"

"I'm still not saying I believe you," Harry told Remus.

Remus nodded as he approached Snape to check his pulse, wincing at the blood on the man's head. *That's not going to be easily forgotten*, he thought to himself while retrieving the collected wands, handing one back to Sirius.

"I understand, Harry. I suppose it's time we offered you some proof." He looked to Sirius, hoping that his friend had *something* to show.

Almost immediately, Sirius stuck his hand into a pocket and removed a folded piece of paper, handing it out.

"The idiot Minister tossed that at me when he came for inspections. Taunting me about Harry's birthday," Sirius said with a frown. "I knew the rat immediately. How many bloody times had I seen him transform? The caption said that the kids would be going back to Hogwarts. I had to . . ." He looked up, his eyes meeting Harry's. "I had to make sure you were safe."

"Merlin," Remus whispered, staring at the photograph in the paper. "His front paw."

"What about it?" Ron said defiantly.

"He's got a toe missing," Sirius answered.

"Of course," Remus said on a breath. "So simple, so *brilliant*. He cut it off himself?"

Sirius nodded, the movement tight. Remus could see the way his teeth clenched through the thin, pale skin of his jaw. "Just before he transformed. When I cornered him, he yelled for the whole street to hear that I had betrayed Lily and James. Then, before I could curse him, he blew apart the street with the wand behind his back; killed everyone within twenty feet of himself. He sped down into the sewer with the other rats, leaving me sitting there holding his blood-covered robes."

"Scabbers probably lost the toe in a fight with another rat. He's had a rough life, and this year he's been terrorised by that mad cat!" Ron pointed at the orange kneazle, who was purring on the nearby bed.

"That cat is the most intelligent creature I've ever encountered," Sirius declared, walking over and petting the kneazle, who nuzzled his hand affectionately. Harry, Ron, and Hermione stared at the sight with their jaws dropped.

Ron winced as he experimentally moved a hand closer to Crookshanks who turned and hissed at him. "Bloody menace."

"He recognised Peter for what he really was," Sirius noted aloud, looking a little smug that the kneazle was affectionate with *him* and no one else. "When I was able to communicate with him, he offered to bring me Peter if he could capture him. He brought me food from the kitchens and the passwords to the tower."

"Crookshanks brought you food?" Hermione asked.

"Yours?" Sirius inquired, looking at her.

She nodded.

"I'm . . . I'm very grateful to you, then." He nodded his head to her, his voice breaking as he spoke.

Remus thought for a long moment and then he turned toward Ron. "There's one certain way to prove what really happened. Ron, give me that rat."

"What are you going to do with him if I give him to you?" Ron demanded, voice taut with tension.

"Force him to show himself," Remus replied. "If he really is a rat, it won't hurt him."

Ron hesitated. Then, at long last, he held out Scabbers, and Remus took him. Scabbers began to squeak without stopping, twisting and turning, his tiny black eyes bulging in his head.

"Together?" Remus asked Sirius quietly, holding Scabbers tightly in one hand and his wand in the other. Sirius nodded. "On the count of three. One, two, three!"

A flash of blue-white light erupted from both wands; for a moment, Scabbers was frozen in mid-air—his small grey form twisting madly. Ron yelped, and the rat fell and hit the floor. There was another blinding flash of light and then . . .

"Well, hello, Peter," Remus said pleasantly, as though rats frequently erupted into old school friends around him. "Long time, no see."

Peter stared up into the angry face of Sirius. He turned and looked at Remus, who appeared to be the lesser of two evils. "R-Remus . . . He's come to try and kill me again! Sirius killed Lily and James, and now he's going to kill me too. You've got to help me, Remus!"

"No one's going to try and kill you until we've . . . worked out a few details," Remus threatened.

Sirius grinned darkly.

"Worked out a few details?" Peter squeaked, frightened, before he fell to his knees and cried, "I didn't mean to! The Dark Lord, you have no idea the weapons he possesses! He would have killed me, Sirius!"

"Then you should have died!" Sirius roared. "Died rather than betray your friends, as we would have done for you!"

"Ron . . ." Peter crept across the floor and fell at the boy's feet. "Haven't I been a good friend—a good pet? You won't let them kill me, Ron, will you? You're on my side, aren't you?"

But Ron was staring at Peter with the utmost revulsion. "I let you sleep in my *bed*!"

"No, no, no. Kind boy, kind master . . ." Peter crawled again toward Ron. "You won't let them do it. I was your rat; I was a good pet."

"If you made a better rat than human, it's not much to boast about, Peter," Sirius said harshly.

Ron, going still paler with pain, wrenched his broken leg out of Peter's reach.

Peter turned on his knees, staggered forward toward Hermione.

"Sweet girl, clever girl, you—" Peter paused and stared up into her face as though there was some recognition there. After a long moment, whatever held his attention broke, and he reached forward, taking hold of her robes.

Remus and Sirius reacted instantly, and Peter was thrown back on the ground, coughing as the breath was knocked from his lungs. When he finally was able to gasp, he looked up at them, horrified. Remus could only imagine how he looked right then. Years of experience had taught him to feel when the wolf was at the surface, and he could almost see his own golden gaze reflected in Peter's wide-eyed stare. Sirius was breathing hard beside him, snarling viciously.

"Sirius, what could I have done?" Peter cried. "The Dark Lord . . . You have no idea. He has weapons you can't imagine. I was scared, Sirius. I was never brave like you and Remus and James. I never meant it to happen. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named forced me—"

"Don't lie! You'd been passing information to him for a year before Lily and James died! You were his spy! It was *you* who betrayed us and set up that trap. You killed Mary, didn't you?" Sirius snapped and tore at the sleeves of Peter's robes, revealing the Dark Mark on his left forearm.

Peter wept.

"You should have realised," Remus said quietly, "if Voldemort didn't kill you, we would." Twelve years. For twelve years, he had mourned Peter right along with James and Lily. For twelve years, he had broken his promise to Mia and had chosen to not trust Sirius. Remus had never taken a life, not even in battle. But this . . . *this* would be worth it. "Goodbye, Peter," he said callously, raising his wand at the same time as Sirius.

"No!" Harry yelled, running forward. He placed himself in front of Peter, facing the wands that were immediately withdrawn. "You can't kill him."

"Harry," Sirius said, panting with anger. "This . . . *rat* is the reason you have no parents. He stole their lives, stole my life and *everything* from me."

"I know. You still can't kill him."

Sirius and Remus both shook with rage.

"We'll take him up to the castle," Harry said, looking at both of the men with pleading eyes. "We'll hand him over to the dementors. He can go to Azkaban."

Sirius moved through the passage heading toward the Whomping Willow, following behind the orange kneazle that led the way, and Remus, who was not only pulling a properly tied up Pettigrew but also bearing the majority of the weight of the Weasley boy and his broken leg. Floating ahead of him was an unconscious Severus Snape—which Sirius thought made the *best* kind of Severus Snape—who was being levitated by his own wand in Sirius's hand. A very small, very childish part of him thought about letting his head hit the ceiling a few times.

Harry and the girl—*Hermione*—trailed behind him.

*The girl.*

Remus had promised that she was Mia, but there were obviously complicated circumstances considering she looked different, was at least five years younger than he last remembered her, her name was different, and what was most apparent—and upsetting to Sirius—was that she did not know him.

"You know what this means, Harry?" Sirius abruptly asked as they made their slow progress along the tunnel, ignoring the way the girl gasped when Snape's head actually *did* run into the ceiling when he let himself lose focus. "Turning Pettigrew in?"

"You're free."

"Yes," Sirius said and let out a sigh of what felt like relief—what felt like hope. He cleared his throat before speaking again. "But I'm also—I don't know if anyone ever told you . . . I'm your godfather."

"Yeah, I knew that."

Sirius smiled, looking back at the boy who was an exact copy of James. "Well, your parents, er, in the Wizarding world godparents are quite important. I should have been . . ." he began but then stopped and ran a hand down his face in frustration.

Was now the right time to confess all of his guilt over not being there while Harry grew up? Was now the right time to teach the boy about bonds and how, because of their Familial Bond, he felt as though Harry was his own? Was that overstepping?

"Well, they made me your guardian," he said, finding the word to be completely inadequate, but it was the best he could come up with at the moment. "I would understand, though, if you want to stay with your aunt and uncle—" Even though he would not. "—but, well, you can take some time to think about it. Once my name is cleared, if you wanted a different home—"

"I could live with you?" Harry nearly shouted. "Leave the Dursleys?"

"I understand if you wouldn't want to—"

"Are you insane?" Harry croaked.

Sirius stopped in his tracks and turned back to look at his godson, who stared at him with a clear, penetrating gaze. Sirius briefly looked to the witch next to Harry, who was smiling at him kindly, looking like the love of his life that had vanished fourteen years ago.

*Am I insane?* Sirius thought to himself and then just chuckled under his breath.

"Of *course* I want to leave the Dursleys!" Harry exclaimed, pulling Sirius's attention away from the girl. "Have you got a house? When can I move in?"

Sirius chuckled at the boy's enthusiasm; it was so reminiscent of James that it hurt. He took note of Harry's distinct lack of caring for leaving the Dursleys, and while he certainly could not blame him—having met Petunia and Vernon several times—he mentally filed the moment away, knowing that at some point in the future he would need to inquire about Harry's life under their care. "You want to? You mean it?"

Harry grinned. "Yeah, I mean it!"

Sirius continued to levitate Snape out of the Whomping Willow, standing back to let Harry and the girl through the exit beneath the tree until they were all out in the open. He took a deep breath, feeling free for the first time in twelve years.

"One wrong move, Peter," Remus threatened before suddenly falling forward, clutching at his chest and gasping. "Sirius . . ."

*Oh no.* Sirius's eyes flickered immediately to the sky, where he saw the moon slowly rising above the clouds.

"Oh, no!" the girl said, launching herself in front of Harry as though she could somehow protect him from a transforming werewolf. The sight would have made Sirius laugh had they not been in incredible danger.

Sirius moved between the teenagers and Remus, who was shaking, teeth clenched, trying to hold back the screams as the pain wracked his body. Knowing the inevitable was about to happen, Sirius turned toward her and stared into deep brown eyes. "Run," he whispered. "Run, now."

Harry rushed forward to help unchain Ron from Peter and Remus, but Sirius quickly caught his godson around the middle and threw him backward toward the girl. "Harry, leave it to me. Take her and run!"

A snarl came from Remus, who had hunched forward, his body elongating and shifting. The sound of bones cracking echoed around them, and Sirius could hear the girl let out a sob. He watched as she and Harry stood frozen, staring at the scene in front of them.

He lunged forward and took his godson by the shoulders, breaking him out of his stupor. "Harry! Keep her—keep *them* safe. It's *your* job," he said before stepping back and letting his body shift downward into his Animagus form just as Moony, in his full glory, stretched up and let out a piercing howl.

The werewolf reared and snapped its jaws toward the teenagers, wrenching himself free from the bindings that tied him to Ron and Peter. Before he had a chance to snap again at the injured boy on the ground, Padfoot leapt forward, clamping his jaws around Moony's neck and forcing the weight of them both backward.

Sirius felt, not for the first time in his life, the claws of the werewolf tearing at him.

Eventually, they broke apart, and Padfoot growled viciously, putting himself between the wolf and the path back to the Whomping Willow. Moony hovered dominantly over him, and Sirius felt the pull to submit but fought against it. The wolf took notice of the disobedience of his pack member and snarled, snapping his jaws against the skin and fur of Padfoot's back. He let out a sharp yelp just as a loud howl came from elsewhere in the woods.

Moony sat up quickly, releasing him. Padfoot fell to the ground whimpering and bleeding, and he watched as Moony rapidly set off into the Forbidden Forest. Padfoot whined as he got to his feet, using what strength he had to try and chase after the wolf, but he only made it as far as the Black Lake where he collapsed onto the ground.

"Sirius!"

He could hear Harry screaming his name as he shifted back into his human form, and a familiar unsettling cold washed over his body.

"No," Sirius moaned in pain and fear as hundreds of dementors descended upon him. He could hear her in his head, his Mia, pleading for him not to leave her, begging him

to stay. He should have stayed. She had been missing when he returned. Why hadn't he stayed?

*Stupid. Stubborn.*

"Hermione, think of something happy!" Harry cried.

*Something happy*, Sirius thought to himself as his eyes closed, and the cold seeped into his bones. There was a heavy pressure in his chest; it felt like the Soul Bond was hardening into a protective shield as though it were being attacked.

*Think of something happy.*

Quidditch Cup trophies, fifth-floor corridors, matching crescent-shaped scars, a flying motorbike, early morning coffee, red sheets, and a clawfoot tub. A stag, a wolf, and a fox running through the trees. A fiery redhead with green eyes, and a little boy with black hair. Strawberry ice cream, a golden bracelet, a silver chain, and an opal ring.

The feel of firewhisky in a kiss.

Amber eyes.

"*Expecto Patronum!* Hermione, help me! *Expecto Patronum!*"

## Chapter One Hundred Ten

### *Revealing Escapes*

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*Silence just keeps screaming back at me  
The ones I love are lost in memories  
And I wish that I could take back what was done  
You can only change the person you've become  
(Crash and Burn - Lifehouse)*

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**June 9th, 1994**

When Sirius woke up, he was poorly bandaged and sitting in a room. *No*, he thought, *a cell*. He straightened up and tried to move, wincing as pain shot through his muscles. He groaned as he tried to force himself to stand. "H-Harry . . ."

"Harry is being well cared for in the hospital wing."

Sirius turned to the door to see twinkling blue eyes looking through the bars back at him. "Dumbledore," he whispered. "Professor, Albus, Harry's in danger." He winced again as he finally stood, limping over to the door and pressing his hands against the bars. "You have to protect him."

"From what or whom, Sirius?" Dumbledore asked. "You? Remus?"

"Remus had nothing to do with anything," Sirius growled defensively, doing what he could now to make up for the fact that he had broken his promise to Mia fourteen years ago and mistrusted their friend. "He's innocent. It's . . . It's Peter. Pettigrew. He's alive and has been hiding in Hogwarts." He coughed, suddenly aware that one of his ribs was obviously broken. "He's been . . . been hiding as a rat; he's an Animagus."

"Well," Dumbledore reacted thoughtfully. "I have to admit, I didn't expect that. So, you claim that not only is Peter Pettigrew alive and not dead at your own hands, but that he is, in fact, an unregistered Animagus?"

"Yes!" Sirius barked. "As am I! There, now I'm properly implicated, what reason would I have to lie about Peter being an Animagus? He's the one, Albus. James and Lily changed Secret-Keepers. He's the one. *He* did it."

There was a brief change in Dumbledore's eyes as though he were suddenly aware, his mind coming to the conclusion that what Sirius was saying was the truth.

"There's no proof," he said finally, a sadness in his expression. "Only your word."

"Harry was there, and Remus, and the Weasley boy," Sirius insisted. "And . . . And the girl," he whispered, unable to speak the name that sounded wrong being paired with her face. She was not *Hermione* to him.

"A werewolf and three teenagers." Dumbledore frowned. "I'm not sure how I can help you, Sirius. Against the Minister for Magic and a very angry Severus Snape, who is at present nursing a head injury and insisting that the dementors be brought to this very room to administer the Kiss to you."

Sirius flinched at the words in genuine fear. He ducked his head and shut his eyes tightly as he tried to push away the terror that was quickly seeping its way into his skin.

"I . . . I don't care. Albus, I'm not saying all of this in order to escape. I'm telling you, regardless of my own fate, Peter Pettigrew is alive. He is a Death Eater, and he has and will sell out anyone, Harry especially if it means saving his own skin. Keep my godson safe." Sirius paused and then added, "Keep *her* safe, too."

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. "Do you remember many years ago, Sirius, when you were brought to my office after a prank had gone awry? Did you ever wonder why you were not expelled for endangering the life of a fellow student? Why you were not punished more severely?"

Sirius shook his head. "No. At the time, I was preoccupied with seeking forgiveness."

"I should like to tell you, then, how I came to decide your fate." Dumbledore smiled, *actually smiled*, as though Sirius were not at present being sentenced to a fate worse than death. "A young witch informed me that Sirius Black was a confused and angry boy who was lashing out because he did not know how to properly handle the prejudices he'd grown up with. And then she informed me that Sirius Black was a good *man*." He chuckled, stroking his fingers through his beard. "Interesting phrasing, don't you think? Almost as though she thought of the boy and the man as different people."

And, without another word, Dumbledore left Sirius to his fate.

Sirius moved back to the bench in the corner and collapsed on it, one arm draped across his waist, holding his sore ribs.

"So, this is it."

He frowned as he focused his attention on the door, wondering how long it would take before Fudge showed up with dementors at the ready, hungrily staring at him, eager to swallow his soul.

He heard a familiar voice shout, "He's there!"

Sirius looked at the window, eyes wide as the strangest sight appeared before him: Harry Potter riding on the back of a hippogriff with a tiny, bushy-haired witch clinging to him, her eyes shut tight.

The flying creature tapped on the window with the tip of its wings.

Sirius, forgetting his pain, rushed to the window and tried to open it. "Locked!"

"Stand back!" the girl yelled as she pulled out her wand, still gripping the back of Harry's robes with her left hand. "*Alohomora!*"

The window sprang open.

Sirius stared at them, gobsmacked. Hadn't Dumbledore just said, not less than a few minutes ago, that Harry was in the hospital wing? How had they come to save him so quickly? How had they not been noticed? Where the *fuck* did they get a hippogriff on such short notice?

"Get on!" Harry shouted, holding a hand out to him. "There's not much time. You've got to get out of here. The dementors are coming. We saw Macnair going to fetch them."

With no further prompting, Sirius pulled himself through the window and took Harry's hand as he climbed onto the back of the hippogriff. He threw a leg over the large flying beast and leant forward to look at the small girl with an apology in his eyes.

*Mia*, he thought as he looked at her, placing a hand on her waist to steady himself. And that's when he felt it. *The bond*. It *was* her. The thrumming was faint, barely there and, had he not previously felt it at its strongest, he might have missed the sensation altogether as, apparently, *she* had.

She was young. So young, it was quite uncomfortable to look at her, let alone touch her, despite the need to do so in order to stay balanced on the hippogriff's back. She was a virtual stranger to him, but somehow . . . she was still *Mia*.

"Okay, Buckbeak, up!" Harry shouted, and the creature took flight once again. "Up to the tower, come on!"

The girl had nodded to him with a sympathetic smile, silently saying it was okay for him to hold onto her as they flew away.

Sirius smiled when he noticed she had shut her eyes tightly once again. *Afraid of heights. Yes, this must be Mia.* He didn't know how, but there was no doubt in his mind.

The hippogriff—Buckbeak, Sirius recalled—put his claws down on the top of the West Tower, and Harry jumped off. Hermione made to move but stilled as Sirius clung to her waist, afraid that if he let her go—let *either* of them go—they would disappear forever.

"Sirius, you'd better go, quick," Harry panted, snapping Sirius out of his daze. "They'll reach Flitwick's office any moment, they'll find out you're gone."

Suddenly, Sirius let go of the girl. She turned and smiled at him, and he felt on the verge of tears as their gazes connected. He resisted the urge to touch her face; a face he thought he would never see again.

"I owe you a life debt, little witch." Sirius smirked at her before helping her down from the hippogriff. She blushed, and he grinned at the sight before turning to Harry. "How can I ever thank—?"

"Go!" The pair cut him off together, and Sirius laughed looking at them. The girl—*Hermione*—and Harry, who looked just like his father. If Sirius had not felt so old at that moment, he would have thought that he was looking at James and Mia.

"We'll see each other again," Sirius promised. "You are," he began, turning his gaze on his godson, "truly your father's son, Harry."

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### June 10th, 1994

Most of his things were already packed, but Remus was finishing up separating a few books into two boxes when he heard his office door open. He looked up and grinned at the sight of Harry standing there, hands in his pockets, looking guilty. Remus could not for the life of him imagine why. The boy had saved Sirius's life, protected his friends, helped oust a traitor, and faced a werewolf courageously—albeit a bit foolishly.

"Hello, Harry. Saw you coming," Remus said and gestured to the open Marauder's Map on his desk. His brows furrowed when Harry looked up at him with worry in his eyes

and suddenly the pieces clicked. He laughed, gesturing to the puncture marks around his neck and the bruise along the side of his jaw from Padfoot's attack. "I've looked worse, believe me."

Harry frowned. "You've been sacked."

"Resigned, actually," Remus clarified as he threw another book into the smaller of the two remaining boxes. "It seems that someone has let slip the nature of my condition."

Harry grumbled, "Snape."

The way he had said the name was a reminder that the boy before him was *truly* James Potter's son. Remus sighed, hoping that somehow Harry would be able to overcome any faults he might have inherited from his father, the ego for one. Somehow, he believed that with Hermione there to temper him, Harry would turn out just fine.

"Whoever." Remus shrugged. "It was bound to get out. This time tomorrow, the owls will start arriving. Parents will not want a . . . someone like me teaching their children," he said firmly, forcing back the bitterness that was rising inside of him.

A part of him could not blame Snape. Remus had, after all, endangered all of their lives by not taking his Wolfsbane Potion when it was right in front of him. He tried not to be angry about the situation, but he had, for the first time in many years, finally felt at home. Not only that, he felt *useful*. It did not help him knowing that he was leaving Harry and Hermione behind . . . essentially unprotected.

"But Dumbledore—"

"Has already risked enough on my behalf," Remus insisted, cutting Harry off. "Besides, people like me, well, let's just say I'm used to this by now. But, before I go, tell me about your Patronus."

"How'd you know about that?"

Remus smirked. "What *else* could have driven off the dementors?"

"Well," Harry began. "At first I thought it was a horse, or perhaps a unicorn, but I think it was—"

"A stag," Remus said on a breath. "Your father used to transform into one."

He smiled at the memory of the large animal that had always been so regal and gentle, at least when he was not charging forward and attempting to stab someone with an antler in retribution for defiling his sister.

"That's how he was able to keep me company when I became . . . sick. He was a great friend." Remus looked down and swallowed hard. "Their . . . deaths were very hard on me."

"You knew my mum, too?"

Remus nodded sadly. "Lily was exceptional. One of the kindest witches I've ever known; amazingly talented and fiercely protective. In fact, there was only ever one other that surpassed her in that sense," he uttered quietly and then cleared his throat. "They and Sirius were my best friends. I am very glad to know that I haven't lost them all."

"What will happen to Sirius?"

"I'm not sure, Harry," he replied, leaning up against the edge of his desk. "I have hopes, and a general plan for the future, I suppose. Perhaps I'll share it with Sirius should I come across him."

Harry smiled. "If you do, tell him . . . tell him that our plan is still on. One day his name will be cleared, and then we'll figure everything out."

"I'll do that," Remus promised, and he folded the Marauder's Map back up, tapping his wand on the top of it and whispering, "Mischief Managed," before handing the parchment out to Harry. "I'm no longer your professor, so I don't feel guilty about giving this back to you. In fact, I hope—and I know James and Sirius would feel the same way—that you, Ron, and Hermione find some fun uses for it."

"What about my mum?"

Remus laughed, imagining the horrified look Lily would have on her face. "She would have hexed your arse for even *considering* following in our mischievous footsteps. Which your father would say would just be a good enough reason to do so."

*Knock! Knock! Knock!*

Remus and Harry turned to see Hermione standing in the doorway.

"Come on in, Hermione." Remus smiled and patted Harry on the back. "I'll see you again, Harry. I promise you that," he said and watched the boy smile and leave the office, shutting the door behind him.

Hermione protested, "It's not fair."

"Few things in life are. Will you do me a favour, Hermione? Will you take care of Harry?"

"Of course," she responded immediately. "But couldn't we write to the Ministry? All of your students want you to stay. Fine, maybe not the Slytherins, but they have biased opinions."

"Unfortunately, I believe it will do little good." Remus frowned at the way her eyes filled with tears. He had always hated it when Mia cried; it was so very rare that, when she did, it usually meant something truly terrible had happened. Hermione, on the other hand, appeared to weep quite often, which only endeared the girl to him more. "Your kindness, as always, astounds me."

"Where will you go?"

"Home. Perhaps I'll travel. It does get quite lonely, though. If I'm lucky, perhaps I'll get myself a pet. I've always been a fan of dogs."

Hermione smiled sadly. "I hear there might be a big, black stray out there somewhere."

Remus grinned at her. "If I track him down, I'll do my best to look after him. You do the same with Harry. Oh." He turned around, reaching for the small box of books. "These are for you."

Her eyes widened with glee at the sight. "Really?" She took the box gratefully. "But I thought . . . I mean I couldn't—"

"You're still *borrowing* them," Remus clarified. "And when you're done, you'll send them back, and I'll give you something new to read. I may no longer be your professor but, considering Dumbledore previously hired Gilderoy Lockhart to teach you, I'd be remiss in my duties as a *friend* to leave your education in the hands of those less qualified. Plus, you can keep me informed on Harry. I imagine you'll be much better at writing letters than a Quidditch-obsessed teenage boy. But I do care to know that he's well. I care to know that you are well, also."

She nodded, still frowning. "Can I help carry some of your things to the gates?"

"No need," he said, waving his wand and shrinking all of his belongings into one large trunk. "I'm not vanishing quite yet. Professor Dumbledore has been keeping some things of mine for me, and I need to retrieve them before I depart."

"I suppose this is goodbye," Hermione acknowledged.

Remus shook his head and smiled. "'Never say goodbye because goodbye means going away, and going away means forgetting.'"

"Peter Pan." After a beat, Hermione nervously asked, "Professor? Do you promise to write back to me?"

"I promise."

---

The green flames erupted from the fireplace and a tired Remus stepped into his small living room. Leaving Hogwarts had been difficult and he had not even completely processed everything that happened over the past twenty-four hours. A day ago, he had been certain that Sirius was, at least partially, responsible for the deaths of Lily and James. A day ago, he had been certain that Peter was dead. Now everything had changed.

"Got sacked, I take it?"

Remus jumped a foot in the air, startled into a scream.

"When did you get so jumpy?" Sirius asked from his place on the long sofa, his legs stretched out to the end, and his hands resting behind his head.

"What . . . ? Where . . . ?" Remus gaped at the sight of his friend in his living room. On his sofa. Still unbathed and lying on his sofa. "How the hell did you get in here?"

Sirius rolled his eyes. "You use the same security wards that we used to put up on our flat. Constant vigilance, Moony."

"How did you take them down?" Remus questioned, wide-eyed. "You don't have a wand. Did you steal a wand?"

"Please." Sirius scoffed, offended. "I could take down our old wards wandlessly, wordlessly, and in my sleep if I wanted to. Don't worry, Aurors have already been here," he assured him. "I staked out the place until I saw them leave. Moody's still a cranky old bastard. Overheard that he's retiring, though. Brought my cousin along for the ride. Can't believe little Tonks is an Auror."

Remus paled at the mention of the girl he had not seen in almost a year. Inside, the wolf felt the never-ending itch that only ever dissipated in her general proximity. He did his best to hide his reaction to Sirius's words. "Did anyone see you?"

"I'm still here, aren't I?"

"Do you want some tea?" Remus offered as he walked into the kitchen. "I don't have much in the way of food, but I think I left behind a few things."

"I'd like some firewhisky," Sirius said clearly. "But you're out. I already checked."

"I wouldn't even waste *cheap* firewhisky on you," Remus retorted as he came back into the living room, collapsing into the large armchair in the corner. He was still physically exhausted and sore from the prior night's transformation. "Last I remember, you couldn't even get pissed."

"Not on *firewhisky*," Sirius confirmed. "But I miss the taste. Miss a great many things." Then, after a full minute of silence, he added, "We have a lot to talk about."

"I'm sorry," Remus blurted out. "I'm sorry for fighting with you the last time we saw one another. Maybe if I hadn't . . . I don't know." He scowled and leant forward in the chair, running a hand through his shaggy hair. "I shouldn't have jumped at the chance to take every mission Dumbledore threw at me. I missed her," he said as though it were a good enough explanation, which he knew it was not. "I missed her like a piece of me was gone."

"I know the feeling," Sirius said quietly.

"I couldn't talk about things, and you were . . . I didn't know how to keep you alive, Sirius," he admitted. "You barely functioned after Mia went missing; you almost died. Then the Order started putting us out on missions. But if I had been around more, you never would have mistrusted me and—"

"Don't go there, Moony. I know what I was like those last few years. If I wasn't drinking, I was fighting, and since I kept getting arrested for doing it in public, I tried bringing it home. Couldn't fight with James because he and Lily had Harry, and they had their own problems. It didn't help that I had Wormtail right there whispering shit in my ear, and Snivellus accusing one or the other of us of being a spy during Order meetings. So, I took it all out on you. It was a fucked up situation."

"Yeah."

"Mia?" Sirius asked, looking up and meeting Remus's stare.

"Hermione," Remus quickly corrected. "She's called Hermione Granger here."

"Time-Turner?"

Remus startled. "How the hell would you—?"

"I'm not an idiot, Remus," Sirius scoffed, his eyes narrowed. "I got more O.W.L.s than *you* did. Once I figured out that I wasn't hallucinating her, I was able to put two and two together. When she and Harry rescued me, she had a necklace on. I've never seen one

up close, but I've read about Time-Turners. Plus, I know it's her. I could . . ." He cleared his throat and scratched at his chest. "The Soul Bond."

"You can feel it?" Remus inquired, somewhat relieved.

"Barely. It's there, it's just . . . faint. Mum—*Dorea*," Sirius said, "told me that a Soul Bond needs to have both partners fully knowing, willing, and loving. It's not strong right now because she doesn't know me, does she?"

Remus shook his head. "She's just a normal, fourteen-year-old girl."

"When did *you* find out the truth about her?" Sirius asked, somewhat bitterly.

"Seventh year, just after her scar appeared," Remus replied, gesturing to his forearm. "Mia brought me to Dumbledore and took me into a Pensieve to show me memories of the future to prove who she was and where she came from. For years I honestly didn't ever think that the future I saw would come to pass. I thought when she disappeared it had all been ruined. But now, with you free—"

"You saw me?" Sirius asked.

Remus confirmed with a nod. "Saw us both. She was selective of what I could see, of course. But I saw her, younger her, Hermione," he said specifically, "with you. It'll be a few years, of course, she's just a child now."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Merlin, don't remind me. All right, so when does everything happen?"

"I send Hermione back in time September of 1998," Remus explained. "And I charm the Time-Turner into a delayed Portkey that will bring Mia *back to* 1998 from the nineteenth of September 1979."

"The night she left." Sirius's eyes widened. "You? *You* took her away from me?"

"Apparently." Remus shrugged apologetically. "Time travel is complicated. I only end up doing things because I've already done them. Same with her apparently. Same with all of us." He sighed in frustration. "I didn't want to take her away from you, I swear it. But, fuck, I watched her leave. She called me, you know."

"That night?"

He looked up across the room and glared at Sirius, old feelings of resentment rekindling. "She told me that you walked out on her when she was . . . She was trying to tell you what was happening to her."

Sirius stood up and kicked the nearby table. "How the fuck was I supposed to know that? I come home, and my witch is crying her heart out. Tells me that she's been keeping more bloody secrets, and she starts stuttering—"

"That was the spell," Remus interjected with a sigh. "Dumbledore put some spell on her to prevent her from talking about the future. Prevent her from *changing* anything. Any time she got close to talking about it, she'd start stuttering and black out."

"Fuck." Sirius rubbed his face. "So, she *knew*?"

Remus frowned, looking up into the grief-stricken eyes of his friend, his only friend left in the world. He watched as some pain buried deep down inside of Sirius came to life. Just by the devastated look on his face, Remus knew exactly what Sirius was thinking: *Mia knew about Lily and James.*

Sirius let the thought roll over in his head repeatedly, trying to make sense of it all. Nothing made sense, but it seemed to be the truth regardless of how awful and insane it sounded. He swallowed hard, his saliva feeling acidic as it slid down his dry throat. "She knew about Prongs and Lily. Mia let James die."

Remus nodded, but then quietly added, "We *all* let them die."

And it was the truth in a way. Sirius had been reckless, hiding his grief and pain with alcohol, fighting, and eventually espionage. He had cut ties with Remus, catered to Peter, and relied too heavily on James and Lily. Despite his good intentions, he still blamed himself for their deaths, at least in part.

But Mia had known *everything*. Known about Peter, about the attack and the war and Voldemort's destruction. She had obviously known about Harry, considering the girl—Hermione—was his best friend now. Worst of all—or, at least the most *personal* revelation, was that Mia had known about Azkaban. Sirius struggled with feeling betrayed over her secrets and relieved that she was, in fact, alive.

"I don't know whether to hate her or love her," he admitted, the tension and confusion in his own voice actually frightening him a bit. "How could she let James die? She loved him. How could she . . . ?" His voice broke, and he buried his face in his hands—hands that were callused and scarred and filthy. "She *left* me there. She let me *rot* there. Twelve years."

Remus walked over and sat down beside him. "Love her," he advised. "She suffered, believe me. She *couldn't* change anything, Pads. Even one thing out of place might have

made our world worse. More people could have died, more could have suffered. Harry could have died."

That struck something inside of him, and Sirius looked into Remus's eyes and slowly nodded. "Harry's alive. I love her, then," he decided aloud, as though he even had a choice in the matter.

Sirius knew his heart had decided long ago that Mia was his everything; even at her worst, he loved her unconditionally. *This* was apparently her worst.

Remus moved to stand. "We should get some sleep."

"Stay out here with me, Moony," Sirius insisted.

Remus stretched his arms over his head. "I'll set up the spare room tomorrow. We can stay here for a few days, but then we should probably leave. At least until the Ministry stops looking for you. I know of a few of the Order's old safe houses that Dumbledore had me stay in when I was working with the werewolf packs. We can move between them for the time being. If you want, you can sleep in my room tonight."

"I can't do that, Moony."

"Pads, I insist. After everything you've been through, I can give up my bed for tonight."

"No." Sirius looked up at his friend and smirked. "I mean, neither of us can use your bed tonight. I stuck a hippogriff in there before you got home."

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### **June 11th, 1994**

When the water poured out of the shower head and hit his hand, Sirius flinched at the cold temperature that reminded him too quickly of the long swim through the North Sea after escaping Azkaban almost a year ago. Merlin, had it really almost been a year? A year of running, hiding, and being scared? Twelve years in prison and another waiting . . . waiting for vengeance. A need for vengeance that had yet to be satisfied.

When the water turned hot, he breathed in the steam as though it was rising off of a freshly baked treacle tart. Slowly, he stripped the filthy grey prison robes from his body, kicking them into a pile in the corner of the bathroom.

When he stepped into the shower and moved under the fall of hot water, Sirius let out a loud moan mixed with pleasure and relief. He rested a palm against the wall and closed his eyes, letting the warmth spread down over the taut skin of his back, penetrating the stiff and sore muscles.

Reaching for the small bar of cheap soap, Sirius lathered up a flannel and ran it over his skin to wash away the dirt, the grime, and twelve years' worth of memories. He rubbed the flannel across each of his arms and down his legs, then across his stomach and sides, pausing to feel the way his fingers rose and fell over his ribs. He vigorously scraped the dirt away from his pale chest, looking down with relief as the tattoo of Mia's name became clearer. He hissed in pain as the soap cleansed a still-open cut along his back, making a mental note to have Remus heal it once he was out of the shower.

He groaned when he was able, after several attempts, to get his fingers through his thick, dirt-crusting hair. After the fourth time washing it, the feeling of cleanliness was so great he was at last able to answer a question he'd had over the years: did long-term exposure to dementors decrease a man's ability to get hard?

The answer was a *resounding* no.

Unfortunately, his previous go-to fantasy was his witch, but his witch was now a fourteen-year-old girl, and though thoughts about *dementors* did not have the ability to kill an erection, the very *implication* of lechery certainly *did*.

Sirius focused on the dirty water as it circled the drain, washing away the dirt, blood, and pain. He logically knew that he would never be able to forget Azkaban. Still, when the water finally ran clear, there was a sense of accomplishment that overcame him. He had long ago come to terms with the fact that he might never feel clean again.

After turning the water off, he reached for a towel that had been set out for him, rubbing the dry, soft cloth vigorously over his skin. His gaze fell on a set of clean clothes that Remus had placed on the edge of the bathroom counter. Sirius smiled at the gesture, having forgotten what it was like to have someone take care of him, even with something as simple as setting out clothing.

"It's a good thing life's been as shitty to you as it has been to me," he said as he walked out of the bathroom wearing only a pair of Remus's jeans. "The fact that we've both been starved has kept us the same size."

Remus's lack of laughter drew his attention.

Sirius frowned at the expression on his friend's face. Remus stared at Sirius's body in obvious shock. Sirius knew what he looked like after twelve years of starvation and beatings, and he was annoyed with the look of pity on Remus's face. Especially since Remus, of all people, knew better.

Sirius turned around to show him the gash on his back. "Go ahead and fix this one for me, would you? And stop staring at me like I'm broken. I'm still better looking than you are."

Remus let out a short laugh.

Sirius could hear him sniffing, likely wiping at his eyes as well.

"At least you don't have grey hair," Remus said. "Though, I suppose it does make me look more like a professor."

When he felt that the skin of his back was repaired, Sirius slipped the faded t-shirt on over his head and turned to face his friend. "How *was* that? Being back at Hogwarts, teaching Mia."

"Hermione," Remus corrected.

Sirius rolled his eyes. "I know who she is, Remus."

"You *really* don't. They're very different witches. Mia *was* Hermione, but Hermione is not Mia," Remus clarified. "The reason that Mia was who she was is because of the life Hermione is living now. Mia was . . . a completed puzzle. Or, at least, close to completion. And right now, Hermione is all the uncoordinated pieces. You can see them fitting together, though."

Remus approached Sirius again, carrying a cup of hot tea in his hands.

Sirius drank immediately, ignoring the fact that the liquid was slightly burning his mouth. The warmth of the tea penetrated his bones and seeped into each and every vein, warming his entire body that had been left slightly cold after stepping out of the shower.

"Mia never talked about her life before the Potters took her in," he reflected aloud. "Just the scars. I didn't see the rest of Hermione, obviously." And he grimaced at the very thought of the fourteen-year-old in any potential state of undress. The age gap between them now was horrifyingly inconvenient. "But I saw her forearm. It was clean."

Remus inclined his head. "She hasn't been hurt yet. At least, not by Death Eaters. I don't think you want to know what she and Harry have been up to since they started Hogwarts."

Sirius raised a brow.

"Let's just say, facing a werewolf and an escaped convict this past year was boring compared to their previous adventures." Remus took a sip from his own mug. When it was clear that Sirius expected him to continue, he sighed. "Last year the Chamber of Secrets was opened."

"Bullshit. That's a myth."

"Tell that to the basilisk that Harry apparently killed."

Sirius choked on his tea and winced as the hot liquid spilt out of the mug. He stared at Remus incredulously, waiting for his friend to tell him that he was joking. When he did not, Sirius sat up, set the mug on the nearest surface, and put his head in his hands. "Tell me everything you know."

An hour later when the stories were finished, Remus made another pot of tea, and the two pretended it was the firewhisky they both needed to settle their nerves.

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When Sirius woke in the middle of the night because Remus was shaking him, he looked around to find himself in Animagus form, lying across his friend's lap. He sat up quickly and shifted back to his human self, and then awkwardly said, "Well, I suppose you and I have been in more compromising positions before."

Remus smiled sadly. "You were having a nightmare."

Sirius nodded. He assumed as much.

"You can shift unconsciously?"

He nodded again. "Dementors don't pay attention to animals."

Remus cleared his throat. "I have some things for you. When the Ministry seized our flat, Dumbledore was able to get most of our belongings out. He gave everything to me, and I've kept it all this time. I was going to wait until tomorrow morning so you could have a chance to go through everything, but something tells me that you could use some old, familiar comforts."

He stood and walked over to the coffee table in the middle of the room where there was a small box that had not been there before Sirius had fallen asleep. He sat up, paying

attention as Remus slipped his hand and then arm into the box all the way up to his shoulder.

"Undetectable Extension?"

Remus bowed his head briefly. A moment later, he returned to the sofa.

Sirius held out a shaking palm as a long piece of chestnut wood was placed there. He took a sharp breath as the magic from his wand reconnected with him like an old friend, the same way it had when he was eleven years old, standing in the middle of Ollivander's.

"Mate," Sirius breathed out softly as he gripped the wood with his fingers, feeling the magic buzz beneath them. "I don't think I've missed *any object* in the entire world more than this over the past twelve years."

"You might want to save that declaration," Remus said before dropping a long silver chain into Sirius's open free hand.

Sirius pressed his lips together and threw the silver chain around his neck quickly, tugging at it like he used to do when he needed comfort—needed to feel safe. He closed his eyes, fighting back the tears that were threatening to surface.

There were no words that Sirius could use to properly convey his gratitude to Remus.

Remus squeezed his hand, and Sirius opened his eyes to see the look of understanding on the man's face.

## Chapter One Hundred Eleven

### *Correspondence*

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*When you're gone, The pieces of my heart are missing you  
When you're gone, The face I came to know is missing too  
When you're gone, The words I need to hear to always get me through the day  
And make it okay, I miss you  
(When You're Gone - Avril Lavigne)*

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**June 18th, 1994**

"Did you get the owl?" Sirius asked the moment that Remus stepped from the fireplace.

After only a week in the safety of Lupin Cottage, Sirius was feeling better. The colour had mostly returned to his cheeks, and with proper food, he had actually filled out quite a bit—though still nowhere near his normal, healthy proportions. He had, of course, noted that the food supply was dwindling. With Remus constantly searching for work, Sirius felt guilty for being a drain. He had not revealed it yet, but he was planning on going back on the run if only to spare his friend the extra trouble. Besides, he knew that dementors had not been recalled from Hogsmeade and assumed that if someone spotted him somewhere south of London, the Ministry of Magic would turn the manhunt for him away from Scotland—which would better keep Harry and Hermione safe.

Sirius had been happy to see that among his things given to Remus by Dumbledore, there had been a stash of Galleons. He was not surprised that his friend had not used the money for himself over the years. Sirius had done what he could to help restock the paltry pantry, saving whatever was left—which was not much—to purchase a new owl so that he could send a letter to Harry.

Remus grimaced as he approached Sirius, who was sitting at a large desk, quill in hand. "I got an owl. Though for the cost, he's not exactly . . . He's *adequate* enough to send a letter—very enthusiastic."

Sirius gaped at the small cage with a grey, snitch-sized ball of feathers that bounced from one end of the cage to the other. "What the fuck is *that*?"

"Apparently, an owl," Remus said with a shrug. "It was the only one they had left for the amount of money you gave me. Plus, I wanted to get out of the shop quickly. You know how all those animals react to me."

Sirius scowled but purposely tried to soften his features, remembering Care of Magical Creatures classes where every animal smaller than a hippogriff would squeal and shriek in Remus's presence. "I should have just sent something back with the owl that arrived for you this morning."

"I got an owl?"

"Dropped off a letter and a book. I read the letter," Sirius admitted, gesturing to the desk where he had left both. "It's from Hermione. Since when are you pen pals with a fourteen-year-old girl?"

Remus snorted and crossed the room to look at the book Hermione had returned, smiling as he opened the letter. "Jealous?"

"Shut it, Moony."

"She only has Harry and Ron as friends, Pads. While Harry *is* talented at Defence, Quidditch, and Charms, she's very ahead of both of the boys intellectually. I offered to loan her my book collection and help with anything she might be in need of, especially if Dumbledore hires another imbecile to take over my position at Hogwarts. Besides, she'll help me keep an eye on Harry. He's not very forthcoming with asking for help when he needs it."

"The son of James Potter doesn't know how to ask for help?" Sirius asked sarcastically. "Next you'll be telling me he loves Quidditch and doesn't know how to comb his hair."

Remus chuckled and sat down to read Hermione's letter. "Dear Professor Lupin, I hope you'll indulge my need to address you formally, regardless of whether or not you are still a professor."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "You can't read silently?"

"This seems to bother you, so no," Remus said with a smirk and then cleared his throat before holding the letter in front of his face, blocking Sirius's glare.

"Somehow 'Mr Lupin' sounds strange to me, and as the best teacher I've ever had in Defence, I believe the title is well earned and much deserved. I hope you are well and that your journey home, wherever that might be, was not uncomfortable due to your

condition. Once again, I hope you'll forgive me for the things I said in the Shrieking Shack that night. It was rude of me to imply you were anything but honourable, and please know that I will never again reveal your condition to others."

"She'll take that promise seriously," Sirius muttered, fiddling with the tip of a quill that had lost its edge. "Bloody near attacked us when we found out second year."

"Thank you again very much for the books you've loaned me," Remus continued reading aloud. "I've returned to you your copy of *Dreadful Denizens of the Deep*, and I can't wait to see what you're willing to send me next; that is if you are still all right with me using you as a post order library.

"The end of term was without incident, at least in the life-threatening sense. Gryffindor won the House Cup again and, shortly after the announcement, Fred and George Weasley somehow transfigured one of Professor McGonagall's cats into a miniature hippogriff and let it chase Malfoy around the Great Hall, pecking at his ankles. They've been given detention for two weeks starting next September."

"Brilliant," Sirius said with a grin. "That was my favourite part. Miniature hippogriffs. I'm heartbroken that we never thought of that."

"Ron and Harry are well. Ron's leg is healing from the break, and he's quite content to tell anyone who will listen about his heroic face-off against the now infamous Sirius Black, though no one appears to believe him, which I think is well and good. Harry worries about Sirius. It might be strange to say, but I do as well. Hermione J. Granger."

"What does the 'J' stand for?" Sirius asked.

"Jane or Jean," Remus answered. "I can't remember which." He pulled down the letter, folding it back up and setting it aside. "She's worried about you."

"I know, I read the letter and heard your oration, thanks very much." Sirius scowled as he took up his own quill and put it to parchment.

*Dear Harry,*

*I hope this finds you before you reach your aunt and uncle. I don't know whether they're used to owl post. Buckbeak and I are in hiding. I won't tell you where, in case this owl falls into the wrong hands; I have some doubt about his reliability, but he is the best I could find, and he does seem eager for the job.*

*I believe the dementors are still searching for me, but they haven't a hope of finding me here. I am planning to allow some Muggles to glimpse me*

*soon, a long way from Hogwarts, so that the security on the castle will be lifted.*

*There is something I never got around to telling you during our brief meeting. It was I who sent you the Firebolt. Crookshanks took the order to the Owl Office for me. I used your name, but I told them to take the gold from my own Gringotts vault. Please consider it as thirteen birthdays worth of presents from your godfather.*

"Wait just a minute," Remus said from over Sirius's shoulder.

Much like a pre-teen caught sending a love letter to a girl, Sirius covered the parchment quickly and turned to glower at his friend, who was smirking at him.

"Oh, don't look at me like that, you read *my* post. I knew you had sent him the Firebolt, but how exactly did you get anyone to access your vaults?"

"I lied," Sirius replied through clenched teeth. "I don't want the lad to think any worse of me than he already does."

"So where'd you get the money to buy the broom?"

Sirius grinned smugly. "Stole it off Lucius Malfoy."

Remus's laughter echoed through the house as Sirius continued his letter.

*I would also like to apologise for the fright I think I gave you that night last year when you left your aunt and uncle's house. I had only hoped to get a glimpse of you before starting my journey north, but I think the sight of me alarmed you.*

*I am enclosing something else for you, which I think will make your next year at Hogwarts more enjoyable. If ever you need me, send word. Your owl will find me.*

*I'll write again soon.*

*Sirius*

*PS: I thought your friend Ron might like to keep this owl, as it's my fault he no longer has a rat.*

---

June 24th, 1994

*Dear Moony,*

*Don't be mad that I left. I feel bad enough as it is leaving during the full moon, knowing you could probably use some help recovering, but I knew that if you weren't distracted enough, you'd never let me leave. And I needed to leave. It's not safe for me at the cottage. You're not safe with me there. Aurors are still on the lookout and, as clever as you are with your fancy Patronus, I've seen what happens when faced with a hundred dementors, and I will not bring that hell down on you.*

*Take care of yourself. I'll keep in touch when I can.*

*Padfoot*

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*Professor Lupin,*

*I received your copy of Hairy Snout, Human Heart today, and I'm excited to begin reading it. I find the subject of lycanthropy quite interesting and, I hope, should I have any questions regarding it, you won't be offended were I to ask you.*

*Knowing that the full moon was last night—and in keeping with tradition—I've enclosed a bar of chocolate. It's a Muggle brand and sugar-free, so it's not quite the quality of Honeydukes, but my parents are dentists, and I would have to listen to a well-rehearsed and memorised speech about cavities if they caught me spending money on proper sweets.*

*I've only received one owl from Harry so far. Apparently, his aunt and uncle have allowed him to access his Hogwarts books because he's told them that the escaped murderer, Sirius Black, is his godfather. I told him that it wasn't appropriate to scare Muggles, especially since Sirius was perfectly innocent, but I doubt he'll listen to me.*

*Hope you are well.*

*Hermione J. Granger*

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**August 23rd, 1994**

*Dear Sirius,*

*Thanks for your last letter. That bird was enormous; it could hardly get through my window. Things are the same as usual here. Dudley's diet isn't going too well. My aunt found him smuggling doughnuts into his room yesterday. They told him they'd have to cut his pocket money if he keeps doing it, so he got really angry and chucked his Nintendo out of the window. That's a sort of computer thing you can play games on. Bit stupid, really, now he hasn't even got Mega-Mutilation Part Three to take his mind off things.*

*I'm okay, mainly because the Dursleys are terrified you might turn up and turn them all into bats if I ask you to. A weird thing happened this morning, though. My scar hurt again. Last time that happened it was because Voldemort was at Hogwarts. But I don't reckon he can be anywhere near me now, can he? Do you know if curse scars sometimes hurt years afterward?*

*I'll send this with Hedwig when she gets back; she's off hunting at the moment. Say hello to Buckbeak for me.*

*Harry*

*PS: If you want to contact me, I'll be at my friend Ron Weasley's for the rest of the summer. His dad's got us tickets for the Quidditch World Cup!*

---

**August 24th, 1994**

*Dear Hermione,*

*While I wish you would not waste your money on indulging in the sweet tooth of an old werewolf, I am grateful for your monthly packages. I was also glad to hear that Harry received a decent amount of things for his birthday. You are a good friend, and I hope he is grateful for all that you do for him.*

*I know I am.*

*To answer your question, no I will not be attending the Quidditch World Cup, though I'll be eagerly listening via wireless. While I did not play on the House team at Hogwarts, I was quite the fan and enjoyed flying a bit in my youth, though I was never as skilled at it as Sirius or Harry's father.*

*Please say hello to Harry and Ron when you see them, and do try to enjoy yourself at the game. Though, when all else fails, I suppose you could just bring a book along.*

*Please take care of yourself.*

*R. J. Lupin*

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**August 27th, 1994**

*Moony,*

*Can't tell you where I am these days for obvious reasons. Your owl back will be able to find me. Sure would be nice to have those old Galleons that Mia made back in the day. I'm always worried that one of my birds will get intercepted. I've been picking up random varieties as I travel, exotic ones from various locations so that, if they do catch one, they'll never be able to trace it. Getting one inside Hogwarts is going to be difficult, I think.*

*I'm worried about Harry and Hermione. I caught wind of what happened at the World Cup. Death Eaters out in the open again. It's like it's starting all over. Isn't this what we fought against? Isn't this what Lily and James died for? What we lost Mia for? Didn't you tell me that she said the war was over in her time? Fuck. I hate not being able to do a thing to help. I heard someone mention that they've given Moody your old job. I hated the bastard when I worked under him, but if anyone can keep an eye (get it?) on the kids, it'll be that old coot.*

*Padfoot*

---

**September 4th, 1994**

*Professor Lupin,*

*You've never been more missed here at Hogwarts. Our new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor taught his first class today, and I honestly don't know how to feel about it. He's supposedly some famous Auror who*

*came out of retirement to take up your post, but the things he taught us . . . I don't even know if I can say.*

*Unforgivables. It was horrible. The look on Harry's face. And poor Neville.*

*Professor Moody even attacked a student. Granted, it might have been well deserved.*

*I hope you are well.*

*Hermione J. Granger*

*PS: Do you happen to have any books on house-elves? I find myself poorly educated on the subject, and if I plan on freeing them (yes, you read that correctly), I feel I should learn as much as possible. I've included a badge for you if you'd like to join the cause. S.P.E.W. stands for the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare.*

---

**October 30th, 1994**

*Harry,*

*I'm flying north immediately. This news about your scar is the latest in a series of strange rumours that have reached me here. If it hurts again, go straight to Dumbledore. They're saying he's got Mad-Eye out of retirement, which means he's reading the signs, even if no one else is.*

*I'll be in touch soon. My best to Ron and Hermione.*

*Keep your eyes open, Harry.*

*Sirius*

---

**October 31st, 1994**

*Dear Sirius,*

*I reckon I just imagined my scar hurting, I was half asleep when I wrote to you last time. There's no point coming back, everything's fine here. Don't worry about me, my head feels completely normal.*

*Harry*

---

*Nice try, Harry.*

*I'm back in the country and well hidden. I want you to keep me posted on everything that's going on at Hogwarts. Don't use Hedwig, keep changing owls, and don't worry about me, just watch out for yourself. Don't forget what I said about your scar.*

*Sirius*

---

**November 1st, 1994**

*Dear Sirius,*

*You told me to keep you posted on what's happening at Hogwarts, so here goes . . . I don't know if you've heard, but the Triwizard Tournament is happening this year, and on Saturday night I got picked as a fourth champion. I don't know who put my name in the Goblet of Fire. I didn't.*

*The other Hogwarts champion is Cedric Diggory, from Hufflepuff. Hope you're okay, and Buckbeak.*

*Harry*

---

**November 13th, 1994**

*Harry,*

*I can't say everything I would like to in a letter, it's too risky in case the owl is intercepted. We need to talk face-to-face. Can you ensure that you are alone by the fire in Gryffindor Tower at one o'clock in the morning on the 22nd of November?*

*I know better than anyone that you can look after yourself, and while you're around Dumbledore and Moody, I don't think anyone will be able to hurt you. However, someone seems to be having a good try. Entering you in that tournament would have been very risky, especially right under Dumbledore's nose.*

*Be on the watch, Harry. I still want to hear about anything unusual. Let me know about the 22nd of November as quickly as you can.*

*Sirius*

---

**November 14th, 1994**

*Professor Lupin,*

*Things are not well at Hogwarts. I suppose you've heard about the Trivizard Tournament taking place here? I don't know who did it or how it was done, but Harry has been chosen as the second champion for Hogwarts. Something doesn't feel right, and I'm terrified to think what might be happening that we're unaware of. Harry is in danger; I just know it. I'll do my best to help him, of course, but it looks like I'm on my own. With the exception of Fred and George (who, let's be honest, aren't exactly helpful) the whole school has turned on Harry, thinking that he's cheated and entered the tournament himself.*

*Even Ron has abandoned him. He's turned into a jealous child, throwing a tantrum because the spotlight is once again on Harry, ignoring the fact that Harry never asked for the attention. If the boys aren't fighting these days it's because they aren't speaking to one another, and I've been put in the position of owl, relaying messages between the two.*

*Malfoy has been particularly cruel to Harry, and the two got into a duel this afternoon. As per usual when a fight breaks out, it's those on the side-lines who are casualties. I'm writing this letter from the hospital wing. I'm quite all right, though a stray hex from Malfoy hit me, and Madam Pomfrey has promised to fix me up.*

*Sirius has been writing to Harry, and I'm worried for them both.*

*Hermione*

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*Hermione,*

*There are few people I have met in my life who remain as loyal a friend as you. Harry is very lucky to have you, and I will always be grateful that you are looking out for him. The Trivizard Tournament is very dangerous and hasn't been held for so long for a good reason. I have to admit, though, had it come to Hogwarts during my time as a student, I doubt there would be anything that would have kept Sirius and Harry's father from entering.*

*It upsets me to hear that you were injured in a duel with Draco Malfoy. I know you have a hard time with needing to follow the rules, but*

*Slytherins rarely play by the same set. I've included my copy of Self-Defensive Spellwork, and I'd very much like it if you studied it closely. Please take care of yourself.*

*Remus Lupin*

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## **November 22nd, 1994**

Sirius was dead if Rosmerta caught him.

He moved from town to town, city to city, and he even Apparated to the continent to get spotted roaming around Venice, Paris, and Amsterdam before returning to London. He eventually made his way back north to Hogwarts, after overhearing two Aurors discussing that the manhunt for Sirius Black had hit a standstill when dementors and Ministry officials lost him somewhere outside of Luxembourg.

Harry's letters concerned him more than anything, and he was desperate to talk to his godson face-to-face—or Floo to Floo. He slipped into Hogsmeade unnoticed by anyone, stealing food and copies of the *Daily Prophet* where he could. Now that he was back in a country where he was too easily spotted, he knew that food would become scarce once again.

Sneaking into the Three Broomsticks was easy enough. Considering it was a busy night, he knew that Rosmerta would not be slipping into her own quarters anytime soon, which was where he called into the Gryffindor common room. He stuck his face in the fireplace and waited for Harry, who turned up right on time.

"Sirius, how are you doing?"

Harry was growing much too quickly for Sirius liking. He frowned at the thought of the boy growing up but took solace in the fact that the faster Harry aged, the faster *Hermione* did as well—which meant he was one step closer to getting Mia back. His chest hurt to think about her, so he pushed the witch from his thoughts and focused on his godson.

"Never mind *me*, how are *you*?" Sirius asked.

"I'm . . ."

A part of Sirius wondered if Harry would be able to talk to him like this. They had only had a short chance to be with one another face-to-face before he had needed to disappear once again. Harry was good about writing, though it was clear he worried about being a burden to anyone. Sirius worried that there would be too many obstacles between them and that as soon as he had asked how the boy was doing, Harry would shut right up.

He was wrong.

"Sirius, I'm horrible! No one believes that I didn't enter this bloody tournament, never mind that it's supposed to be impossible. Dumbledore put an age line around the Goblet of Fire, not even *Fred and George* could trick it, and they know *twice* as many spells as I do! Ron's been a complete tosser, and Malfoy's gone around and made up all these buttons that say 'Potter Stinks' on them, the prat! I'm to go up against Cedric Diggory—who's actually a nice bloke—and this snobby girl from France, and Viktor Krum! *Krum!* He's a famous Seeker, Sirius! And his headmaster, Karkaroff, blamed Dumbledore and then threatened to leave, but Snape said it was all *my* fault. Then this crazy lady from the *Daily Prophet* interviewed me and lied throughout the entire article, making me seem like some crying baby, and Hermione's the *only* person to stick by me, but really that's to be expected; she's always been there by my side. But not even *she* can help me in this bloody contest, and now Hagrid's just shown me what's coming in the first task, and it's dragons! Dragons! Sirius, I'm a goner!"

Sirius stared wide-eyed at Harry, who was now catching his breath.

"Fucking hell." He sighed as he tried to think up any spells, hexes, charms, or curses that could be used against a bloody dragon.

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**November 24th, 1994**

*Dear Sirius,*

*I did it! I can't believe I did it, but I made it out alive. Tied for first place with Krum as well! Hermione stayed up all night helping me learn a Summoning Charm and right in the middle of the first task I summoned my*

*Firebolt. So I guess I have you both to thank for that! I'm not sure yet what the second task will be, but I'll keep you updated.*

*Harry*

*PS: Hermione and Ron say bello.*

---

**December 23rd, 1994**

*Dear Harry,*

*I'm sorry this letter comes so late, but I had trouble getting an owl to deliver it without being seen. Congratulations on getting past the Horntail. Whoever put your name in that Goblet shouldn't be feeling too happy right now! I was going to suggest a Conjunctivitis Curse, as a dragon's eyes are its weakest point, but your way was better, I'm impressed.*

*Don't get complacent, though, Harry. You've only done one task; whoever put you in for the tournament has got plenty more opportunity if they're trying to hurt you. Keep your eyes open, and listen to whatever Hermione tells you. She's clearly a brilliant witch who has proven her loyalty to you.*

*Keep in touch, I still want to hear about anything unusual. In case you don't hear from me before then, Happy Christmas, son.*

*Sirius*

---

**December 25th, 1994**

*Dear Sirius,*

*Happy Christmas. I wish more than anything we could spend it together. It'd be much better than staying here at the castle, that's for certain. The school hosted a Yule Ball in celebration of the tournament, and it was an absolute disaster. Did my dad know how to dance? Because if he did, the talent skipped a generation. Ron and I were absolute gits and waited until the last second to ask for dates. The one girl I wanted to go with was already going with Cedric Diggory. In the end, I managed to get dates for Ron and*

*me. He tried asking Hermione but she had already been asked by Viktor Krum!*

*Ron caused a right scene at the Yule Ball, accused her of fraternising with the enemy. She stormed off, and we found her in the common room crying after the dance, where she screamed at Ron—I ducked out as quick as I could. She can be scary when she wants to be. I know I should be focused on the tournament (and Hermione's been on my case for weeks about figuring out what the second task is supposed to be), but I can't help but think I've got the worst luck in the world with girls.*

*My dad would never have had this much trouble.*

*Harry*

---

**December 26th, 1994**

*Moony,*

*Do you think the Bulgarian Quidditch Team would notice if their Seeker went missing?*

*Pads*

## Chapter One Hundred Twelve

### *It's a Werewolf Thing*

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*Be careful of the curse that falls on young lovers  
Starts so soft and sweet and turns them to hunters  
A man who's pure of heart and says his prayers by night  
May still become a wolf when the autumn moon is bright  
(Howl - Florence + The Machine)*

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**March 4th, 1995**

Embarrassing is what it was.

A nearly thirty-five-year-old man hovering outside Sugarplum's Sweets Shop because the owner thought she saw a Death Eater walking down the street. Since the attack at the Quidditch World Cup the previous summer, alleged Death Eater sightings had increased tenfold. While Remus had no business investigating them, he could not help but linger around Diagon Alley as the Aurors followed up on each report.

Well . . . *one* Auror.

The purple-haired witch stared incredulously at the old shop owner, looking like she was trying her best not to appear bored. Her robes hung open haphazardly—the hint of a Weird Sisters logo printed on the shirt she wore beneath—and there were rips in her jeans that looked like she had done them herself on purpose. Her black boots were decidedly non-Muggle and came up an inch or so above her ankles. One had a large scuff mark across the toe that looked like paint. Unlike every other part of her that screamed "I don't give a fuck what you think about me," her Auror badge was pinned in exactly the right spot, and shined so brightly that the reflected sunlight pouring in from the nearest window was creating spots on the wall in front of her.

Her youthful appearance deserved a constant smile, Remus thought, but she instead looked frustrated as she prompted the old woman to continue speaking, "And you think he was a Death Eater because . . . ?"

"I don't *think* missy, I *know*! It was a Death Eater, it *was*! I saw them back in the first war!"

An owl perched on the counter flinched at the piercing tone and took flight.

"I saw them, I did. Walked right in front of my shop this morning wearing black robes and that Death Eater mask. I recognised him, though; had to be that Lestrangle fellow."

"Lestrangle?" A purple eyebrow lifted in evident annoyance. *Both* Lestrangle brothers were securely locked away in Azkaban, and it was a well-known fact. "Which one? And how exactly did you know it was him if he was wearing a mask?"

After another twenty minutes of listening to Death Eater conspiracy theories, the young witch put on her best "polite face"—which Remus recognised looked eerily similar to her "You're a mental bint" face—and bid the shop owner farewell.

She dashed out the door and made a quick left out of the shop, heading down toward the Leaky Cauldron. Out of what was clearly a terrible habit, Remus quietly left the shop and proceeded to follow her.

He had no logical reason for it, of course, but with Death Eater activity being reported all across Wizarding Britain, Remus felt the urge to protect. Sirius was on the run up near Hogsmeade, and Harry and Hermione were both safely locked behind Hogwarts wards. That left only *her*, his *mate*—unguarded.

He hated thinking she could not take care of herself; she was an Auror, after all. Then again, Remus had seen her trip four times that morning, and the wolf inside him paced nervously. It was not *stalking*. He just . . . needed to make sure she was safe.

He had followed her all morning, watching from a distance as she went from shop to shop, taking statements from a vast majority of crazy, paranoid, elderly witches and wizards. Nymphadora Tonks was good at her job, a bit brusque at times, and she had little patience for bullshit and attitude. Earlier that morning she had hit a man with a Stinging Hex for leering at her.

Remus followed her past the sweet shop with his eyes fixed on the ground until her footsteps stopped.

"Are you following me?" she bluntly asked.

She was talking to him.

To *him*!

Flustered, Remus froze and tried to remember how words worked. "What? Me? I . . . Walking. What? Umm . . ."

He swallowed hard, eyes wide as they stared into hers. *They're blue today*, he thought to himself as his breath quickened in a panic. Not knowing what else to say, he decided that fleeing would be the best option, so he quickly turned on his heels and ran . . . face first, into the side of a building.

A moment later, he found himself staring up at the sky, the prettiest witch in the world hovering over him.

"I see you've met Wally," she said with a grin.

He blinked. "Wally?"

"Yeah." She chuckled and then gestured to the brick building he had just cracked his forehead against. She touched the wall affectionately. "Wally and I have had our run-ins in the past. See this?"

She knelt down beside Remus, who flinched away from her. She was pointing to a small scar on the left side of her forehead. It was barely visible and, had she not pointed it out, he might never have known it was there.

"Cracked my head clean open when I was eleven. Was so bloody excited to get my Hogwarts shopping done that I ran right into old Wally here. Woke up in St Mungo's six hours later."

Remus grimaced at the thought, prompting him to wonder aloud, "Are you . . . all right?"

"What, ten years later?" she asked with a chuckle. "Yeah, I think I'll live."

He smiled at the sound of her laughter, which he thought was the loveliest sound in the known universe.

"So, you gonna tell me why you were following me?"

Eyes wide, his smile faded, and he felt the blood drain from his face.

He had known who she was for over fifteen years, had seen her from time to time—always from a distance—here and there, but had never once made contact. And now he had spoken eleven words to her, and more than half of them had not made a lick of sense.

"I was just . . . Umm . . . Because Death Eaters? And you're an Auror."

She rolled her eyes, suddenly looking perturbed. "You've spotted a Death Eater, have you? Well, I'm officially off the clock. Haven't eaten all day. If you want to make a report, you'll have to talk while I grab lunch. C'mon."

She held her hand out to help him up.

Remus stared at it.

"Go on, then." She shoved her palm closer to him. "I ain't gonna bite you."

Remus laughed loudly, much louder than he had intended to—had he even intended on laughing in the first place. He covered his mouth and blushed apologetically.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't laughing at you, just . . ." He winced, embarrassed, and stood on his own, ignoring her hand. She appeared to take no offence, dusting her hands off before spinning around—literally spinning—and darting off toward the Leaky.

"Wotcher, Tom!" she shouted as she entered the pub, making her way to an empty table and taking a seat, but not before knocking over a chair in the process, clearing her throat as she righted it. "Two butterbeers and a big plate of chips, if you please!"

As though lost, Remus followed her inside and sat down opposite, blinking wide-eyed as she ordered the drinks, one of which was presumably for him. It suddenly and strangely felt like a date. But it could not be a date. They had never actually, technically *met* before, despite Remus having previously met her mother on numerous occasions, not to mention being best friends with her cousin for over twenty years. She didn't even know his name.

"So, Death Eaters," she said, bringing her attention up to Remus's face. "You seen 'em?"

"What? Umm . . . no, I was just—I mean, I heard that there had been sightings."

"You were following me because you *heard* there had been Death Eater sightings?"

She watched him carefully, and when he was certain she could tell his discomfort had reached an all-time high, she winked at him and sent his heart plummeting into his stomach.

"Do you think I'll protect you?" she asked with a grin.

Remus huffed indignantly, swallowing as he waited for his heart to climb back up into his chest. "I can take care of myself quite well, thank you," he retorted with an air of smugness. "You're much too friendly. You shouldn't trust people so easily. In fact, I could have been a Death Eater myself. You kept your back to me the whole walk over here. It's not safe for you to just—"

She snorted in amusement, the sound interrupting him. "You're no Death Eater."

Remus scowled, not sure if he should be offended or not. "And how do you know that?"

"Easy." She took a sip from her butterbeer after Tom set both bottles down on the table, slipping the plate of chips between them.

Remus screamed at himself inside his head when his eyes focused in on the way her lips wrapped around the opening of the bottle. When her tongue darted out to lick at a stray drop on her bottom lip, he whispered, "Fucking hell," under his breath.

"Death Eaters are pureblood fanatics, and even if you *were* a pureblood—which you're *not*—they wouldn't take you because you're a werewolf."

His entire body froze solid, and he felt his breath catch in his throat. This was *not* how this was supposed to happen. He was supposed to meet her casually, *not* get caught stalking her in Diagon Alley. He was supposed to introduce himself with a smile, *not* run into a wall like a wanker. He was supposed to invite her to dinner, *not* silently follow her into the Leaky. And then months and months—and maybe years—down the road when she'd had time to get to know him, he would slowly introduce her to the fact that he was a werewolf.

Which she, apparently, already knew.

"I may be dead clumsy and trip over my feet fifty percent of the time that I'm touching solid ground," she said with a smirk, "but I'm a good Auror. Despite the fact that I may or may not have had issues with the stealth and tracking portion of my testing, I'm pretty handy at everything else. Like investigation. I know exactly who you are, Remus Lupin."

He exhaled sharply at the way his name sounded falling from her lips so easily.

"You come by the Ministry about once a month to put down job applications, but the Wizarding world can't pull their heads from their arses, so you never get hired because of your condition. I saw you lingering in the Atrium once at work and asked old Mad-Eye if he knew you. He told me your name and then said to mind my bloody business and get back to work. So, naturally, I looked you up. Found you on the registry pretty quick, to be honest. They need to up the security down in Administrations."

"W-Why would you look me up in the registry?" was the only question he could think was appropriate enough to ask.

"I've seen you about." She shrugged and pushed the plate of chips in front of him. "Eat something; you're all skin and bones." As though her command was something he could not bear to avoid, Remus snatched up a single chip and shoved it into his mouth.

"Anyway, since I can change my appearance at will, I was curious how you kept finding me. Smell, right?"

Remus nodded and then remembered to chew.

"I knew it!" she cheered victoriously, her eyes brightening in excitement.

After swallowing slowly, he asked, "You don't think it's weird?"

"No. Do *you* think *this* is weird?" She scrunched up her nose, and her hair changed from purple to turquoise. When Remus shook his head, she smiled. "See? Can't help what you are. Out of curiosity, what do I smell like?"

"Biscuits," Remus replied without thinking and then immediately felt his face burn hot with embarrassment.

She laughed brightly, the sound filling the room. "Nice. Better than Dungbombs or Stinksap. Oh, I'm Tonks by the way." She tossed a chip in her mouth and then licked the salt from her fingers before rubbing it off on her jeans. Then she held that hand out to him in greeting. "But I'm guessing you already knew that."

Remus stared at her palm once more as though he had never before seen a human hand his entire life. "You're not afraid to let a werewolf touch you?"

"I'm a little offended that a werewolf hasn't been taught that it's rude to not accept a hand of greeting when it's offered to him," she replied mockingly, wiggling her fingers at him like bait.

He smiled nervously and took her hand.

The very second that her skin touched his, Remus felt it: a tiny golden string connecting them. His heart rate quickened, and he wondered if she felt it, too. The relaxed look on her face said that no, she had not, but he was pleased to discover for himself the feeling that Mia and Sirius had described to him all those years ago.

"Are you the same Remus Lupin that used to live with my cousin?" Nymphadora asked out of the blue, snatching a few chips from their now-shared plate.

"You *know* about that?" Remus raised a brow. "I mean . . . you remember? You were so . . ." He paused and winced. *Young*. She was so *young*.

"Pretty good memory on me. Plus, Mum and I aren't exactly invited to many Black family reunions. Not that there would *be* any considering most of them are either in Azkaban or dead these days. It makes it a little easier to remember the *good* family members."

"And you think *Sirius* is good? Isn't he supposedly Voldemort's right-hand man who betrayed his friends, murdered Muggles, and escaped Azkaban?"

"No." She smiled thoughtfully, and the roots of her hair turned pink. "He's the cousin who used to share his Cauldron Cakes with me when I was little and never minded that I broke his favourite whisky tumbler. He had a cat that didn't like me, but he said it didn't matter because it didn't like him, either.

"He slipped me a Sickie anytime I made my mum roll her eyes. He had a girlfriend who let me eat chocolate bars from a cauldron that she kept under the sink." She laughed at the memory, not noticing the shocked and mildly annoyed look on Remus's face. "And they had a flatmate who was always sick whenever I came over. His name was Remus Lupin."

He studied her carefully as he finished off his butterbeer.

"And despite everything, my mum always said that Sirius was innocent. Considering she still married my dad after everything she had up against her, I like to think my mum is a good judge of character. What about you?"

"What *about* me?" Remus asked.

"What do *you* think about my cousin?"

He paused and let the question linger in the air. "I don't think there's anything in the world he wouldn't do for those he loves. Family and friends mean the world to him. I hope you'll be reunited someday. He'd love to see you."

"You say that like you've talked to him recently."

Clearing his throat, Remus chuckled softly. "I can assure you, Miss Tonks, I do not know the current location of Sirius Black." It was not a lie. He knew Sirius was up in Hogsmeade, but he roamed from time to time.

"It's just Tonks. And you still haven't answered my question, by the way. Why were you following me?"

Remus hesitated. He wanted to lie, but something felt wrong about it. "I wanted to make sure you were . . . safe." He cringed as the words left his mouth.

She laughed. "That's an odd thing for a stranger to do."

He grimaced at the word *stranger*.

"Care to explain why you're worried about my safety?"

"Not particularly."

"Well, don't worry your handsome face about me," she insisted, unaware of the way his eyes widened or the way his breath caught in his throat when she called him handsome. "People think just because I was a Hufflepuff it means I'm some weak little sap. Trust me," she said, her blue eyes flashing with a look of daring that was reminiscent of Sirius and Mia—a Black family trait no doubt. "I'm *not* a girl to be trifled with."

"I don't think you're weak. I just . . . was worried. It's a . . . werewolf thing. Maybe you being Sirius's cousin makes me feel, I don't know, protective?" He leant forward and put his face in his hands. "Sorry, that's weird and inappropriate."

"It's a little weird," she acknowledged, a tone of amusement in her voice. "If you'd like to be friends, it would make it a lot *less* weird."

Remus rose a brow and opened one of his eyes to look at her. "You don't even know me."

"What I do know, I like." She grinned, sat back in her chair, and threw a chip in the air, catching it in her mouth. "You're a man who happens to be a werewolf. You have a long-term loyalty to my family, the good side at least. You run into walls and didn't bother to pick up the chair that I knocked over. Which means that despite saying you're worried about my safety, you're okay with letting me clean up my own messes. You apply for jobs at the Ministry even though they're not going to hire you which either says that you're clueless, resilient, *or* you've been going there for another reason."

At this, Remus's face flushed, and Nymphadora smirked as though she got confirmation for a silent theory.

"And you didn't eat all the chips." She gestured to the plate in front of them. "I've created lifelong friendships knowing less. But if it's not enough for you, then we can play twenty questions. What House were you in at Hogwarts?"

"Gryffindor," Remus replied with a genuine smile, the scent of biscuits flooding his senses. The way she smiled in his direction warmed him over.

"Ah, loyal, handsome, *and* brave." She leant her elbow on the table and rested her chin in her palm. There was a devious glint in her eyes. "What on earth will I ever do with you?"

*Love me, marry me, shag me stupid.*

He stared into blue eyes that were slowly shifting green—the same shade he saw in the mirror every day. Her hair was changing as well, turning into his sandy-blond colour,

minus the grey streaks. He took it as a good sign and summoned up that famous Gryffindor courage, suggesting, "You could let me take you to dinner?"

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### March 10th, 1995

"You look like hell," Remus said as he made his way into the small cave Sirius was apparently living in with Buckbeak.

There was a large nest in the corner where the hippogriff was content to sleep, surrounded by rat carcasses and chicken bones. Remus cringed at the sight, his nose twitching at the offensive smell. From the way that Sirius casually regarded his dwelling, he had long since grown accustomed to the stench. Opposite Buckbeak's nest was a pile of papers: a mixture of the *Daily Prophet* and *Witch Weekly*. He could see Harry's picture in a few, and one of Hermione dancing with a tall, bulky boy.

"You're terrible at sweet talking, Moony. Now you're *definitely* not getting in my pants."

"You're sleeping in a cave," Remus pointed out.

Sirius shrugged. "You occasionally sleep in a cage. Don't be a judgmental prick."

Remus sighed. He had spent the past few days meeting up with Nymphadora—*Tonks*, he tried to remind himself—in Diagon Alley, having lunch at the Leaky or stopping at Florean's for a bite of ice cream. He would not necessarily call the outings *dates*, especially since he could never afford to take her anywhere nice, and she always insisted on paying her half of the bill when it came. It was nice enough just to spend time with her, be near her and get to know her as a person. The ache to keep her safe slowly dulled, as did his utter idiocy anytime she spoke or smiled in his general direction. Remus was actually finding himself happier than he had been in years, and the reason was painfully obvious.

Just as obvious—and just as painful—was the understanding as to why Sirius was looking worse than ever. Stuck living in a cave so close to Hogwarts that he could see the towers from this distance yet unable to be near Harry or Hermione with the exception of reading about them in the papers. It was something that Remus himself had been doing,

and if Sirius was taking *any* of what was written about them to heart, it was no wonder he looked a mess.

"I'm worried about you, is all. Why don't you come back to the cottage? You've already lost all the weight you put on last summer, and I promised Mia that I would take care of you."

Sirius scoffed, a dark look coming over his expression. "Yeah, well, I promised her I'd take care of you, too, and we promised her that we'd trust one another, but we both fucked that one up royally, didn't we?"

Remus sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. *Yes, we most certainly fucked that one up.*

"Sorry." Sirius frowned and looked down at the stack of papers leaning up against the wall of the cave. "I'm still not exactly . . . I haven't been sleeping well. I've been trying to get into Hogwarts, at least near the Forbidden Forest, but with the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students constantly running around the grounds . . . I was only able to get in once before two French girls starting screaming, 'Get eet away! Filzy mongrel!'" he said in a mocking French accent.

"I could go back into the village and get you some food," Remus suggested, knowing that Sirius would continue to fight him on leaving Hogsmeade altogether.

"Don't waste your Knuts on me, Moony. Harry came to see me a few days ago, and he's been having the elves send me food," Sirius assured him, looking miserable over the fact that his godson, the boy he was supposed to be taking care of was, in fact, taking care of him instead.

"*Just Harry?*" Remus asked, leaning down to pick up a copy of *Witch Weekly*. The page had been marked, and he smiled at the sight of Hermione dancing on the arm of the Bulgarian Seeker, Viktor Krum—at least that's what the caption read. The article had not said a decent thing about her, slandering her character completely.

### HARRY POTTER'S SECRET HEARTACHE

*by Rita Skeeter*

*A boy like no other, perhaps—yet a boy suffering all the usual pangs of adolescence. Deprived of love since the tragic demise of his parents, fourteen-year-old Harry Potter thought he had found solace in his steady girlfriend at Hogwarts, Muggle-born Hermione Granger. Little did he know*

*that he would shortly be suffering yet another emotional blow in a life already littered with personal loss.*

*Miss Granger, a plain but ambitious girl, seems to have a taste for famous wizards that Harry alone cannot satisfy. Since the arrival at Hogwarts of Viktor Krum, Bulgarian Seeker and hero of the last Quidditch World Cup, Miss Granger has been toying with both boys' affections. Krum, who is openly smitten with the devious Miss Granger, has already invited her to visit him in Bulgaria over the summer holidays, and insists that he has "never felt this way about any other girl." However, it might not be Miss Granger's doubtful natural charms that have captured these unfortunate boys' interest.*

*"She's really ugly," says Pansy Parkinson, a pretty and vivacious fourth year student, "but she'd be well up to making a Love Potion; she's quite brainy. I think that's how she's doing it."*

*Love Potions are, of course, banned at Hogwarts, and no doubt Albus Dumbledore will want to investigate these claims. In the meantime, Harry Potter's well-wishers must hope that next time, he bestows his heart on a worthier candidate.*

"The other two came to visit as well," Sirius said, snatching the magazine from Remus's hands and tossing it back onto the pile in the corner.

"The *other two*?" Remus rose an eyebrow. "Are you trying to distance yourself from Hermione?"

"Why not? She's not Mia."

Remus rolled his eyes dramatically. "Excuse me? You're the one who fought me last summer telling me that they were the same person! What's changed?"

Sirius turned his eyes away from him.

"Is this about the Bulgarian?" Remus laughed. "Oh Merlin, you're so bloody dramatic. She's fourteen—"

"Fifteen," Sirius corrected him.

"—and she went on *one date* with him."

"And then she became so important to him that she was dropped into the Black Lake, all for some stupid tournament!"

Remus scoffed. "Well, to be fair, considering how many girls Mia Tele-Portkeyed *into* that lake, I'd say it's pretty decent karma."

There was a pregnant pause before Sirius whispered, "Lily almost *died* in that lake."

Wincing as the memory flooded straight to the forefront of his mind, Remus groaned and walked across the cave to take a seat down beside his friend. "I'm sorry, Pads, I . . . I forgot."

Sirius sighed miserably. "She's a teenage girl, and even though I don't see her like—*can't* see her like I want to . . . she's still mine."

Remus nodded in full understanding. He had spent the entire previous year watching Hermione grow, and it was hard to reconcile the two witches. Despite his very intimate history with Mia, he never saw Hermione in that way, so he understood *exactly* how Sirius felt.

"*She* might not know about the Soul Bond, but *I* do, and it's my job to make sure she's safe and happy. Right now *she's* not safe, and *Harry's* not safe, and I can't do a thing about it. I have to just sit and pretend like I don't know who or what she is. You have no idea how that feels."

"You'd be surprised," Remus muttered and ran a hand through his hair, hesitating for a moment before deciding to confess. "I uh . . . I found my mate."

Sirius's eyes widened, evidently pulled out of his depression. "I'm sorry, you *what?* When? Who is it?" he asked excitedly.

Remus shook his head. "I really can't say. Let's just go with the fact that she's younger than me, and I've had to do exactly what you're doing. Watch her grow up and wait, all the while hoping that she doesn't accidentally get herself killed."

"Killed? What, is your mate a Dragon Tamer?"

"No, but she apparently *dated* one," Remus bitterly replied, recalling a recent conversation with Nymphadora where she told him about her short-lived relationship with Charlie Weasley while the two were still at Hogwarts.

"Oh, *now* who's pouting?" Sirius said mockingly.

"Fine." Remus huffed. "Aren't we a pair of sad sods."

"Your girl dated a Dragon Tamer and mine's dating a famous professional Quidditch player." Sirius sighed and leant back against the cold stone wall of the cave. "And one day if we're very, very lucky, they'll both settle for a werewolf and a felon."

Remus did not want to tell Sirius that he was already making small strides with his mate. He did not want to jinx himself by hoping his friendship with Nymphadora was more

than it was, and he also did not think it was appropriate to rub his momentary happiness in his friend's face.

"What the hell do we even have to offer?" Remus asked aloud.

"We're good-looking?" Sirius suggested.

Each took a moment to look the other over. Sirius in his torn robes, skinny, pale, and dirty once again, though not as badly as he had been after his prison escape. Remus in his patched, brown, second-hand robes, grey hair, and scarred face.

"We *used to be* good-looking?" Sirius corrected.

"At least *your* witch actually gets to go back in time and see you at your best. Mine will have to settle for an old, poor, grey-haired werewolf."

"She won't care; she's your mate," Sirius pointed out.

"Mia used to say things like that." Remus smiled thoughtfully. "I can still complain about it, though."

"You going to tell me who she is?"

Remus shook his head. "Not a chance."

There was an uncomfortable silence that filled the air. After a few minutes of watching Buckbeak gnaw on some chicken bones left over from when Harry, Hermione, and Ron brought food, Sirius spoke up. "I'm worried about Harry."

"Me too."

## Chapter One Hundred Thirteen

### *Old Enemies, New Loves*

---

*We were made for each other  
Out here forever, I know we were, yeah, yeah  
All I ever wanted was for you to know  
Everything I do, I give my heart and soul  
I can hardly breathe, I need to feel you here with me, yeah  
(When You're Gone - Avril Lavigne)*

---

**June 24th, 1995**

*Albus,*

*It's been a year since you've known the truth about my innocence. A year since I've properly seen my godson. He's been at Hogwarts, in your care, and according to the letters I receive from him—not to mention the papers—he's been in constant danger. I'm coming to Hogwarts tonight. You and I are going to discuss Harry. I'm aware that the third Trivizard task is tonight. I assume that once a victor is crowned, the celebrations will take place. Do me this favour—because I am owed it after what I've endured—and skip the parties. I'll be in Hagrid's pumpkin patch waiting for you.*

*S.B.*

---

He knew he should have gone earlier.

Padfoot waited for hours in the pumpkin patch, listening to cheers coming from the Quidditch Pitch which had been turned into a massive labyrinth. In the distance, he could hear people chanting.

"Digg-or-y! Digg-or-y!"

"Potter! Potter! Potter!"

He wanted to smile and cheer for Harry as well, but something was not sitting right with him.

He owled Remus earlier that week to see if he would be coming to Hogwarts to witness the tournament. The reply back informed Sirius that Remus wanted to, but he had been told that only students, staff, Ministry officials, and the occasional reporter were

allowed. The *families* of the champions, of course, were allowed to be present, and Remus had requested to be let in to see Harry, but Dumbledore explained that Bill and Molly Weasley would be brought to Hogwarts to stand as Harry's family.

The news had left both Remus and Sirius fit to be tied.

*They* were Harry's family.

Sirius owled Remus back, promising full details of the tournament once he got them from Harry, and then told him to go back to snogging his new girlfriend and mate—whom Sirius had yet to meet or learn any details of, other than the fact that she and Remus had been official for one month, and she did not care one bit about his lycanthropy.

Applause turned to anxious silence in the distance, and Padfoot kept his ears open, waiting nervously to hear if a champion was declared. Nervous whispers turned to loud, boisterous cheers of, "Harry! Harry! Harry!" that all too quickly gave way to screams of horror. Padfoot shook in place, not knowing what to do. He felt horrible for feeling relieved when he heard someone yell, "Diggory's dead! Cedric Diggory's dead!"

If he had wanted to rush forward to see what had happened, his chance was lost when the crowds began rushing out over the grounds. A flock of French students ran to the pastel blue coach while a large group of Durmstrang students made their way in an orderly fashion toward the large ship that sat at the edge of the Black Lake.

Someone cleared their throat loudly, and he turned to see Minerva McGonagall standing in front of the pumpkin patch, staring at him.

"Professor Dumbledore would like to see you in his office."

Had he been in a chipper mood, or in human form, Sirius might have made a sarcastic comment about how that statement would have given him a flashback to his youth. Instead, he followed behind her until they reached the castle, and then he ran as quickly as he could, stopping at the stone gargoyle where he waited for Minerva to catch up and give the password.

"Liquorice wands," she said, and they both watched as the spiral staircase opened, allowing them inside.

The very second that the large oak door shut behind them, Sirius shifted into his human form and turned to stand in front of the witch.

Minerva gasped and held her hand to her chest, her eyes remained wide in shock for a split second before they narrowed. "Sirius Black!"

"Where's Harry?" he asked immediately, ignoring her panic and anger.

She gaped at him in furious frustration. "An Animagus? How?"

"A lovely story I'll be overjoyed to tell you about in detail later, Minnie. But not until I see my godson!"

Minerva swallowed and took a breath to collect herself. "He's with Albus. Safe. There was a . . . a death in the tournament. We're not certain what's happened. I have to go and report back to Professor Dumbledore, and I will let him know where you are," she said and then left the office without another word.

It might have been minutes or an hour, Sirius did not know how long he waited. The moment that the door opened and he caught sight of Harry, he quickly crossed the room and pulled the boy into his arms.

"Harry, are you all right? I knew it. I knew something like this . . . What happened?"

He pulled away to look at Harry's face, shocked at the pale colour and lack of life in the usually enthusiastic teenager.

"What happened?" Sirius demanded, turning his attention to Dumbledore as he brought Harry over to the desk, sitting him down in the chair.

"It would appear, Sirius, that you were not, in fact, the first man to escape Azkaban," Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "Alastor Moody has been kept prisoner for the past nine months, and Barty Crouch Jr has been using Polyjuice Potion to impersonate him."

"Barty . . . No." Sirius shook his head. "No, Crouch died in Azkaban. I remember the guards saying . . . I remember he died."

"He changed right before our eyes and is now being held captive here in the castle, waiting to be questioned by the Minister for Magic," Dumbledore informed him. "He was charged by Voldemort to come to Hogwarts, arrange for Harry to become a Triwizard champion, and make it to the end of the final task where the Triwizard Cup had been charmed into a Portkey."

Sirius's eyes widened, and he felt himself shaking. A glance down at Harry told him that he was not the only one. There were more answers needed, but he remembered hearing about another boy dying, and by the look on Harry's face, Sirius could tell that his godson had seen it with his own eyes.

"I need to know what happened after you touched the Portkey in the maze, Harry," Dumbledore said.

"We can leave that till morning, can't we?" Sirius asked harshly. He put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Let him have a sleep. Let him rest."

"Cedric," Harry began. "Cedric and I touched the Cup together, and it . . . it pulled us away into a graveyard." He spoke softly, green eyes staring ahead into a vacant place as if neither Dumbledore nor Sirius were with him. "They . . . He killed Cedric. Pettigrew. Pettigrew killed Cedric."

Sirius took a deep breath and tried to control his rage. He opened his mouth to speak, but Dumbledore held up a hand, requesting his silence for the moment.

Harry told them everything then. Told them about being trapped in the cemetery with Voldemort, Peter Pettigrew, and Cedric's body. Told them how Wormtail cut his arm and used his blood for a potion to bring Voldemort back to full strength.

Sirius knelt down at Harry's side to look at the wound on his forearm, immediately remembering the scar on Mia's arm marking her a "Mudblood". The burnt scar on his own skin from where Lucius Malfoy tried to brand the Dark Mark into him was still there beneath the tattoos.

He closed his eyes and tried to focus his anger on something productive. Three was a powerful magical number. Somehow, whether by luck or fate, Mia, Sirius, and Harry had made up a trinity of sorts. Mia, a Muggle-born, who had been branded a Mudblood, had the word carved into her flesh to remind her, only to be adopted into a pureblood family and become one of the most powerful witches that Sirius had ever known. Then there was himself, a pureblood, who defied his family and the traditions of his House. They had tried to force him to serve Voldemort, branding him a Death Eater against his will, but he had fought back. Finally Harry, a half-blood, who had his flesh pierced to bring back to strength the one wizard who wanted nothing more than to kill him. But Harry lived.

*Harry lived.*

Sirius focused on those words as his godson continued telling his story of how Voldemort returned to a full body, called forth his Death Eaters, and tried to duel Harry only to fail when something strange happened between the pair of wands.

"The wands connected?" Sirius asked, looking from Harry to Dumbledore. "Why?"

"Priori Incantatem," Dumbledore muttered.

"The Reverse Spell effect?" Sirius asked sharply.

"Exactly," Dumbledore replied. "Harry's wand and Voldemort's wand share cores. Each of them contains a feather from the tail of the same phoenix."

Harry went into more detail regarding the duel and how the echo of the spells was made manifest, visibly, allowing him to see for a brief moment in time . . . his parents.

Sirius fell into a nearby chair and held his head in his hands as he tried to wash from his memory the images of the night that James and Lily died: leaping over James's body and rushing up the stairs to Harry's room; Lily's red hair, fanned out on the floor behind Hagrid.

"I will say it again," Dumbledore said to Harry. "You have shown bravery beyond anything I could have expected of you tonight, Harry. You have shown bravery equal to those who died fighting Voldemort at the height of his powers. You will come with me to the hospital wing. I do not want you returning to the dormitory tonight. A Sleeping Potion and some peace. Sirius, would you like to stay with him?"

Sirius nodded and stood up, transforming back into Padfoot. He walked with Harry and Dumbledore out of the office, accompanying them down the flight of stairs and eventually into the hospital wing.

The moment Dumbledore pushed open the doors to the infirmary, a small group of redheads and Hermione turned to see them enter.

The older, ginger witch gasped loudly and moved to rush toward Harry, shouting his name.

Instinctively, Padfoot stepped in front of the boy and growled protectively.

"Molly," Dumbledore said, holding up a hand, "please listen to me for a moment. Harry has been through a terrible ordeal tonight. He has just had to relive it for me. What he needs now is sleep, and peace, and quiet. If he would like you all to stay with him, you may do so. But I do not want you questioning him until he is ready to answer, and certainly not this evening."

"Headmaster," Madam Pomfrey said as she approached, her eyes staring at the dog. "May I ask . . . ?"

"This dog will be remaining with Harry for a while," Dumbledore answered simply. "I assure you, he is extremely well-trained. Harry, I will be back to see you as soon as I have met with Minister Fudge, and I would like you to remain here until I have spoken to the school tomorrow."

Madam Pomfrey handed Harry a pair of pyjamas to change into. While he was doing so behind the screens that surrounded his bed, Padfoot walked over to Hermione. The stress of the night, the past few months, the last fourteen years, had all been too much, and he needed her—even if she was not exactly *whom* he needed her to be right then.

Padfoot moved to where the girl sat on a nearby hospital bed, jumping up to sit beside her and resting his large, heavy head in her lap.

"He'll be okay," Hermione whispered and ran her fingers through his fur, causing his body to shiver at the feel of comfort, something that had not been afforded him in far too long.

The woman—Molly—approached Hermione, cautiously staring at Padfoot. "Hermione, dear, maybe you shouldn't touch that dog. He's filthy, and who knows where he's been."

When she took another step closer toward the bed, Padfoot gave another low growl in warning, baring his teeth for a brief second before dropping his head back into Hermione's lap, pleading with her to resume petting him.

When Harry pulled the screens back from his bed and slipped beneath the covers, the Weasley matriarch was immediately at his side, smoothing down the blankets. Padfoot jumped from Hermione's lap and rushed over to the bed, leaping onto the mattress and circling twice before curling up at Harry's feet, sending cautionary glares to anyone else who felt like coming near the boy.

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It was starting again.

Harry had not been asleep for more than an hour before Sirius could hear screaming in the corridor outside the infirmary. Voices he knew too well: Cornelius Fudge and Minerva McGonagall. Barty Crouch Jr was dead, Kissed by a dementor that Fudge had apparently brought into the school even after everything that had happened the year before. Crouch was dead, and there was no proof. No proof except Harry's word and, according to Fudge, that just was not enough.

Minerva sounded beside herself with rage. Dumbledore sounded defiant, filled with righteous anger as he faced off against the clearly delusional Minister for Magic. Sirius even

heard when Snape appeared, tearing up the sleeve of his robes to likely show the Minister the Dark Mark on his skin. Sirius did his best to ignore the *supposed* former Death Eater, forcing down years of pent-up hatred.

The Weasley family was off to the side, bitterly bristling. Hermione sat by Harry, one hand on his arm and the other fiddling with Padfoot's ears. Somehow her presence kept him calm, despite the fact that he could hear her angrily grinding her teeth.

"There is work to be done," Dumbledore said once Fudge left the school. "Molly, am I right in thinking that I can count on you and Arthur?"

"Of *course* you can," she replied. "We know what Fudge is. It's Arthur's fondness for Muggles that has held him back at the Ministry all these years. Fudge thinks he lacks proper Wizarding pride."

"Then I need to send a message to Arthur," Dumbledore said. "All those that we can persuade of the truth must be notified immediately, and he is well placed to contact those at the Ministry who are not as short-sighted as Cornelius."

"I'll go to Dad," said the tallest Weasley boy, Bill, standing up. "I'll go now."

"Excellent. Tell him what has happened. Tell him I will be in direct contact with him shortly." Dumbledore turned to Minerva, adding, "He will need to be discreet, however. Minerva, I want to see Hagrid in my office as soon as possible. Also, if she will consent to come, Madame Maxime."

She nodded and left without a word.

"And now, it is time for two of our number to recognise each other for what they are. Sirius, if you could resume your usual form."

Padfoot looked up at Dumbledore, then, in an instant, turned back into a man.

Molly Weasley screamed and leapt back from the bed. "Sirius Black!" she shrieked, pointing at him.

Sirius ignored her screams because his attention was focused solely on the greasy-haired Death Eater standing in front of him.

"Him!" Snape snarled, staring at Sirius. "What is *he* doing here?"

"Nice *tattoo* there, Snivellus," Sirius growled, narrowing his eyes.

"Lovely *prison* brand, Black!"

"Sirius is here at my invitation," Dumbledore insisted, glancing between them, "as are you, Severus. I trust you both. It is time for you to put aside your old differences and trust each other."

Both Sirius and Snape scoffed loudly at the exact same time.

"I will settle, in the short term," Dumbledore said, with a bite of impatience in his voice, "for a lack of open hostility. You will shake hands. You are on the same side. Time is short, and if the few who know the truth do not stand united, there is no hope for any of us."

Very slowly—but still glaring at each other as though each wished the other nothing but ill—Sirius and Snape moved toward each other and shook hands. With Dumbledore looking the other way, Sirius mouthed "Fuck you." Snape snarled in reply. They let go of each other's hands quickly.

"Sirius, I need you to set off at once. You are to alert Remus Lupin, Arabella Figg, Mundungus Fletcher, the old crowd. Lie low at Lupin's for a while; I will contact you there."

"But—" Harry began.

Sirius moved to Harry's side, cupping the boy's face in his hands and looking down at him, summoning what he thought could be a fatherly expression—something perhaps James would have done in a moment like this, or at least he hoped. "You'll see me very soon, Harry. I promise you. But I must do what I can. You understand, don't you?"

"Yeah," Harry agreed, bobbing his head. "Yeah, of *course* I do."

Sirius grasped his hand briefly, turned his face toward Hermione and offered her a kind and grateful smile before transforming again into Padfoot and disappearing through the doors of the infirmary.

He had a mission, and Dumbledore could not have been clearer.

The Order of the Phoenix was regrouping.

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One month. One whole, unbelievably wonderful, miraculous month since Nymphadora Tonks had officially been *his* witch. One whole month since, after taking her on a date to Florean's, Remus had anxiously mumbled out something about exclusivity—

in a stutter that would have embarrassed the poetic romantic he had been in his youth—shocking him into a stupor when she had actually said *yes*.

Remus was finding that his limited romantic experience, while intense, had been just that: limited. The relationship he'd had with Mia had not prepared him in the slightest for handling a witch like Nymphadora. While Mia was ever the suspicious Slytherin and temperamental Gryffindor, Nymphadora was as loyal and friendly as any Hufflepuff that Remus had ever met. Where Mia had been graceful, Nymphadora was notoriously clumsy. Where Mia had been well-read, Nymphadora preferred to learn in the moment.

While they differed greatly, Remus could not help but see many similarities as well: determination, goodness, power, and an unwavering need to protect loved ones.

Though he thought of Mia often when he was with Nymphadora, it was only ever in the fact that he had missed his best friend dearly, and this witch—his *mate*—he found, reminded him of her.

Remus was finding himself more and more eager for the day when he could send Hermione Granger to the past in the hopes that Mia Potter would return to him, if only so that he could introduce the two witches, and maybe, just maybe, feel a little more whole.

As often as he thought about Hermione and her future—or past—counterpart, Mia was the furthest thing from his mind at the moment.

The witch in his lap seemed to be attempting a record at how long she could hold her breath while she passionately kissed him. Kissing Nymphadora had quickly become an addiction that Remus hoped he would never be rid of.

Their first kiss had been clumsy and awkward when she tripped over a cobblestone in Diagon Alley and fell into his arms. Too close to the full moon, the wolf had taken over, and Remus found himself kissing her enthusiastically. They had not even been on a real date yet. He had apologised profusely and tried to explain lunar symptoms, but she laughed it off and said that if she had known werewolves were *that* sexy, she would have been snogging them for years. Remus had growled in response which earned him a wink.

Nymphadora flirted with him relentlessly, kissed him any chance she got, and trusted him too easily. His chest rumbled pleasantly as she straddled his lap and tilted her hips in such a way to make her intentions obvious, her lips giving him the same message: *I trust you; I want you.*

Remus, however, didn't trust *himself*. One wrong move and not enough control, and he knew he would be marking her before he'd had a chance to explain what that meant, and considering she was a Black—and Sirius's cousin—there was a high chance that she would interpret biting during sex as a bonus.

"You know, Remus," she whispered when he pulled away from the kiss and tried to adjust her sitting position away from him a touch. "You've got a way of sending a girl some pretty mixed-up signals."

"How's that?" he asked, still catching his breath.

"Well." She leant forward and kissed just below his ear, earning another rumble in his chest. "I'm sitting on your lap with some *hard* evidence that says you want me just as much as I want you, and yet you're still holding back. Why? Is it the age thing again? You know I don't care about that."

"No." Remus rubbed the palms of his hands down his face. "I mean, yes, it kind of bothers me still, but it's not *that*—"

"The werewolf thing? It had better be the werewolf thing, because if you bring up money again, I might gag you," she said with a genuinely threatening voice reminding them both of their first and, so far, only fight where he threw a mild tantrum when she had fought him over going to an expensive restaurant for dinner. It had been a place he knew he would never be able to afford. She insisted that it was her treat, and he had decided to spend the night lamenting over the anti-werewolf legislation that prevented him from getting a job and some bitch named Umbridge who wrote it.

"I might gag you, anyway," Nymphadora teased and kissed his chin. "Tie you up a little. I'm pretty good with Restraining Charms." She grinned when Remus growled. "Oh, he likes that idea." She captured his lips with her own and opened her currently hazel eyes, making eye contact with him. He felt the wolf roar to life, and Nymphadora pulled away, looking very pleased with herself. "There's my beautiful, golden-eyed boy."

Remus thrust his hips upward and grinned when he made her gasp. "Hardly a boy."

"Not entirely a man, either." She teasingly bit her lower lip. "I *like* it."

Remus frowned slightly at her words. "I'm not a novelty."

"No more than I am." She reached up and touched the space between his eyebrows, pushing at the line there. "I like the wolf. I like the wizard. They're the same man to me."

So whatever your deal is, Remus, get over it. I like you, I *want* you, and I'm not putting up a fight. You're not the big, bad wolf who's come to ravish the fair maiden."

"There's . . ." He sighed. "There's a lot you still don't know. It's only been a month."

"A pretty *great* month. And, technically, we had our first date back in March."

Remus scoffed, leaning back on the sofa. He put his hands behind his head to stop himself from holding onto her. "Yes, where I stalked you through Diagon Alley, and you bought me chips and a butterbeer while regaling me with my life story, which you apparently already knew. How romantic."

"You've quite made up for it since then. Flowers I forget to water, chocolates that you've half eaten, and poetry that I'll never understand. You better be careful there, Remus Lupin, a girl could get used to this kind of treatment. What happens when I decide that I'm never letting you go?"

He looked up at her, his mate, the girl he had waited eighteen years to know by name, twenty-nine years to see with his own eyes, and thirty-four years, eleven months, and twenty-two days to speak to. She was so very much his polar opposite and yet she was utter perfection.

Lost in his thoughts and without thinking, Remus whispered, "I love you."

Nymphadora's violet hair quickly turned bright red, and her hazel eyes shifted to blue and widened in the process. Her mouth fell open and a "Whoa" escaped her.

Groaning, he realised what he had done. "I know, I'm sorry, but . . . I can't . . . I can't help it, and it's not because we're in the position we're in, and it's not because you're so very pretty, but you are."

He momentarily lost his train of thought as he looked up at her face, cheeks flushed pink and eyes still slightly dilated from arousal, the tiny shimmer of the scar on her forehead which she kept visible even though she had the ability to morph it away.

"And it's not because you smell like biscuits," he said and then breathed her in, his own eyes glazing over at the scent of living Amortentia. "Which you do. You're just . . . perfect."

She snorted indelicately. "Hardly. I trip over everything."

"I like catching you. I *love* catching you."

She grinned down at him. "You're a big sap, aren't you?"

"The biggest."

She took a moment and smiled sweetly, running the pad of her thumb over his bottom lip and grinning when he kissed it. "I think I lov—"

"Don't say it," Remus blurted out, interrupting her. "You don't have to say it just because *I* said it. That was not me fishing for some sort of declaration, and if you don't—"

"Remus, shut up. I love you."

His eyes must have shifted colour at the declaration because she smiled and morphed her own eyes into that deep golden colour that practically glowed in the dark.

He shivered at the sight and felt himself involuntarily gripping her hips hard. He had not even noticed that he pulled his hands back down from behind his head.

"We have things we need to talk about if we do this," he confessed while simultaneously flipping her over and pinning her beneath him on his living room sofa. "I might . . . not be able to control myself."

Nymphadora grinned deviously. "Who said I want you to?"

The wolf howled, and Remus smiled, crushing his lips against hers. He shifted his position until he found himself cradled between her thighs, grinning like an idiot when her fingers laced through his hair and tugged hard.

"MOONY!"

Remus broke the kiss immediately and pulled away from her, looking horrified. "Oh, fuck."

"Who's that?"

Looking up just as Sirius walked straight into the living room, Remus was thankful that he and Nymphadora were still dressed.

"Oh, sorry!" Sirius chuckled but did not bother looking away, the tosser.

"Get out," Remus growled.

"Sirius Black?" Nymphadora blurted out, shifting away from Remus.

"Shit." Sirius groaned. "Look," he said as he withdrew his wand from his robes. "I'm sure you're a very nice girl, and I don't *want* to Obliviate you, but I'm a wanted man and all. I can't exactly let you . . ." He paused and looked the girl over, watching as her red hair shifted purple. He gaped at the sight. "Mini-Tonks?"

She turned on Remus, wide-eyed and furious, shoving his body off of hers in the process. He landed on his back on the floor, staring up at her as she yelled at him. "You knew where Sirius was this whole time?!"

Sirius hovered over Remus as well, jabbing a finger at his chest and growling. "You're shagging my baby cousin!?"

Remus stared between the two, noticing that Nymphadora's hair had turned as black as Sirius's, and her eyes became a matching grey. Family traits. *Frightening* family traits.

"I . . . I . . . I am not equipped to handle two Black tempers at the same time! Can one of you please be on my side for the moment?"

The witch was the first to back down, turning her attention to her cousin. "Merlin, Sirius, you're . . . you're . . ." She grinned, embracing the man tightly. "You look like shit, cousin."

Sirius grinned and hugged her back. "And *you're* all grown up." He smiled as he pulled away to get a better look at his cousin.

Remus stood up, dusting his hands off on his trousers, and caught Sirius's stare from over Nymphadora's shoulder.

"*Sort of* grown up," Sirius said with a scowl.

"Nymphadora is a grown woman," Remus defended.

"Don't call me Nymphadora," she interjected.

"You're an *old* man," Sirius countered.

"Judging *me* on age?" Remus scoffed. "At least she's *of* age!"

Sirius's eyes darkened. "Low blow, Moony. Tonks is my baby cousin!"

"She's twenty-two!"

"*You're* thirty-five!"

"Oh, good, we all know how to count!" Nymphadora jumped in loudly, clapping her hands. "Seven years of Hogwarts really pays off, doesn't it?" She asked with a smirk, moving between them. She shoved Remus down on the sofa and crawled into his lap as if to make a point to her apparently overprotective cousin.

"How'd you get out of Azkaban? Why were you in there to begin with? Who really killed all those Muggles, because I know it wasn't you! Where've you been for the past two years?"

Sirius huffed at the sight of her sitting on Remus's thigh. "Animagus. Framed. Peter Pettigrew. Around," he said, answering each of her questions. "Now, there are much more important things we need to take care of, and I can't believe I'm saying this, but the *least* of which is the fact that apparently, your mate is my bloody cousin."

Remus paled.

"Wait. Mate?" Nymphadora shifted, and looked at him. "Like *werewolf* mate? That's really a thing?"

Sirius winced, clearly realising his mistake. "Oh . . . Shit."

Remus glared at his friend. "You are an arsehole of epic standards, Padfoot."

Nymphadora's eyes widened. "I'm your *mate*?"

"You didn't tell her?" Sirius asked.

Remus grit his teeth. "Obviously not."

He expected her to jump away from him and go running for the door, but instead, she slapped his chest—hard.

"How could you not tell me? Wait, is this why you were following me around before we started dating?"

Sirius snorted. "Classy, Moony."

"Don't judge me, you hypocritical dickhead!" Remus snapped. "Want to tell me exactly why *you* smell like a certain witch we both know?"

Sirius avoided eye contact and toed the floor innocently. "I don't have to answer to you when I walked in on you shagging my cousin."

"We weren't shagging!"

"Yet," Nymphadora added quietly.

Remus's eyes widened. "Really?"

Sirius snapped his fingers at them. "Focus!"

"Wait, you can smell a witch on him?" she asked Remus curiously.

"It's not what you think," Sirius defended. "She was just petting me."

Nymphadora laughed and cleared her throat. "Oh, well, umm . . . Good for you."

Sirius sighed in obvious frustration. "Not like—"

"Pads!" Remus said, cutting him off. "Why are you here?"

Sirius's jovial expression shifted immediately, leaving behind obvious anxiety. The look left something sour and sick in Remus's stomach.

"Voldemort's back."

## Chapter One Hundred Fourteen

### *Home Sweet Home*

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*One more time across the empty sea  
Promise me that you won't sleep  
One more cigarette and I'll let you be  
Who the hell am I? Oh who the hell am I?  
(Forget Me Forgotten - Hollow Wood)*

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**July 3rd, 1995**

Sirius stared in front of him at the long-forgotten house. There, between numbers eleven and thirteen, stood a battered door and dingy windows attached to the building that had been almost as much a prison as Azkaban ever was. He mentally calculated the number of times he had almost died in Azkaban and wondered if any of them had been as bad as the *last* time he had stepped foot inside number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

Never taking his eyes off of the building ahead, watching it appear as though out of nowhere before them—the Fidelius Charm already in place—he reached a hand out to his right and gripped Remus's arm. "Moony, do you remember sixth year after we stole the girls' knickers, you told me that you would do your best to make sure I didn't do anything incredibly stupid ever again?"

"I remember."

"Care to explain to me why we're walking into my parents' house right now?" he asked, suddenly aware that his feet were carrying him forward toward the dilapidated old door. A hand reached out, taking his arm, and Sirius sighed at the comforting feeling of Tonks there on his left.

"Because, in a moment of surprising generosity, you offered this place to Dumbledore for the Order," Remus reminded him, reaching forward and opening the door.

The smells of dust, dirt, and mould assaulted their senses. Sirius and Remus visibly recoiled, though Tonks appeared to be hardly affected.

Sirius shook his head in disbelief. "What the fuck was I thinking?"

"That we needed a safe house, and somehow Dumbledore convinced the goblins to overlook the fact that you're a felon and allow you access to the Black family vaults *and* keep it off the books that you've been reinstated as heir to this place?" Remus offered.

Sirius let out a sigh of relief. "It is nice to have money again." Somehow, though he was not certain exactly how, Dumbledore had been able to get him access to his vaults. Not personally, of course—he was still a wanted man. But, once again, he had money. Thankfully, Remus was not opposed to making the occasional trip to Diagon Alley; his only complaint being that for every trip he made on Sirius's behalf, Sirius insisted that he buy something for himself. Never one to splurge on a purchase, Remus usually kept his spending to the sweet shops, which had an added benefit of adding a little weight to his frame.

"You've got to appreciate the fact that goblins don't give a shit about Wizarding laws and who may or may not be an escaped felon," Sirius noted. "As long as they get their cut. What exactly did Dumbledore give them?"

Remus shrugged his shoulders lightly as they walked into the front entryway of the old house. "Supposedly, your mother had a few goblin-made weapons and jewels stored in the vaults. The goblins were very happy to have them returned to their rightful owners."

Sirius scoffed. "Well, goblins are happy, Dumbledore's happy, everyone's happy . . . except for me."

Tonks patted him on the shoulder. "Look on the bright side, Sirius. At least you won't be starving and on the run."

"No." He frowned. "I'll be fucking trapped in a *new* prison."

He took note of the large picture frame covered with black curtains. Several members of the Order had come to Grimmauld Place before their arrival, days earlier to give it a good once-over. The portrait of Walburga had been the first thing they stumbled upon, and Sirius had been warned of its loud resemblance to the witch. Finding out that his mother had died while he had been in prison had been one of his best moments since escaping Azkaban, but now . . . knowing that she was still there, right on the wall in front of him, made him feel like a child again.

A part of him was reminded of the way he could so easily rile her up and how amusing it always was. Another part of him remembered the embarrassing Howlers she

would send to Hogwarts, the way she locked him in his room and starved him for days, and the way that she had forced him to cut the words of the House of Black into his own skin with a blood quill to prove a point.

Sirius swallowed hard and took a deep breath to control his emotions. He was a grown man in his thirties and would not allow a fucking *painting* to make him feel weak.

"Promise you'll visit . . . often," he pleaded quietly.

Remus reassured Sirius with a small smile, directing him away from the portrait on the wall. "I'll be staying here *with* you unless I'm out on missions. I promise, Pads."

The news settled Sirius's nerves a bit.

"Do you have my stuff?" He looked back as Remus removed a shrunken box from the pocket of his robes, waving his wand to enlarge it once more. "I'd like to go put everything away. See if my dear, dead mother didn't turn my old bedroom into an altar, where she sacrificed Muggles and bathed in their blood to make herself beautiful."

"No offence, Pads, but I remember your mother . . ." Remus began, his face contorted into a disgusted grimace.

Sirius snorted, glad for the humour to break the tension. "Well, I didn't say that bathing in Muggle blood would *work*. You sure the place is clean?" He wiped a finger along the bannister by the stairs, scowling at the feel of the grime.

"Depends on your definition of clean," Tonks said as she leant up against a nearby wall. "I went through the place with Mad-Eye and Kingsley. They needed someone with Black blood to open up the wards, of course. But then they made me sit on the front porch after I broke a vase, while they scoured the place for Dark Magic." She rolled her brown eyes and ran a hand through her long blue hair. "Said I might end up accidentally knocking over a cursed item if I wasn't careful. Anyway, the place is infested with a number of creatures, mainly doxies, and Kings thinks there might be a boggart in the upper floors roaming around, but there weren't any curses set up."

"Good," Sirius muttered and made his way up the stairs. "I'll see you two in a bit. Moony, go check out the basement and see if we can't set something up for the full moons."

Remus sighed heavily as Sirius began to ascend the stairs. "Will do. Get some rest, Pads."

Once downstairs, Remus used a variety of Levitation Charms to move boxes and old trunks to the side, Scourgifying the floor and walls the best he could, which still left behind a few layers of filth. He paced back and forth in the back near the wall, running his hands along the brick to test the durability while simultaneously counting steps as though he were measuring for something.

"So, how will this work?" Nymphadora asked.

Remus scratched his head. "Shouldn't be too bad. I can set up a cage in the corner here."

"A cage? You're going to lock yourself up in a *cage*?"

He tried to ignore her tone of incredulity. A part of him wondered if his lycanthropy had just been a vague thought in the back of her mind, and only now was she addressing the reality of his condition.

"It's safest for everyone. We'll put up wards at the top of the stairs. Better yet," he said, turning his attention back the way they came, "position them at both the top *and* the bottom just in case. Sirius can be down here with me in his Animagus form as a precaution as well."

"What about me?"

Remus scoffed, unintentionally giving her a sour look. "I'd prefer if you were in a different country during the full moon."

Nymphadora put her hands on her hips defiantly and glared at him. He turned away from her gaze, focusing his own on the ground to measure for the base of what would be his cage.

"Remus, I am a fully trained Auror."

"Then you should know better than to ask, *Nymphadora*."

He *knew* he was not supposed to call her by her given name, but "Tonks" felt impersonal considering who she was to him. He often just did not say her name at all unless he forgot or needed to make a point, like now.

Long gone were the moments of Remus succumbing to the smell of biscuits and the sweet sound of her laughter, at least where her safety was concerned. Nothing was more important than that to him, and he did not care if her feelings got hurt in the process, so long as she remained alive and unharmed.

"Dumbledore says that Severus is willing to make my Wolfsbane Potion again but, just in case, we'll need to keep a large stock of Calming Draughts and Essence of Dittany in addition to the usual Pain Relief Potions." He made a mental checklist, purposely ignoring the shocked look on her face. "I'm not the best at Healing Charms, and Sirius is no better." He sighed in frustration. "I wonder if Madam Pomfrey would be willing—"

"Remus, how bad is it?" she inquired, interrupting him with her whispered question.

He took several minutes to reply, knowing what she was asking: the pain.

His parents had seen him transform when he was young but, even then, after the first few times, they would shut him away in the basement of their home so they would not have to watch. That was always easier—at least on *them*. Even at Hogwarts with Mia, Sirius, James, and Peter there with him each moon, his friends had always stayed in another room while he completed the transformation, listening on the other side of the door as he screamed, cried, and sobbed his way through the anguish. No one had seen him transform in decades except, of course, a little over a year ago when Sirius, Harry, Ron, and Hermione had all been in the wrong place at the wrong time. He tried to focus on the memory of their fear, strangely enough, to avoid the looks of pity that had quickly followed.

"Depends on the Wolfsbane," he finally answered. "Being in a new environment with numerous people coming and going—not to mention a cage—it's not the best-case scenario. But as long as my mate is safe, and my pack is with me, I'll be fine."

"Pack?"

"Yes, Sirius and—" He stopped as he realised his slip-up. Did he even really *have* a pack anymore? Sirius was there, of course, still marked as he had been for almost seventeen years, and though Moony considered both Tonks and Harry as pack members, it was *Hermione* that Remus had been thinking about when he said the word aloud. Hermione, whom Moony still recognised as his Beta.

"It's a long story," he confessed.

"Well," Nymphadora said and took a seat on a nearby trunk, "you've barely told me a thing about me being your mate since Sirius outed the secret. Do you plan on telling me *anything*?"

"I'll answer any questions you have."

She immediately blurted out, "How do you know I'm your mate?"

He realised then that she had to have been creating a list of questions for this very moment. "I can feel it. There's a bond between us. Magical creatures can feel or see them better than witches and wizards. It feels similar to the bond I share with my pack, but more . . . more important. Essential."

"So does this make us . . . what? Married?"

His eyes widened in horror. "No! Bonds are . . . complicated. Especially with werewolves. Bonds have to be prepared by emotional attachment, provoked by physical or magical intention, and sealed with—" He paused and let a blush creep over his facial features, avoiding her gaze. "Well, normal bonds are sealed with a ritual—like marriage—but werewolves are different."

"How?"

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'd have to . . . be *intimate* with you."

"That doesn't sound so complicated." Nymphadora chuckled, looking pleased with the idea.

Remus cursed the way that the sound she made went straight to his cock. Reminding himself exactly how such an intimate encounter would end, he fought his desires. "And then I would *bite* you."

Her laughter briefly faded. "More complicated. Would I . . . ?"

"No. I'd . . . I wouldn't bite you while transformed. You wouldn't be infected."

"Are you sure?"

Remus briefly thought of Mia, Sirius, and the orchards of Potter Manor. He swallowed hard and cleared his throat. "Very sure. It didn't happen last time."

"Last time?" A line formed between her brows. "You've had a mate before me?"

"What? No! No! I meant—fuck—the Pack Bond. We umm . . . We sealed our Pack Bond years ago."

"Oh." She bobbed her head, still looking a bit confused. After a moment, she lifted a curious brow. "Wait. You had *sex* with and bit Sirius?"

"No!" Remus answered too quickly and then paused. "Well . . ."

"Holy Hufflepuff!" She laughed, her eyes widening comically.

Remus shook his head. "I didn't. There was . . . I mean—Oh, this is the worst situation in the world. There was a witch as well. In the pack. I . . . I sealed it with *her*. Not Sirius. Or well . . . Fine, Sirius was there but not . . . I did not have sex with *him*."

"Oh, all right." Nymphadora smiled, clearly amused. "Who is she?"

Remus frowned and looked away from her.

"Remus?" The amusement was gone from her tone, and he wondered just how broken he looked. He felt when she stood up, placing her hand on his arm. "It's not like I'm going to be jealous. I've read enough about werewolf mates to know how the fidelity works, and you're a good man. I don't think you'd just run off with one of your ex-girlfriends. I'm not a jealous witch. The past is the past. I don't expect you to go running off on a crazy killing spree chasing after Charlie Weasley or Donaghan Tremlett."

"It's not that, I . . ." he began but then turned and stared at her with furrowed brows. "Wait, Donaghan Tremlett? The bass player for The Weird Sisters?"

"Yeah. He was a year ahead of me at Hogwarts. We dated for a few months. I read he's getting married this autumn."

Remus was highly unamused by her casual tone. Nothing ever seemed to phase her. "You dated a rock star and a Dragon Tamer," he muttered, the words hanging heavily in the air between them.

"*And a werewolf,*" she said with a smirk, poking him playfully in the chest. "I've got some interesting tastes in men, wouldn't you say? Especially since I prefer the wolf despite the fact that he's a bit of a prude."

"I . . ." Remus winced, taken aback. "Nymphadora—"

"Do not call me Nymphadora, Remus." She pointed a finger in his face, the famous Black family traits never more obvious than when she was either angry or annoyed.

Sighing, he cleared his throat. "Dora?"

She thought about it for a moment and nodded in approval. "Now, tell me about this ex-girlfriend, who is apparently very complicated."

"Mia Potter," Remus blurted out.

"Mia . . . Wasn't that Sirius's—?" Dora raised a questioning eyebrow. "Wait, *Potter?* Potter as in *Harry Potter?*"

Remus nodded. "She's his—*was*—his aunt. Sort of."

"How come I don't remember her? I remember Sirius's girlfriend, of course, sort of. I remember he *had* a girlfriend. I *know* I met her, but it's a bit hazy. I was just a kid at the time. But the Potters were famous." Her features suddenly softened, and her hair

shifted to a duller blue. He assumed that she noticed the look of pain in his eyes. "I mean, I'm sorry, Remus, I know they were—"

"It's all right," he said, trying to ignore the dull, empty ache in the missing Pack Bond that never truly went away. "Mia was James's sister. She went missing in the autumn of 1979. Moody closed the case just a few months later, and she was presumed dead. Dumbledore—I assume—kept her name out of the papers."

Dora frowned. "Why do I feel like that's not the end of the story?"

Remus sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "What do you know about Time-Turners?"

An hour later, they sat on the ground of the basement, leaning up against the brick wall where Remus's cage would eventually be placed. He stared nervously at Dora, anxiously biting the inside of his lip, his left leg bouncing. She looked contemplative as she took in all the information he literally dumped on her. Memories and knowledge he had been collecting for two decades involving his entire time at Hogwarts and the ups and downs that followed the many years since.

And he told her about Mia.

Told her everything he could think to tell her about Mia that would be at all useful—and then some.

"Huh."

Remus stared at her, waiting for a proper reaction. He had expected her to at least look partially baffled, perhaps even a touch—or incredibly—suspicious. Instead, when she appeared only slightly thoughtful, he asked, "You don't believe me?"

"No, I believe you."

"Do you think I'm a horrible, lecherous monster?" he asked her, frowning.

"For what?" She snorted indelicately. "She was your age when you dated her, wasn't she?" He inclined his head in affirmation. "Not like you could help she'd one day vanish and suddenly become your thirteen-year-old student. Wow, what was *that* like? Being her professor?"

"Almost as awkward and uncomfortable as finding out that a five-year-old was my mate when I was eighteen," he stated and put his face in his hands.

"So *that's* why you were always sick when I came around Sirius's flat? And Mia knew?"

Remus nodded, refusing to look at her. "She knew us both. At least, she told me so. Came running into the flat the first time you and your mum came to see Sirius." He remembered the day and could not help but laugh at his ridiculousness. "Locked me up in the bedroom and told me who you were and that I needed to stay hidden so I didn't, well, *stalk* you through Diagon Alley."

"Aww." Dora pried his hands away from his face until he looked at her. She ran her fingers through his hair affectionately, scratching his scalp and grinning when he made a quiet noise of contentment. "But I like creepy, stalker Remus. He's terrible at it."

Remus deadpanned, "I appreciate that my obsessive nature is endearing to you."

"You *should*. So Mia—or, well, I guess *Hermione* now—she'll be coming here?" Dora asked and, when Remus confirmed, she continued. "Are you going to be all right with that? Merlin, is *Sirius* going to be all right with that?"

Remus understood why her eyes widened dramatically. Sirius—who was barely sane and constantly on edge—being forced to temporarily live in the same house as his bond mate, who was not only underage but also had no idea who he really was to her. The thought alone was unnerving.

"He's not going to attack her or anything," Remus said defensively. "He's assured me that he sees her as, well, the *future* and nothing more, really. Potential. Their Soul Bond would prevent him from hurting her, anyway. I am worried about his emotional health, though. When she vanished, he just . . . collapsed." Memories of an alcohol-induced comatose Sirius came to the forefront of his mind. "Knowing that she's alive has given him hope, but it's also—I mean, she doesn't know. Doesn't know a thing, and he has to sit back and pretend that he doesn't love her."

"So do you," Dora pointed out.

He shook his head. "I don't—"

"It's fine, you know." She smiled at him, crawling into his lap and wrapping his long arms around her waist. "I get it. I mean, I may not *completely* understand bonds or werewolf magic, but I still feel it." She leant forward and kissed the tip of his nose. "I didn't know that's what it was when I was with you, but it makes sense. I may be a little adventurous, but I'm hardly the type of girl who'll just jump into bed with a man she just met."

"We didn't jump into bed!"

"I know. I'm starting to think you're a tease." She winked at him, putting her finger to his lips when he opened his mouth to protest. "What I'm saying is, I *feel* something for you, Remus. Trust and . . . and other, deeper things." A lovely blush flooded her cheeks, and he kissed the finger still pressed to his lips. "I love you. And if I feel that *now*, with knowing you for less than a year, I can't imagine how connected you are to someone you grew up with, fell in love with, and shared a life with, as lovers and friends. To have her not *know* you . . . To have to wait . . ."

He pulled her close to him and buried his nose in her long hair, breathing in her scent and letting it calm him.

"It hurts like hell," he admitted quietly, grateful that he was lucky enough to have someone like Dora who understood him. "Sirius has always been one of my best friends, but Mia was the closest thing to happiness and wholeness I could have without . . . without *you*. She called me her kindred spirit. Said that I was her heart, but Sirius was her soul."

"She sounds like a big sap, like you."

"I don't see her that way. Not in a romantic sense. Not anymore." He sat back and stared up into Dora's eyes. "And I won't. I haven't seen any woman in that light since . . . since I knew who you were."

She grinned down at him. "Then I'll do what I can to help. Keep her safe and keep Sirius sane when she's around. We'll all get through this war, and you can fulfil your Vow, send her to the past, and hopefully, get her back to you *both*. Speaking of the Vow, I thought you said you were only allowed to tell people who already knew, with the exception of Sirius. How are you alive after telling me everything?"

"You're my mate." Remus smiled, nuzzling the side of her neck. "Our magic supersedes any other, even an Unbreakable Vow."

She tugged lightly on his hair to pull him away from her neck and pressed her soft lips against his. He lightly growled as her tongue sought entrance, and his fingers moved from her hips to the curve of her arse, holding her to him tightly.

Their blissful euphoria of desire was all too quickly interrupted by the sound of screaming.

"What's wrong?!" Remus shouted as he ascended the staircase.

Sirius pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. "The fucking *elf* is having an attack."

On the floor in front of him, Kreacher seized in obvious anguish, the filthy rag tied around his waist gave off an odour as he writhed, causing both Sirius and Remus to wince in disgust.

"It came back! Master, the ungrateful brat he is, wasn't supposed to come back! Oh, my poor Mistress! What should poor Kreacher do? Kreacher serves the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, but its Master is a filthy blood-traitor, a nasty stain on his Most Noble House. Oh, my poor Mistress!"

Remus just stared at the aptly-named elf. "What happened?"

"I'm *trying* to do what Dumbledore said and be nice to the little git!"

"Then why's he banging his head on the wall?" Tonks approached, looking down as the elf moved from faking a seizure to punishing himself by smacking his head against the wall.

"Oh, evidently accepting kindness from the stain on the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black is against whatever orders my *darling* mother gave him last," Sirius answered sarcastically, hissing out the words. "I said hello, and he's been sobbing and smacking himself ever since. Merlin, I miss Tilly."

Kreacher continued to cry as he smacked his face against the railing of the staircase. "Oh, if Mistress knew that the traitorous brat has come home, what would she do to Kreacher? What would she do if she knew that poor Kreacher was to serve this Master, the rotten blemish on her House and his filthy half-breed friends?"

"I wouldn't be calling anyone filthy, there. You smelled yourself lately?" Tonks asked, scrunching her nose up in revulsion, morphing her features to shrink her nostrils.

Kreacher glared up at her with a look of pure and utter hatred. "The shifty one speaks to Kreacher. She smells like a Black, but she *tricks* Kreacher and breaks his Mistress's treasures."

Tonks rolled her eyes. "Oh, it was *one* vase, and that was an accident. I'd hardly even call that piece of shit a treasure. It was hideous."

"What the hell am I supposed to do with him?" Sirius demanded, gesturing to the elf with his hands while staring at his friend and cousin in horror.

Remus shrugged. "Give him an order and make him stop?"

"Kreacher, shut up!" Sirius snapped loudly.

The elf immediately quieted, but Sirius's shouting had awakened Walburga's portrait. The curtains surrounding her painting flew wide open, and her hateful face turned immediately to Sirius.

*"You! Stain of dishonour on the House of my father! Wretched, traitorous boy! No son of mine!"*

"Fucking hell." Sirius gaped at her, suddenly feeling all of sixteen again as she shrieked her disappointment at him.

*"Bringing filth into this house! Scum! Creatures of dirt!"*

"Nice to see you too, Mrs Black," Remus muttered sarcastically.

*"How dare you step foot back in this house!"*

Sirius glared at her. "Wasn't my first choice of living arrangements, believe me, *Mother*. But as you can see, I *am* back, here to further ruin your bloody Noble and Ancient House."

*"Wretched boy! Traitorous boy! My poor Regulus was the last Noble son of this House. He died pure while you were out ruining our name by—"*

"Fucking the blood-traitor daughter of Dorea Potter?" Sirius interjected with a menacing grin.

*"HOW DARE YOU—"*

Remus flicked his wand quickly and the curtains closed over the portrait, silencing the painting.

"Wow." Sirius stared pleasantly. "Just close the curtain, and she goes away. Why couldn't we have installed this years ago?"

"Fucking the blood-traitor daughter of Dorea Potter?" Remus repeated in an incredulous tone, a look of disapproval on his face.

Sirius barked a laugh, feeling the rush of adrenaline following confronting his mother pushing through his blood. "Did you see how angry she got? Merlin, that felt good. Vulgar, I know, but I had to get it out of my system before everyone else shows up. Speaking of which, is there a way to get the portrait down or at least permanently silenced?"

I don't want Harry or Hermione to hear the things my mother will certainly call them. Hermione, especially."

Tonks shook her head to answer his question. She walked forward and wrapped an arm around his shoulders when he sighed. "It'll be fine, Sirius. We'll figure everything out."

"Easy for you to say. The two of you actually get to *do* something."

"You know who you sound like?" Remus asked with a soft smile.

"James," Sirius replied quietly with a nod. "Fuck, I don't know what I'll do if I end up in hiding as long as him and Lily. You should have seen him by the end, Moony. Fidgety as hell, and Lily was temperamental and snappy. You could tell they were itching to get out of that house. You think I'll last that long?"

Remus patted him on the back. "I think you'll last as long as you need to. As long as *Harry* needs you to. In the meantime, just try and hold out on going crazy for as long as possible."

As long as possible turned out to be one month.

## Chapter One Hundred Fifteen

### *Not Often Very Likable*

---

*I'm so tired of being here  
Suppressed by all my childish fears  
And if you have to leave  
I wish that you would just leave  
'Cause your presence still lingers here  
And it won't leave me alone  
These wounds won't seem to heal  
This pain is just too real  
There's just too much that time cannot erase  
(My Immortal - Evanescence)*

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**August 2nd, 1995**

"They're here! People are here!"

Sirius rushed down the many flights of stairs at Grimmauld Place, feeling like Christmas had come early. "Moony! Tonks! People are here!" he shouted, quickly silencing the portrait of his mother who had started screaming.

"Calm down, Pads." Remus chuckled as he followed Sirius to the front of the house, where Weasleys began filing inside. "You're going to scare them." He patted Sirius on the shoulder as he joined him in greeting the family of redheads.

Arthur Weasley stepped forward while his wife and children struggled behind him with their trunks, all trying to squeeze into the hallway at once. Arthur looked just as Sirius remembered him years ago, though with a few more pounds around the middle and a little less hair on top.

"Sirius, it's good to see you again after all these years." He offered a kind smile and extended a hand of greeting.

Sirius grinned, taking the hand gladly. "Arthur Weasley. Can't thank you enough for taking your family on that trip to Egypt. Without that photograph in the *Daily Prophet*, I'd still be in Azkaban."

Arthur frowned and looked down, clearly guilt-stricken. "I only wish that—"

"You couldn't have known, Arthur," Sirius assured him, interrupting the man to do so.

Arthur sighed softly and nodded. "Still. Twelve years. No rat lives that long. I'd brought my son Percy with me to work one day, not long after You-Know-Who, well, vanished. Don't know how he found it, but by the time we got back to the Burrow, Percy was holding on to this rat. Molly told me to get rid of the filthy thing, but Percy was attached. He'd never had anything of his own before; something that hadn't first belonged to either of the older boys. The rat wouldn't let anyone else hold him for those first few years. Just Percy. We should have known something."

"You should have bought a cat." Sirius laughed, hoping to alleviate the shame from the wizard in front of him, who had never done a thing wrong in his life. Mia had always spoken kindly of Arthur, who fought for Muggle rights against a Wizengamot that despised him, doing his best to make the world a better place while providing for his exceptionally large family in the process. "No hard feelings, honestly."

"No." Arthur shook his head. "I feel I *need* to apologise. I know we didn't know one another very well back then, but we were friendly and . . ." He paused and looked down, fighting back tears. "And Mia loved and trusted you. She was a good witch, and her word should have been enough. But when she—"

"I know," Sirius interjected quickly, his smile fading at the mention of his witch.

"Was she ever found?" Arthur asked, looking up.

"No," Sirius answered without hesitation.

"Sirius, I'm so—"

"Arthur!" Molly Weasley called from the front door. "Can you help with these—? BOYS! PUT THAT DOWN! Ronald! Help Hermione with her trunk!"

Sirius and Remus looked up to spot the little witch making her way through the front door, struggling with the large Hogwarts trunk, her fat kneazle slipping between the legs of the crowd, making his way toward Sirius.

Grinning at the familiar beast, Sirius leant down to scratch Crookshanks behind his ears, smiling smugly when the cat purred at him.

"She's got hands," Ron snapped at his mother. "I've got my *own* stuff to take care of."

"Such a gentleman," Hermione muttered, rolling her eyes as she finally made her way into the house. "It's fine, Mrs Weasley, I can take my own things, thank you."

"You'll do no such thing, kitten," Sirius insisted, moving through the crowd to take the handle of her trunk in his hand, pulling it away from her. He looked down at the girl and swallowed nervously.

"Kitten?" Hermione repeated the word, making a displeased face as she spoke.

Sirius rose an eyebrow and grinned. "Yeah, 'cause you've got claws."

Hermione looked as though she was trying very hard to hide her irritation as she politely said, "I don't like nicknames."

"It's a *pet* name," Sirius argued and tried pulling her trunk down the hallway only to find she still had a grip on it, apparently intent on carrying it herself. He stared at her incredulously and tugged on the trunk a bit, trying to pry it away from her.

Hermione mirrored his movement, pulling on her luggage. "With all due respect, Mr Black—"

Sirius winced at the moniker, releasing the trunk as if it had bit him. "Oh, for Merlin's sake. Please don't call me that."

"It's . . ." Hermione frowned, looking uncomfortable. "You're allowing us all to stay in your home, it's only proper that I be respectful and call you—"

"You can call me Sirius," he said, interrupting her. "*Please*, don't call me Mr Black. I'm begging you." She looked disappointed at being told what to do. It was eerily similar to the expression that Mia used to wear when she would catch him mid-prank at Hogwarts.

"Very well," she eventually agreed and then tested by saying the name to his face: "Sirius. Thank you for allowing me to stay in your home."

"What's mine is yours." The words tumbled out of his mouth before he realised what he had said.

Thankfully, the meaning of the statement did not appear to register as she glanced over Grimmauld Place. Looking as though she did not want to touch anything, Hermione bit her lower lip in obvious consternation. "Your home is . . . It's . . . very . . ."

"It's a Dark Magic infested shithole," Sirius finished bluntly, smirking when his foul language drew a shocked and annoyed look from her. It was still great fun to get her a little angry. "You don't have to say anything nice about the house, Hermione. I promise, you won't offend me. It's not *my* house anyway. Belonged to my parents. I haven't lived here since I was sixteen."

"Oh." She frowned as she turned around to face him once more, taking her eyes off of the curtain-covered painting on the wall. "I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"Nothing to be sorry about. I didn't get along well with my folks, obvious reasons, of course," he said, gesturing to the house. "So I *left* one day."

His eyes briefly flickered to the other room—a room he now kept purposely closed and had yet to go inside since returning to Grimmauld Place. The one request that he had before moving back to his childhood home was that before he arrived, Moody, Kingsley, and Tonks were to make sure that a certain stained Persian rug was nowhere to be seen.

"I moved in with the Potters and closed the book on this part of my life." Sirius stared at the girl as she moved through the hall, glancing at a few of the other portraits on the wall that were left uncovered. "But the past has a way of coming back to haunt me."

"If we open a quarrel between past and present, we shall find that we have lost the future," Hermione said with a soft smile.

Sirius raised a brow. "What?"

"Winston Churchill." Remus stepped around Sirius, a bright smile on his face. "Muggle."

Hermione's smile intensified, clearly having not seen him before then. "Professor Lupin!"

Sirius scowled at his best friend. "Aren't *you* popular?"

Remus chuckled and ignored Sirius, walking forward to give Hermione a polite hug from the side. "I've not been your professor for over a year, Hermione. You may call me Remus if you'd like."

Hermione laughed and shook her head. "You'll *always* be Professor Lupin to me."

Sirius snorted at the brief look of anxiousness on Remus's face. "Let's *hope* not."

"Sirius," Remus warned.

"Would you like a tour?" Sirius offered.

Hermione looked to be interested until Molly Weasley's voice boomed from below, echoing inside the walls: "Ginny! Hermione! Can you girls come and help me set everything up in the kitchen downstairs?"

Taking a pre-emptive measure against his mother, Sirius held the black curtains in front of her portrait shut.

"Maybe another time." Hermione smiled at Sirius. "I'm sure Fred and George would be willing to go on a tour of the place. They've been talking our ears off about the pair of you."

"Us? Why?" Remus asked.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You're *apparently* their idols. Marauder's Map and all."

"GINNY! HERMIONE!" Molly yelled again.

Sirius had briefly let go of the curtains in front of the portrait which, at Molly's volume, sprung open revealing the enraged image of his mother.

*"Filth! Disgusting creatures, blood-traitors, and Mudbloods tainting the house of my father!"*

Sirius jumped back as quickly as possible and shut the curtains, silencing the old witch. He turned and looked at Hermione, feeling guilty and mortified. "I am so sorry about that. It's my mother's portrait. We can't seem to get it down from the wall."

The shouting from the painting and the specific words used had clearly upset Hermione, who was clutching her hand to her chest as she caught her breath. Mia had perfected the ability to rein in her emotions, not wanting to ever appear weak, but Hermione had yet to be able to completely hide away the pain that the slur caused.

"It's . . . fine," she lied. "Not your fault."

Sirius and Remus stood awkwardly in the hallway, both clearly struggling with the need to comfort her, but neither in a position to do so due to the fact that Hermione was not Mia yet. She was just a fifteen-year-old girl, the best friend of *their* best friend's son.

Almost as if the thought occurred to the men at the same time, they grimaced and took a step back from her.

It was at that moment that Ginny came barrelling down the stairs, rushing past Remus and Sirius, whom she silently greeted with a polite smile before snatching Hermione's hand and pulling her toward the door. "Come on, Hermione, before Mum starts screaming again."

The moment Hermione vanished down the stairs, Sirius leant against the wall behind him and dropped to the floor in defeat.

Remus leant his forehead against the nearby door frame. "That could have gone better."

"Is that right? *Professor?*" Sirius said sarcastically, grinning when Remus groaned. "How the hell did you get through an entire year of that?"

Remus stood up straight again and looked down at Sirius, shoving his hands in the pockets of his robes. "Honestly? I had Dumbledore remove some of my more . . . *potent* memories."

"Orchards?" Sirius asked, scratching at the Pack Mark buried beneath tattoos on his shoulder.

"Among others." Remus nodded, a slight blush tinting his cheeks. "I still knew everything that had happened, but it was *supposed* to take the edge off. Unfortunately, *Moony* remembers everything, so even when *I* struggled to make the connection, the wolf was right there to shove it in my face. It would probably help *you*, though, if you'd want to try it."

Sirius contemplated exactly how to respond for a moment. "Take my memories of her out of my head? Remus, I'll be as gentle as I possibly can when I say this: I will very *literally* tear the throat out of any witch or wizard that tries to take that girl away from me again. Even in memory."

Remus nodded in understanding but then smiled. "Don't let Hermione hear you say things like that. She's quite a pacifist."

"I thought you said she punched Malfoy's brat?"

"That was a rare moment, and you could tell she felt bad for it afterward. She's almost *pure* Gryffindor. It took—It'll *take* Dorea to bring out her inner Slytherin."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Terrific. I'm trapped in my childhood home, the place where I *literally* almost died once, my dead mother screams obscenities anytime someone speaks too loudly, Dumbledore refuses to bring Harry here, and not only am I forced to be around the fifteen-year-old version of my bond mate who doesn't even remember me, but she no longer finds my violent streak endearing. What the fuck *else* could go wrong?"

As if summoned by the words, Kreacher appeared, walking around the corner and glaring at Sirius.

"Master, horrible wretch that he is, has let the filthy blood-traitors into the house. Oh, my poor Mistress, what would she do to Kreacher if she knew Kreacher was forced to clean up after traitors and werewolves and shifters and the filthy Mudblood. Oh, they've let a *Mudblood* girl into the house. Poor Kreacher!"

Enraged by the slur being used against Hermione, Sirius stood. Unable to contain the anger he had been burying deep down all month, he barrelled down upon the house-

elf. He put his dragonhide boot on Kreacher's back and shoved him down the small set of stairs. "Don't you *ever* say that word again!"

"Sirius!" Remus scolded.

Sirius turned to look at his best friend, who was staring across the hallway. He followed Remus's line of sight and cringed when he saw Hermione. She stood in the open door, her brown eyes wide and furious as she glared at him like he was the murdering monster the Wizarding world assumed.

Before he could say a word, she rushed forward and fell to her knees at Kreacher's side. "You poor thing!" she cried out, reaching to help and ignoring the way that the elf tried to fight her. She narrowed her eyes back up at Sirius, absolute disgust in her gaze. "How could you? He's just a poor house-elf!"

"Hermione, that thing just called you—"

"I don't care what he called me! You think I haven't been called a Mudblood before? It's just a *word*, one that *wizards* taught him to use." She returned her attention to Kreacher, her features softening in obvious sympathy. "Are you all right?"

"The Mudblood touches Kreacher! Oh, what would Mistress say if she knew!?" He howled as if burnt and then Disapparated away from her.

"Do you see?" Sirius pointed. "He's not a thing to be pitied, Hermione."

"He's not a *thing* at all," she bit back. "And . . . I'd greatly prefer if you didn't violently attack a poor elf on my behalf. Not only is it cruel, I don't *need* you to defend me. It's not your job, Mr Black." She huffed and then stood up, turning on her heels and storming out of the hallway, presumably back to the kitchen with Molly and Ginny.

Remus groaned. "That went well."

"Not my job?" Sirius repeated, eyes wide and staring at the empty space where Hermione had recently stood.

"You *did* know that Mia had a soft spot for elves," Remus reminded him.

"Not my job?"

"I'm going to do you a favour, Pads," Remus told him, placing his hands on Sirius's shoulders and directing him up the stairs. "One that Mia did for me a long time ago."

"Not my *job*?" Sirius continued to say. "Did you *hear* her?!"

Remus ignored him as they climbed the stairs. "We're going up to your room, and you're going to take a Calming Draught and maybe a hot bath so you can relax. Because

your *still-underage* bond mate is downstairs, completely unaware of who you actually are, and right now you're a little intense. If Molly Weasley catches you looking at Hermione in that overly protective and possessive way—" He stopped as Sirius turned around and glared at him. "Yes, the way you're looking right now. Molly's going to Avada you in the kitchen and feed you to Buckbeak."

"Wotcher, Sirius," Tonks said as she walked down the stairs, meeting them on the landing. "Hullo, love." She smiled brightly and kissed Remus's cheek. "What's wrong with him?"

"He may or may not have kicked the bitter, old, prejudiced house-elf that called Hermione a Mudblood," Remus answered. "But he did so in front of Hermione, who happens to consider herself a bit of a house-elf rights activist."

"Ouch. Wait . . ." Tonks's currently-green eyes widened. "So, she's *here*? Merlin, I'm gonna go meet her!" she exclaimed excitedly and began to move down the stairs.

"What?" Remus paled. "Wait!"

"Oh, calm down." Tonks turned back and grinned at them. "I'm not going to go and pretend to read the girl's future. I'll just make with the nice, morph my face a little to impress—" She turned her nose into a pig's snout. "Soon we'll be the very best of friends, and I'll try to play you up a bit, yeah?" she offered, gesturing to Sirius.

"That . . ." Sirius began and then paused, staring at his cousin, "would actually be very much appreciated. Thanks."

"Are you actually playing matchmaker for your cousin with a fifteen-year-old witch?" Remus asked incredulously.

"What? It's not like she'll start swooning over him *now*. There's still years before you send her back in time, and then she's got to grow up a bit. Besides, if we're being technical, I'll be playing matchmaker for *you*, too," Tonks retorted and then outright laughed when Remus's mouth fell open. "What? Did you happen to forget the fact that she's *your* ex as well? Want me to talk you up?" Tonks waggled her eyebrows, clearly amused with the look of horror crossing her boyfriend's face.

Remus's posture stiffened. "You're doing this on purpose to rile me up."

Tonks grinned. "It's just so easy."

"This is so uncomfortable," Remus groaned. "How are you even remotely okay with this?"

Sirius was the one to answer him. "Dorea once told me it had something to do with being a Black. Things that are considered uncomfortable, unacceptable, or awkward kind of come naturally to us. We're born without shame."

Tonks nodded, accepting the answer. "You boys go have fun, I'm going to go ask your lovely little witch if she's got a preference for blonds or brunets."

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### **August 5th, 1995**

"Before we begin, have Silencing Charms been cast on the doors? I don't think it would be appropriate for the younger guests of this house to be privy to Order information just yet."

"Not to worry, Albus. I cast them myself," Molly Weasley assured him as the group sat down around the large table.

The Order was gathered together for their first official meeting as a whole since the return of Voldemort. Until tonight, Dumbledore had only been *indirectly* setting things in motion so that they could get Grimmauld Place set up securely enough to meet in secret.

Everyone took their place around the large table with the exception of Emmeline Vance and Arabella Figg, who were taking turns keeping an eye on Privet Drive. It would have been Mundungus's shift, but he had spectacularly fucked up once already, and Harry had been attacked by dementors because of it.

At one end of the long table sat Dumbledore with Mad-Eye to his right and Kingsley to his left. At the other end of the table sat Sirius, Remus, and Tonks. Sirius could not help but feel like they were already in some sort of battle as he stared across the long table at the elderly wizard. Dedalus Diggle, Elphias Doge, McGonagall, Mundungus, Sturgis Podmore, and Hestia Jones filled in the remaining seats in between the Weasleys.

Standing in the corner of the room was a glaring Severus Snape.

"You might want to put up an Imperturbable Charm on the door as well, Molly," Sirius advised.

Molly glared at him as though he were questioning her skills at Silencing Charms. "And why's that?" she demanded, placing her hands on her hips to add emphasis to what she probably thought was a commanding tone.

Unfortunately for Molly, she was not dealing with her offspring, but rather Sirius Black, who did not fear her the way her children might.

He stared up at her, unaffected by her attitude—which was growing more and more insolent by the day. "Because I've had the honour of getting to know your children over the last few days, and they are more intelligent than people give them credit for."

He gestured to the bottom of the door where a pair of Extendable Ears were slipped through the one-inch gap on the floor.

Sirius chuckled. Molly bristled.

Snape snatched up the Extendable Ears, yanked them through the gap between the bottom of the door and the floor, and then threw up the Imperturbable Charm whilst glaring across the room at Sirius.

"How goes the effort to clean out the house?" Dumbledore asked.

"Very well," Molly said as she took her seat at the table next to her husband. "There's an infestation of doxies we need to take care of, but there's plenty of time before the children return to Hogwarts. Lots of little helping hands."

Sirius rolled his eyes.

"And Sirius? How are you doing? Since you are incapable of leaving Grimmauld Place, please don't hesitate to ask any Order member to bring you anything you are in need of."

At Dumbledore's proclamation, Sirius looked up at Snape and grinned, earning a sneer in return. He had half a mind to make a long list of things he was in need of just to send the greasy git off on an errand, but he knew that such tasks would likely be passed down to Molly, who would lecture him on the amount of Muggle liquor that was on his shopping list.

"Thank you, Albus." Sirius drew his attention back to the man. "I very much appreciate that. There is actually one thing I've been wanting brought to me if it's at all possible."

Dumbledore smiled brightly. "What would that be?"

"My kid."

Remus reached a hand out and set it on top of his arm. "Sirius—"

"No!" He yanked his arm away, glaring back across the table at Dumbledore. "I want to know why Harry's not here. He should have been brought to me the moment we opened this house up. Not living back with those rotten Muggles."

"Lily's sacrifice—" Dumbledore began.

"No longer applies," Sirius argued, cutting him off. "Wormtail used Harry's blood to bring Voldemort back to full strength."

He ignored the way that more than half of the Order flinched in response to the name. Honestly, weren't *they* supposed to be the ones brave enough to face him?

"Lily can no longer protect Harry. And I'll thank you, Albus, to not mention it again. There are very few subjects anyone should take caution when broaching with me, and Lily Potter is one of them," he said on the edge of a growl.

Someone in the room scoffed loudly, and Sirius turned his angry eyes upon Snape. He stood up, pointing at the man. "Don't start with me, Snivellus!"

"Sirius," Dumbledore said, redirecting his attention. "Lily's sacrifice made it so that I was able to cast a Protection Charm over Harry. While he remains living with his aunt and uncle, he is safe in their home."

Sirius bobbed his head, retaking his seat and kicking his feet up on the table, much to Molly's obvious distaste. "Understood. Except, you know, should he ever need to step a single foot outside that home, then he's got dementors attacking him. "Never mind whatever the Muggles are doing to him *inside* the house."

"Harry is perfectly safe," Dumbledore tried to say, but Sirius was having none of it.

"Arthur, Molly, when Harry's *not* with the Dursleys he's generally in your care, isn't he?" Sirius asked. "Tell me, what do you think of the treatment he's been getting from the Muggles?"

Arthur and Molly both avoided the eyes of everyone else in the room.

Before either could reply, Dumbledore cleared his throat. "It is *because* of the dementor attack and Harry's approaching hearing with the Ministry that we do plan on retrieving him early. Tomorrow, in fact."

Sirius folded his arms across his chest. "Good."

"I'd like to put together an advance guard to bring Harry to Grimmauld Place by broom. Alastor?"

Mad-Eye nodded stiffly looking at Dumbledore; his magical eye focused on Sirius, and it looked annoyed—if that was even possible. "I'll bring Doge, Diggle, Shackbolt, Podmore, and Vance."

"Scuse me, Mad-Eye," Tonks spoke up, looking offended. "Forget someone?"

"Did I?"

"I'm coming, too," Tonks announced, glaring at her mentor in a way that said he would have a bigger fight on his hands by arguing with her.

"And Remus," Sirius added.

Moody glared across the table. "No."

"Moody, I know you and I have problems that go back decades," Sirius stated, reminding himself of the time when he had physically assaulted his old boss, threatening to shove his badge down the man's throat the day that he quit his job. "But that's my godson, and if *I* can't be there, then *Remus* will be."

When, shockingly, no one argued with him right away, he levelled a glare at Dumbledore the likes of which he felt Mia would have been proud of. "Every last one of James and Lily's requests have been ignored for Harry's entire life. Now that I'm back, I'll be setting things straight. When Harry is not at Hogwarts, he's with Remus or myself. I'll concede that he can go to the Burrow, but that's *only* because I trust Arthur," he said, purposely leaving out Molly's name just to watch her fume a little.

"I can agree to allowing Remus to be a part of the advance guard," Dumbledore responded.

Sirius noted that he did not speak of any of his other demands regarding Harry's care and safety.

"Thank you, Albus," Remus said politely, inclining his head.

"Now, intel says that You-Know-Who's after the prophecy once more," Moody began. At the mention of "intel," each set of eyes fell on Snape, who ignored every last one of them. "Once Potter's safety is secured and the hearing is taken care of, that's our biggest issue to deal with."

"What do you suggest, Alastor?" Arthur inquired.

Moody looked up, his magical eye swirling in its socket. "Constant vigilance."

After the meeting, the Order departed, leaving behind the current residents of Grimmauld Place. Remus said goodnight to Dora—who left for a late shift at the Ministry—before he watched Arthur and Molly retire to their temporary room.

The younger occupants had been ushered off to bed hours earlier, and Remus himself was looking forward to a good night's rest, his body already aching from the approaching full moon the upcoming week.

He passed the open door to the library but stopped in his tracks and turned around to peek inside. There, on the sofa, was a quietly sleeping Hermione. Her wild mane of honey-brown hair circled her head like a halo, her hands crossed over her chest, cradling a book.

Sitting on the floor near her head was Sirius, staring at her while she slept. He very gently brushed a lock of hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear.

Remus frowned at the look of pain on his friend's face.

"Pads? Everything okay?" he whispered as he walked into the room.

Sirius did not even turn his head at the interruption. "I put up a Silencing Charm. Didn't want to wake her. Do you see?" he asked with a small, sad smile. "No nightmares. I know Mia's stopped when we got older, but seeing her at this age and not screaming in her sleep—" He let out a shaky breath as though he were waiting for the ball to drop and for the witch to start stirring.

Remus looked down at the girl and smiled. He could not deny that it was good to see her sleeping soundly. He had far too many memories of watching Mia jerk awake, screaming loudly with tears in her eyes. She woke up terrified far too often. He pushed back the memories and looked down at Sirius, who turned away from Hermione for a moment to rub at his eyes. "How've *you* been sleeping?"

"Same."

"Dementors?"

Sirius bowed his head. "If not *that*, then it's Azkaban in general or . . . Godric's Hollow. Lately, it's my own mind putting together alternate versions of whatever happened to Harry in that cemetery."

Remus put a hand on Sirius's shoulder. "He'll be okay, Sirius. *They'll* be okay."

"Dumbledore has forbidden them from writing Harry. I don't know why, but the old man doesn't want him knowing anything that's going on. I didn't mean to snoop, but she had a whole letter written out, tucked in her book there. Told Harry she was sorry for not writing him sooner, asked if his aunt and uncle were *feeding* him," Sirius growled, "and treating him well. What the hell is Albus playing at, Moony? I've always trusted the man, same as you and James, but Mia *never* did, and now I'm starting to really wonder why."

Remus frowned and sat down in the chair behind Sirius, looking across the room at Hermione, who continued to sleep, ignorant of the stressful conversation taking place around her. "That Order meeting was a nightmare. I know you're angry Pads, *I'm* angry, but it's not going to help. You need to stop antagonising Snape, and Moody, and Albus," he said, then added with emphasis, "*and* Minerva."

Sirius scowled. "Do you see how she looks at me?"

"Yes," Remus agreed. "And she spent the better part of a year looking at *me* the same way. She knows who Hermione really is and knows who she is to us. You can't really blame her."

Sirius huffed indignantly. "I spent seven years in her classroom. You'd think she'd know me better."

"She knows you're not going to hurt Hermione," Remus assured him. "But look at it this way: right now Hermione Granger is a well behaved, model, Muggle-born student at the top of her class, despite all the trouble she ends up saving Harry and Ron from."

"And?"

Remus chuckled softly. "And, apparently, all it took was growing up with *us* for a few years to turn her into a trouble-making prankster with a penchant for punching Slytherins."

Sirius ran a hand through his hair, watching as she took soft breaths in her sleep, a strange little smile on her face as though she were dreaming of something pleasant. A stark contrast to the nightmares that they had borne witness to far too often when growing up.

"She's in there. I can see her," Sirius whispered. "I wish she could see me."

Remus felt his heart break for his friend. "She will. One day."

"And in the meantime, *this* little witch hates my guts."

One corner of Remus's mouth quirked upward. "You're not often very likeable."

"She loved me once."

"I still suspect Imperius."

Sirius chuckled, throwing his head back and sighing. "Yeah, well, I think dating a werewolf softened her up for me."

Remus smiled at the sound of his friend laughing. It came so rarely these days. "She's going to be sore if we leave her sleeping on that sofa."

Sirius agreed and then stood up, reaching forward as if to scoop Hermione into his arms, but then he hesitated and stepped away from her, wincing as though in pain. He shook his head, unconsciously scratching at the tattoo of Mia's name on his chest. "Can . . . Can *you* take her? I . . . I can't. If she wakes up in my arms, she's likely to hex me. If she wakes up in *your* arms, the little witch will be over the moon—pun very much intended."

Remus rolled his eyes but leant forward and lifted Hermione gently into his arms, her bent knees hanging over his left forearm while his right cradled her shoulders. He turned to step out of the library to find that Sirius was not following him. Glancing back, he watched as his friend poured himself a small tumbler of firewhisky, all the while likely knowing it would not do anything but remind him of days gone by.

## Chapter One Hundred Sixteen

### *King of Prats*

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*Remember when  
We were further than you'd ever been  
And I think about it now and then;  
It takes me to that place.  
When I pretend that I'm better than I've ever been  
Well at least that's what I tell my friends  
'Cause I can't show my face  
(Just Say the Word - Josh Kelley)*

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**August 6th, 1995**

Days and nights spent at Grimmauld Place were complicated for Hermione.

They were officially at war, Voldemort was back, a secret organisation was established to fight him—the headquarters in that very house—and yet, every morning Molly Weasley woke everyone up, fixed breakfast, and assigned chores as though they were back at the Burrow and life was normal. It made Hermione feel anxious to see how easily Fred and George still goofed around, playing pranks on Ron and Ginny—they knew better by now than to try anything with *her*. Even Ron barely acknowledged the tense feeling in the air that had descended upon them the moment Harry returned from Little Hangleton with Cedric Diggory's body.

But Hermione felt it, and she knew she was not the only one.

Despite the way he would smile politely at her and ask her about her classes at Hogwarts, Hermione knew that Professor Lupin was on edge. She had spent the better part of her third year obsessively watching the man, nursing a crush that, thankfully, had waned a little over the years. She had learnt, though, to read the signs of stress upon his face.

Likewise, the young, bubbly Auror named Tonks, who had befriended Hermione and showed off her skills as a Metamorphmagus while telling interesting stories about Remus and Sirius, had a way of losing composure when something was wrong. For instance, when word reached Grimmauld Place that Mundungus Fletcher had somehow allowed Harry to be attacked by dementors, Tonks's hair had turned black as night, and her eyes shifted to a bright, frighteningly pale shade of grey in a fury.

Hermione, Ron, and Ginny had been angry to hear of what happened to their best friend. Mrs Weasley had been positively outraged. When Dumbledore arrived and began scolding Mundungus over what happened, he had actually frightened many in the house. But it was Sirius and Professor Lupin's reactions that had Hermione the most intrigued. In the presence of everyone else, the two remained calm and quiet, as though they held no opinion of the situation, which she found very strange indeed.

After Dumbledore left and Mrs Weasley stormed off to bed, Hermione sneaked down into the kitchen for a cup of tea to calm her nerves when she heard crying from another room. Unable to let her curiosity go, she followed the sounds down a hallway to a slightly cracked door and peered into a room where she could see Professor Lupin sitting calmly in a chair. His fingers were laced together, resting on his chest as he reclined his feet up on a stool, one leg kicked over the other. His usually green eyes were a deep-set gold as they stared across the room where Padfoot had Mundungus Fletcher pinned to the ground.

"Please!" Mundungus begged.

Even from where she stood in the hallway, Hermione could smell the stink of booze on the man, not to mention other smells she would rather not identify.

"Please," he repeated. "Dumbledore already . . . already said—"

"As much as I respect him," Professor Lupin interrupted with an eerie calm, "Albus Dumbledore was not present during the birth of Harry Potter. He did not hold him when he cried, he did not help teach him how to speak or to walk. Despite the fact that Harry is believed to be both target and weapon by many in the Wizarding world, that beast currently digging his claws into your chest thinks of Harry as a son—a son that *you* put in very grave danger."

Padfoot bared his teeth and leant forward, putting more weight on the man's chest.

Even from the awkward angle, Hermione could see the terrifying glint in the dog's pale grey gaze as it bore its way through Mundungus.

"I'm sorry! I swear it'll never happen again! I swear it!"

Professor Lupin smiled. "Good to know. The full moon is in four days, and I've been told that I'm a bit bigger and much less controlled than Padfoot here."

It was then that Hermione realised just how dangerous Sirius and Professor Lupin were. Just how far they would go to protect Harry. She knew she *should* have disapproved of the two of them punishing Mundungus like they had, but she also felt a strange sense of

pride growing from within her over their protective instincts and actions against the man who had endangered Harry's life.

Besides, who was she to judge them? She had kept Rita Skeeter in a jar for several weeks over the summer.

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"It looks wonderful, Molly," Professor Lupin said in praise at the dinner table, ladling stew into a bowl for Hermione and handing it across the table.

She smiled up at him in gratitude, taking the bowl from him. She curiously noticed that he tucked into his own meal, having only served herself and Tonks, who was busy changing her nose into whatever suggestion Ginny gave her.

Hermione supposed they were hoping to cheer up Harry, who had arrived earlier that night. He had been furious with them all, but a lot of his wrath was saved for Professor Dumbledore. The headmaster had been purposely leaving Harry in the dark over many things—a fact that irked Hermione a great deal.

She was pleased, however, to see that Harry's presence *had* cheered up both Professor Lupin and Sirius.

"Can't you get your *own* food?" Ron whispered.

She turned and stared at him, confused. "What?"

"You haven't noticed, 'Mione? Lupin serves your food at every meal. You *and* Tonks. Has done since we got here."

"It's called being polite, Ronald." She scowled, hiding back the strange way it pleased her to note that Ron was right, Professor Lupin *had* served her at *every* meal. *And he knows how I take my tea*, she thought to herself as she remembered her meeting with him in his office during her third year.

"I don't see him putting food on *my* plate," Ron grumbled with a pout.

Hermione rolled her eyes and did her best to pay attention to the conversation being had between Bill and Professor Lupin about the goblin horde's potential involvement in the war. It was difficult, however, when, at the other end of the table, Mundungus was telling some sort of story that had the twins laughing loudly.

"I don't know where you learnt about right and wrong, Mundungus, but you seem to have missed a few crucial lessons," Mrs Weasley said coldly.

Fred and George buried their faces in their goblets of butterbeer; George was hiccoughing. Mrs Weasley threw a very nasty look at Sirius before getting to her feet and going to fetch a large rhubarb crumble for pudding. For some reason, the glare cast toward Sirius had Hermione on edge, and she listened closely as Sirius whispered to Harry, "Molly doesn't approve of Mundungus."

"How come he's in the Order?" Harry asked very quietly.

"He's useful," Sirius muttered. "Knows all the crooks; he *would*, seeing as he's one himself. But he's also very loyal to Dumbledore, who helped him out of a tight spot once. It pays to have someone like Dung around; he hears things we don't. But Molly thinks inviting him to stay for dinner is going too far. She hasn't forgiven him for slipping off duty when he was supposed to be tailing you."

Everyone began digging into their pudding save for Hermione, who was staring at Sirius in confusion. Hadn't she seen him threaten Mundungus a few nights ago because of what had happened to Harry? She wondered if Sirius was purposely not telling Harry how he felt about the situation so that he would not worry. She did, however, catch a brief look shared between Sirius and Mundungus where the latter swallowed hard and reached nervously for a flask that he kept in his cloak pocket.

"Nearly time for bed, I think," Mrs Weasley yawned once pudding was through and all the plates had been shifted from the table to the kitchen sink.

"Not just yet, Molly," Sirius said, turning to look at Harry. "You know, I'm surprised at you. I thought the first thing you'd do when you got here would be to start asking questions about Voldemort."

Next to her, Ron gasped at Voldemort's name. Hermione rolled her eyes at the noise and turned her attention to Harry, who suddenly looked relieved that someone was *actually* speaking to him about something important.

"I did!" Harry exclaimed indignantly. "I asked Ron and Hermione, but they said we're not allowed in the Order, so—"

"And they're quite right," Mrs Weasley interrupted, "you're too young." She sat bolt upright in her chair, her fists clenched upon its arms, every trace of drowsiness gone from her previously tired face.

"Since when did someone have to be in the Order of the Phoenix to ask questions?" Sirius asked. "Harry's been trapped in that Muggle house for a month. He's got the right to know what's been happen—"

Sirius never finished his thought as the twins burst into the conversation.

"Hang on!"

"How come *Harry* gets his questions answered?"

"Harry's not even of age!"

"It's not my fault you haven't been told what the Order's doing," Sirius said calmly. "That's your parents' decision. Harry, on the other hand—"

"It's not down to *you* to decide what's good for Harry!" Mrs Weasley commanded sharply. Her normally kindly face looked dangerous, and Hermione flinched a little in response. She noted that Ron and Ginny did as well, likely aware of the anger that their mother's tone implied. "You haven't forgotten what Dumbledore said, I suppose?"

"Which bit?" Sirius asked politely, but the edges of his tone sounded like they were coated with steel, as though preparing to fight.

Hermione's eyes widened slightly as she recognised that look on his face. That same dangerous glint in those pale grey eyes that she had seen when he had been punishing Mundungus. Her heart thudded. She might have expected it to have been out of fear, but she felt her cheeks warm over as well and a strange thought occurred to her: *Am I attracted—? No! That's preposterous!*

"The bit about not telling Harry more than he *needs to know*," Mrs Weasley specified, placing a heavy emphasis on the last three words.

"I don't intend to tell him more than he *needs to know*, Molly," Sirius said. "But as *he* was the one who saw Voldemort come back, he has more right than most to—"

But Mrs Weasley cut him off once more. "He's not a member of the Order of the Phoenix! He's only fifteen and—"

"And he's dealt with as much as most in the Order," Sirius said with a growl. "And more than some—"

"No one's denying what he's done!" Mrs Weasley yelled, her fists trembling on the arms of her chair. "But he's still—"

"He's *not* a child!" Sirius barked impatiently.

"He's not an adult either!" Mrs Weasley shouted, the colour rising in her cheeks. "He's not *James*, Sirius!"

Silence filled the room.

While everyone else was staring ahead at Sirius, waiting to see how he would respond, Hermione was watching Professor Lupin who—for some reason—was looking at *her*. He looked guilty. Her heart began to beat harder. *Why does he look guilty?*

"I'm perfectly clear who Harry is, thanks, Molly," Sirius said coldly.

"I'm not sure you are!" Mrs Weasley huffed. "Sometimes, the way you talk about him, it's as though you think you've got your best friend back!"

"What's wrong with *that?*" Harry snapped.

Hermione reached out and took Harry's hand in her own and gripped it tightly, an attempt to help keep his temper in check while at the same time offering what support she silently could. She could see Mrs Weasley's point; the woman was a mother who wanted nothing more than to protect her children, and it was obvious that she considered Harry—and at times even Hermione herself—as one of her large brood. Hermione, however, saw the pain that Sirius looked like he was struggling to conceal. She saw the guilt that Professor Lupin was not even *trying* to hide. She saw the anger and bitterness in Harry's eyes.

"What's wrong, Harry, is that you are *not* your father, however much you might look like him," Mrs Weasley replied, her eyes still boring into Sirius. "You are still at school, and the adults that are *responsible* for you should not forget it."

"Meaning I'm an irresponsible godfather?" Sirius asked, his voice rising.

"Meaning you've been known to act rashly, Sirius, which is why Dumbledore keeps reminding you to stay at home and—"

"We'll leave my instructions from Dumbledore out of this if you please!" Sirius snapped loudly.

"Personally," Professor Lupin quietly interjected, "I think it better that Harry gets the—not *all* the facts, Molly, but the general picture from us, rather than a garbled version from . . . others."

"Well," Mrs Weasley said, breathing deeply and looking around the table for support that did not come. "I can see I'm going to be overruled. I'll just say this: Dumbledore must have had his reasons for not wanting Harry to know too much, and speaking as someone who has got Harry's best interests at heart—"

"He's not *your* son," Sirius muttered.

"He's as good as," Mrs Weasley shot back fiercely. "Who *else* has he got?"

"He's got me!"

Still holding Harry's hand, Hermione felt the way her best friend's fingers clamped down on hers. Her heart broke at the longing way Harry stared down the table at his godfather.

Sirius, on the other hand, looked enraged.

"Yes," Mrs Weasley said, her lip curling. "The thing is, it's been rather difficult for you to look after him while you've been locked up in Azkaban, hasn't it?"

There was a collective gasp around the table as everyone stared at either Sirius or Mrs Weasley; both looked ready to duel.

Hermione glanced back at Harry, who was clearly emotionally torn, and she could understand why. Mrs Weasley had been like a mother to him over the years, but even Hermione could see where Sirius was coming from. After stumbling upon Professor Lupin and Sirius's moment with Mundungus the other night, she could very clearly tell how important Harry was to his godfather.

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### **August 10th, 1995**

The door to the basement slowly opened, and Hermione shifted from her place on the floor, where she had fallen asleep, to find herself face-to-face with Padfoot.

She had tried going to sleep that night, but the window in the bedroom she shared with Ginny had a clear view of the full moon. Knowing that Professor Lupin was somewhere in the house below, suffering, caused her heart to ache something fierce. She had silently pulled herself from bed, grabbing a book on her way, and made the short journey down the many steps to the basement where she knew Professor Lupin was being held behind a variety of protective wards. She had sat down near the door and listened to the sounds of pacing claws on pavement, loud sniffing, and the occasional bark. She figured that the ward included some sort of sensory block, considering her presence *outside* the door did not seem to cause any trouble from within.

When the opening door woke her, and she looked over to see Padfoot staring down at her, Hermione blushed.

Sirius shifted into his human form and frowned, his brows furrowed. "Are you all right, Hermione?"

"I . . ." She tried to think of a lie but was too tired to come up with anything good. "I was worried," she admitted and glanced behind him at the door. "Is he—?"

"He's fine. Sleeping. It'll be a few hours still until sunrise. I thought I'd get a cup of tea and some biscuits. Would—?" Sirius cleared his throat. "Would you like to join me?"

Hermione stared up into his grey eyes and smiled. He had regained a lot of the weight he lost both in Azkaban and on the run. There was no denying that he was handsome—darkly beautiful, in fact. His aristocratic features reminded her of the Malfoys, but the casual way that he held himself was relaxing, comforting even.

Realising that she had been staring and had not answered him, Hermione turned her head down as she felt a blush fall over her cheeks. She shook her head and stood up. "Umm, no, thank you. I just wanted to make sure Professor Lupin was all right," she admitted and made her way quickly for the stairs.

She stopped when Sirius called after her.

"I'll take care of him. I promise, kitten," he said in a whisper, looking at her as though he were asking her for something rather than offering.

He looked sad. Guilty.

*Perhaps, she wondered, he was asking for forgiveness, but for what she could not possibly imagine, least of all why he would want it from her.*

The words coming off of his lips—as well as the only *slightly* less irritating *pet* name—and the genuine way he had spoken, as though he knew how important it was to her that Professor Lupin be cared for, felt . . . intimate. It stirred something in her once more, and she tried to bury it under a polite smile before she rushed away, back up the stairs to her room.

Once inside, Hermione tried to catch her breath—shocked to feel her heart racing in a way that had nothing to do with sprinting up several flights.

*Great, she thought to herself. Two professors, Viktor Krum, and now Harry's godfather? Why can't I be attracted to someone my own age?*

She silently scolded herself, wondering if she should *try* and be a little nicer to Ron. However, memories of how he had acted over the Yule Ball put him at the bottom of the list for potential love interests.

*I should just focus on my studies*, she thought and quietly willed herself to go to sleep where she would absolutely, unquestionably, positively, definitely *not* have dreams about Sirius Black.

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### August 31st, 1995

Hermione did not know how to apologise any better than she had already done. It was not as if she had *meant* to insult Ron by being shocked that he had received a prefect badge—though she had, in fact, been quite shocked.

What on earth had *he* done to become a prefect? Hermione worked so hard for years to get the badge that she coveted so greatly, and somehow, despite his poor grades, his habit of rule-breaking, his attitude and disrespect of staff members like Professor Snape, Ron was deemed worthy to be a prefect?

And her one moment of surprise had, apparently, earned her the cold shoulder and a glare anytime she was in the same room as him.

Fine. If he wanted to be that way.

"Your brother is a prat," Hermione mumbled to Ginny as she walked down the stairs to find her friend with her ear against a closed door. Surprisingly, Ginny did not even jump at the sudden intrusion.

"Which brother? They're all very prattish from time to time, so you'll need to be a lot more specific."

"Well, I suppose considering everything lately, I *should* say Percy," Hermione answered with a frown. Seeing the heartbroken looks on Mr and Mrs Weasley's faces anytime their estranged son was mentioned was terrible. "But in this case, I meant Ron."

"Oh, he's King of the Prats, didn't you know?" Ginny smirked. "Earned himself the title when the twins went off to Hogwarts for their first year, leaving only me and ickle Ronnie behind. 'But, Mummy, I don't *want* to be with stupid Ginevra,'" Ginny mocked her

older brother's sobbing. "He threw a temper tantrum at King's Cross *and* tossed my favourite stuffed dragon in front of the Hogwarts Express."

Hermione gasped. "He did not."

"Oh, he *did*. Mum reddened his arse good and proper once we got home." Ginny grinned smugly at the memory. "I loved that bloody dragon."

"Language," Hermione scolded quietly. "Ginny? Care to tell me why we're whispering?"

"Because I don't want to get caught eavesdropping, of course."

Hermione frowned disapprovingly. "Ginny, it's not nice to invade someone else's privacy."

"Sirius and Professor Lupin are giving Harry a sex talk," Ginny defended as though that were a good enough reason to invade anyone's privacy.

Hermione's eyes widened, and she rushed to Ginny's side. "Budge over. I can't hear anything."

"Well, you wouldn't. They're trying to teach him how to do a non-verbal Contraceptive Charm. Don't ask me *how* they're getting around Harry being able to use magic outside of Hogwarts. Those two are better than Fred and George."

Hermione's face felt like it had turned beet red—whether from embarrassment, shame, or anger she was not exactly sure.

"Speaking of," Ginny went on, "the twins figured out that whole Moony and Padfoot thing. George's been babbling questions at Lupin and Sirius all day. And I think Fred might've started crying from excitement."

"Oh, for goodness . . ." Hermione huffed. "Firstly, as talented as everyone seems to *think* Harry is, he's not even *close* to being able to perform non-verbal spells, and secondly, he's *much* too young to be thinking about things like . . . like . . ."

"Sex?" Ginny teased, stifling a laugh.

"Contraceptive Charms," Hermione corrected, wondering why her cheeks were not cooling down.

"Says you. I may not be able to do it non-verbally, but I've known the charm for the last six months."

Hermione's mouth fell open. "*Your* mother actually—"

Ginny threw her head back and laughed quietly, covering her mouth so that they were not discovered. "Merlin, no. Fred and George taught me when they caught some Ravenclaw bloke taking a fancy to me last year. They apparently locked *him* in a broom cupboard for two days and then came and taught *me* the charm, in addition to a few nasty hexes—both as a precaution."

Their conversation was brought to an immediate halt when they heard voices from the other side of the door.

"I don't think I'm getting it. You're wasting your time, Sirius," Harry said.

"Don't get out of shape, son. I taught you how to walk, and I taught you how to talk. I'm sure as hell going to be the one to teach you this."

"You taught me how to walk and talk?"

"Sure did. Bought you your first broom as well. Only hovered about a foot off the ground, but still."

"What about my parents?" Harry asked.

Professor Lupin chimed in. "Your mum and dad were always there, but we were around just as much. Or well . . . when we *could* be. The war was going on strong when you were born, and with your parents in hiding, that left all the missions up to the rest of us."

"Really? What kind of missions?"

"Boring stuff," Sirius answered suspiciously fast. "Lots of travelling, nothing of interest happened. Now hold the wand like this and *then* try it."

"What was my first word?" Harry asked.

There was a long moment of silence before Sirius said, "Er . . . I'm not exactly allowed to say."

"Why not?"

"Because I made a Wizard's Oath to your dad that I'd keep it a secret. Your mum would have hexed my arse raw if she knew you'd learnt it from me. Let's just pretend that it was 'Snitch' and call it a day, yeah?"

Harry, Sirius, and Professor Lupin all laughed.

Outside the door, Ginny was silently chuckling, but Hermione was shaking her head in disapproval despite the warmth she felt at overhearing Harry have such a sweet family moment with his godfather.

"If you were so close with my parents, how come I never knew about you two before my third year? I had a godfather this whole time, and my aunt and uncle never told me anything."

"That's because Petunia is an uppity, little cun—"

"Because your mum wasn't exactly close with her sister around the time you were born," Professor Lupin cut Sirius off. "She sent her a birth announcement, but I doubt your aunt and uncle cared about any details regarding the rest of the family."

"Family?" Harry asked.

"Umm . . ."

"Yeah," Sirius replied. "Me and Moony. Family. I was practically adopted by your grandparents, you know; Remus as well. Your dad was our brother, and your mum was our sister. When they—" Sirius paused. When he spoke again Hermione could hear the change in his tone: it was softer, solemn. "You should have been with me. But I fucked up, I know that now. Still, your folks had explicit wishes. Had *I* not been around, you were supposed to have been raised by Remus."

"Then why—?"

"Anti-werewolf laws," Professor Lupin answered. "The Ministry would have taken you away from me the second they found out."

Hermione scowled at the information.

"Enough with the sad trip down memory lane," Sirius insisted. "I'm trying to impart decades of wisdom on the lad."

"I really think you're wasting your time, Sirius. I've never even *kissed* a girl."

Ginny and Hermione shared a look. Ginny looked strangely surprised by the news, but Hermione was not. Harry was incredibly shy when it came to girls, and she knew it. The only one he had ever taken a fancy to was Cho, and he had barely had the courage to ask her to the Yule Ball—a bit too late as it turned out.

"Really?" Sirius asked with a chuckle. "See what happens when you're off saving the world? We all appreciate your sacrifice, Harry."

"Thanks," Harry muttered sarcastically. "How old, umm . . . ?"

"I was fifteen my first time," Sirius said.

"Same," Professor Lupin added.

Hermione's eyes shot wide open. Sirius, she could believe. But Professor Lupin?

"Do you know . . . ? My umm . . . How old was my dad?" Harry nervously asked.

"Almost eighteen," Sirius said with a chuckle. "Don't worry Harry, you've got plenty of time. I'm just being cautious. We were a little younger than you when our dad, or well, *James's* dad took us aside and taught us the charm. If it makes you feel any better, I was almost seventeen the first time it actually counted."

"How did it not count before?"

"Didn't *love* the other girls. I was a stupid, reckless boy that tried burying my issues in witches . . . literally. But everything changes when you find the one you really, truly love."

"He's right about that," Professor Lupin agreed.

Hermione pulled away from the door, suddenly feeling guilty for eavesdropping. She turned to Ginny and shook her head. "Well, I still don't approve, but I suppose it's not completely horrendous."

Ginny chuckled. "That's because you missed all the good parts. Before Harry walked in there, they'd been telling Fred and George all about their adventures at Hogwarts."

"Adventures?"

"Apparently Sirius was very *popular* among Ravenclaw House."

Hermione grimaced.

"And Professor Lupin once shagged a girl in the library."

Hermione's eyes widened, and she gasped. "*My* library?!"

"Shh!" Ginny jumped on her, wrapping her arms around Hermione's shoulders in an attempt to cover her mouth. Hermione eventually stopped making noises of horror and shock. Inside her head, however, was another matter entirely. In addition to silently shouting, torrid images of Professor Lupin, shirtless and leaning against the shelves that led into the Restricted Section flooded her mind. Her cheeks burned hot, and she fought against Ginny's grip, now as an attempt to escape.

"Girls?" Mrs Weasley called out, appearing at the railing of the first landing on the stairs. "What are you doing up so late?"

"Nothing!" Hermione and Ginny yelled at the same time.

"Then get to bed. Lots to do tomorrow, and you'll need your rest."

Back in the other room, Sirius and Remus sat at a small circular table with Harry opposite them. Reliving the good memories of their youth was relaxing, and they had both *tried* to rein it in a little when they heard the two witches on the other side of the door.

The moment that they could both hear Molly direct Hermione and Ginny off to bed, the tension in their shoulders eased quite a bit.

"So, do you have a girl in mind?" Sirius asked.

Harry blushed and then stared down into the bottom of his empty cup of hot chocolate. "Sort of," he admitted quietly. "It's complicated."

"Hermione?" Sirius suggested, ignoring the incredulous look that Remus was sending him.

It was something he had been wondering for months now, ever since Rita Skeeter had decided to play story time with his godson and Hermione. Remus insisted it was all lies, but Sirius wanted to hear it from the boy himself. He thought about the day when he finally would need to tell Harry the truth about Hermione and her trip through time; he was dreading it. If Harry was, in fact, in love with Hermione, it would only make everything worse, and Sirius wanted to prepare himself for it.

"What?!" Harry looked up at him, a horrified grimace on his face. "Merlin, no! That's disgusting! She's like my sister."

Sirius held back the big sigh of relief he wanted to let go of and simply nodded thoughtfully as he said, "Good to know. Calm down, son. So why's your *actual* girl complicated?"

"Well, she had a boyfriend and . . ." Harry frowned. "And he died."

Sirius and Remus shared a look and sighed before staring down at the table.

Remus was the first to speak. "That's terrible, Harry. But life *has* to go on. You can't stop living because others pass away. Trust us on this. We're experts on the subject."

Sirius rolled his eyes in response, knowing that Remus was thinking of Sirius's poor coping mechanisms after Mia had disappeared.

"Thanks," Harry whispered. "I'd better head off to bed."

"Not so fast." Sirius reached out and put a hand on Harry's shoulder to keep him sitting. "You think I'm just going to offer you girl advice, teach you a Contraceptive Charm, then send you on your way? What kind of godfather do you take me for?"

"An *awesome* one?" Harry suggested.

Sirius smirked, feeling just a bit proud at the mischievous glint in Harry's eyes. "Nice try, pup. You keep safe this year, and I mean that," he insisted with a fatherly tone of voice.

"And pay attention in class. I know not every lesson is as fun as the last, but you need every bit of magic that your professors are willing to teach you."

"And stop asking Hermione to do your homework for you," Remus chimed in. When Harry looked up as though he had been caught with his hand in his chocolate cauldron, Remus added, "Yes, I know you've been doing it for years."

"And stop treating that girl poorly," Sirius demanded. "And allowing others to upset her. You say she's like your sister, then treat her as such. You can't *begin* to imagine the level of pain I would cause someone if they'd have made your mum cry. She was *my* sister."

Harry took in the look that Sirius was giving him and seemed to ponder for a long moment before frowning. "You're not talking about Malfoy, are you?"

Remus raised a brow. "What do you think would be more painful? To be insulted by an enemy or a friend?"

Harry sighed in apparent understanding and bowed his head. "I'll try and keep a better eye on Ron's temper."

"That boy won't like it if *I'm* the one who has to speak to him," Sirius threatened quietly. "She's your sister, so that makes her family. We protect our family, Harry. Do you hear me? Family is everything."

"I understand." Harry nodded, holding his head up a bit higher. "I won't let you down."

Sirius smiled and pulled the boy into a tight hug. "I know you won't."

## Chapter One Hundred Seventeen

### Just Not Healthy

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*I stuck a knife in my side  
They tell me death doesn't hurt  
But I think they lied  
Because I'm still empty inside  
Oh I'm still empty inside*  
(Forget Me Forgotten - Hollow Wood)

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**January 31st, 1977**

*Mia and Sirius stumbled out of the tattoo shop with arms draped over one another, supporting each other in order to stay balanced as they walked. The elf wine had been strong and still coursed through their systems. Mia told Sirius that they were probably dealing with an endorphin high to counteract any pain from their latest tattoos. Neither could actually say that they had felt much pain.*

*Mia seemed to enjoy it.*

*It had been Sirius's idea, of course, to get her name tattooed on his chest. He focused on her dilated eyes as she watched him get branded hers for life. When he suggested she get one of his name, she was all too ready to reciprocate until he mentioned where he wanted it placed.*

*"Sirius! That's probably going to hurt, don't you think?"*

*In the end, it had not hurt that badly. Elf wine numbed what little pain there was, and Sirius's heated stare seemed to keep her distracted enough that she was barely coherent when the tattoo artist told her that he was done.*

*She giggled when Sirius lifted her into his arms and spun her around whilst kissing her, dodging a pair of Muggles who were glaring at their wanton behaviour. Sirius looked around the neighbourhood to see if anyone was watching before pulling Mia down a long, empty alley and sneaking around an old closed-down thrift shop.*

*"Jamie's going to kill you when he finds out," Mia said in reference to the tattoo as Sirius's hand began sneaking up under the skirt that was much too short to be worn in the cold weather. No wonder the Muggles had been staring.*

*"That tosser pretty much tattooed 'Lily' across his entire chest. I just put your name right above my heart, where it belongs." He pressed his mouth to the side of her throat, relishing the little whimper that came out of her parted lips and adding it to his list of things he loved about her.*

*"You know that's not what I meant," Mia said with a pout, threading her fingers through his hair. "And if my name belongs above your heart, then why again is it that I got your name tattooed on my thigh?"*

*He pulled away to watch a soft pink colour develop in her cheeks as his fingers crept higher and higher, edging toward the new ink. "Because, I figured tattooing my name where it belongs might hurt a little more than on your thigh," he answered with a smug grin as he ran the pad of his thumb over the centre of her knickers, drawing a shocked gasp from the witch.*

*"Sirius . . . we're in public."*

*"We've had sex in public before."*

*Mia blushed prettily. It always amazed him that he could still make her cheeks turn pink after everything they had done.*

*"At Hogwarts, in the corridors, after curfew . . . not in the middle of London."*

*Sirius grinned darkly at her, his eyes boring into brown irises that flashed amber when she was excited or angry. Merlin, how he wished they would stay amber forever.*

*He leant in close and brushed his lips against the shell of her ear, "Remus told me you let him fuck you in the middle of London. Some dark alley after that concert we all went to."*

*Mia breathed heavily as he lifted her into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist and pressing himself against her. "He told you that?" she asked unashamedly, her confidence being one of the many things Sirius found sexy about her.*

*"We compare notes sometimes," Sirius teased and then flinched when she pinched the tender skin near his armpit. "Ow!" He promptly dropped her legs and dashed away from her as quickly as he could, laughing.*

*"You shit!"*

*"I was joking!" he insisted with a smile before rushing forward and grasping her before she had a chance to get away. "I am a little offended, though. You'll have sex with Remus in London but not me?"*

*Mia rolled her eyes at his poor attempt at feigned jealousy. "What do I get out of it?"*

*Sirius slowly raised an eyebrow. "Are you bartering with me? Merlin, you really weren't sorted properly."*

*"So I've been told," she said, hissing the S as she spoke. "Now tell me what I get out of it."*

*Sirius fell to his knees and stared at the hem of her denim skirt heatedly. When she folded her arms across her chest, apparently unaffected by his subtlety, he looked up at her. "What? Don't you like to see me on my knees, begging?"*

*"That's hardly worth my time when I know how much you enjoy it." She bit down on the side of her bottom lip, squealing when he growled and gripped a hand around each of her thighs and held her roughly.*

*"What if I stop begging and instead start demanding?" he asked, running his nose up under her skirt, eyes searching out the tattoo. He was grateful for Healing Spells, otherwise the area might have been a little too raw for the attention he was planning on giving it.*

*"Mmm. That's more like it." Mia leant back against the wall as Sirius buried his face between her thighs, planting open-mouthed kisses against her skin and breathing hot over the centre of her knickers.*

*"I want to see what my name tastes like."*

*He groaned as he ran his tongue over the ink, feeling powerful at the way she trembled by such a simple gesture.*

*"You like that, kitten?" He looked up to see her head thrown back, bottom lip caught between her teeth. "Well then, you're going to love this," he said and stood up, hitching her legs around his hips as he undid his buckle to remove his swollen length. Slipping his fingers between them, he pulled her knickers to the side and ran the tip of his hardness against her slick centre and—Knock! Knock! Knock!*

*"Padfoot! Are you awake?"*

Sirius opened his eyes at the intrusion, trying to quickly shut them in an attempt to cling to the memory that he had been dreaming of. His hand was on his hardened cock, squeezing as the thoughts of reality came crashing down on him.

*No, no, no . . . he thought desperately as he stroked himself once, twice . . . Denim skirt, tattooed thigh . . .*

*"Sirius?"*

"Ahh!" Kicking the blankets violently off of his body, Sirius stood, glaring at the calendar on the wall that told him it was the eighth of October, 1995. He punched the calendar, rushed toward his bedroom door, and threw it open to glare at his friend on the other side.

*"You . . . are such . . . a prick!"*

Remus scowled at him. "Well, good morning to you too, asshole."

"What's wrong with *you*?" Tonks asked as she appeared from behind Remus, blowing bubbles with Muggle chewing gum and turning her hair the same shade of lavender as the sweet in her mouth.

"What's wrong," Sirius began with a growl, "is that I haven't *come* in almost fifteen fucking years," he said bluntly, ignoring the grimace that crossed Remus's face, as well as the loud *pop* that came from Tonks's gum.

"That's . . ." Tonks said, looking shocked, "just not healthy."

Remus rolled his eyes, and Sirius noted the dark circles beneath them.

"So we woke you up from a sex dream? Do I even want to know?"

Sirius grumbled as he turned back around, grabbing a set of black robes that he threw over his body, not bothering to tie them around his waist as his erection was already a lost cause. "Memory. I probably told you about it before. Tattoo shop, London alley, denim skirt." He groaned miserably. "Fuck. I hate my life. I hate this house." He growled loudly, kicking the wall before turning his eyes on his best friend. "I hate you."

Remus laughed. "Oh, go hop in the shower and have a wank."

"I *can't*," Sirius said through clenched teeth.

"Why not?"

"What do you imagine I think about to get off?"

"Oh." Remus stared thoughtfully, and then his eyes widened. "Oooh!"

"Yes, 'oooh'," Sirius snarled as he stormed down the stairs, shouting for Kreacher to get his breakfast started. He was not in the mood to deal with Remus and Tonks until he'd had at least one cup of coffee.

"I don't get it," Tonks muttered as she followed Remus and Sirius down the stairs.

"Mia," Remus told her.

Tonks took a long moment to let the one-word answer ferment in her brain before it seemed to click. "Oh, yeah, she's sixteen years old now."

"I'm very aware," Sirius snapped. "What's worse is that even if my cock is responding to Mia when she was lovely, naked, wrapped around my waist and perfectly of age . . . my brain likes to remind me that she's not anymore!" He kicked open the door to the dining room, pleased to see that the house-elf had, at the very least, put a cup of coffee on the table next to Sirius's seat. "What did you two wake me up for, anyway?"

"The Floo in the drawing room was open," Remus told him as he walked in after Sirius, taking a seat. "Wanted to see if someone came by while we were out."

"No one." Sirius took a long gulp from the mug of black liquid, ignoring the fact that Kreacher purposely left out the sugar because Sirius had not properly ordered him to

put it in. *That elf is going to be the death of me*, he thought. "I made a call to Hogwarts last night to talk to Harry."

Remus narrowed his eyes angrily. "Again? Are you insane?"

Sirius shrugged his shoulders. "I wasn't caught," he insisted, leaving out the fact that he very nearly *had* been caught, since that Umbridge bitch had gone sniffing through the fires, attempting to grab at *anyone* who had their head stuck in the Floo.

"I had to talk to him. He wrote me. He's having pain in his scar again."

"Any nightmares?" Remus asked, his expression changing from irritation to concern.

Sirius shook his head and sighed. "Not sure. Maybe get out that fancy parchment and quill of yours and write your little *quill pal*," he said, not bothering to hold back the bitterness—and jealousy—in his tone. "She might have a better idea, if he's even told her. Harry thinks it was triggered by that Umbridge witch that took over the Defence class."

Remus's expression soured at the mention of Umbridge, and Sirius did not blame him one bit. Tonks, likewise, was grimacing in distaste.

"I've heard a few things about her," she said. "But the looks on your faces tell me I should know more."

"She's a rotten, manipulative—" Sirius began.

"Prejudiced, toad-faced cunt!" Remus spat angrily, his eyes flashing gold.

Tonks's hazel eyes widened dramatically at the sudden outburst. She reached over, running her fingers through Remus's hair, which seemed to calm him down a touch. When she looked to find Sirius for an explanation, he mouthed "moon" at her when his friend was busy enjoying the calming touch of his mate.

"What?" Remus bitterly huffed, his nose twitching. "It's because of *Umbridge* that I can't go to St Mungo's when I'm injured. It's because of her that I wasn't allowed to raise Harry, and why I can't get a job now. She's been writing anti-werewolf laws since Mia worked at the Ministry."

"I remember," Sirius said thoughtfully.

*"Mia, I'll be fine, you've always taken better care of my injuries than any Healer," Remus insisted when Mia had come home to their flat, screaming about a piece of legislation that had gone through, effectively barring all half-breeds—werewolves especially—from St Mungo's and any other medical facility in Wizarding Britain.*

*Sirius had been frustrated and angry on his friend's behalf, and James and Lily were threatening to picket both the hospital and the Wizengamot. Remus, however, begged them not to make a fuss because he did not want more attention drawn to him.*

*While the rest of them backed down, Sirius watched in amusement that Remus apparently thought Mia would do the same.*

*"It's not the point, Remus!" Mia yelled. "It's discriminatory and horrible and should not be left up to a bunch of pompous blood supremacists that don't even understand lycanthropy!"*

*"Yeah, well." Remus passively shrugged his shoulders, and Sirius snorted into his glass at the way Mia's hair sparked at his attitude regarding his own well-being. "There's nothing to be done about it. It's how it's always been and how it always will be."*

*"Oh, no." Mia shook her head. "You listen to me, Remus Lupin, one of these days I am going to overturn every last one of these awful laws, and then I'm going to find Dolores Umbridge and I will fucking bury her!" Her body shook with rage as she stormed off down the hallway.*

*"Well done, Moons," Sirius said with a chuckle.*

*"Shut it. She'll calm down eventually and realise that one prejudiced witch isn't to be fussed about considering everything else we're dealing with."*

*"That prejudiced, toad-faced cunt!" Mia screamed before slamming the bedroom door, leaving Remus standing in the living room, wide-eyed and mouth open, and Sirius choking with laughter.*

Now, of course, Remus was fuming with all the ire that Mia had always wanted him to have in regards to the way the Wizarding world treated him. Bristling and huffing, Sirius could not stop himself from grinning at his cousin. "He's pretty sexy when he gets all riled up, isn't he?"

"He *really* is," Tonks said with a twinkle in her eyes.

Remus pouted a little and then jumped with a quiet yelp, banging his knees on the underside of the table. By the smug look on Tonks's face, Sirius assumed that she had tried to get a little handsy.

"Well, then my job is done, I suppose," Remus said, clearing his throat loudly and ignoring Tonks, who was rolling her eyes behind him. "Go have a wank thinking of *me*, dickhead," he said to Sirius, a bite to his voice, before storming out of the room.

Sirius chuckled at the display and then turned to his cousin. "He hasn't lost it like that in a while. Don't mind the attitude. Pre-moon Moony has always been a bit pissy. He

was a lot easier to tolerate when he was getting laid on a regular basis." He shrugged at the thought and then asked, "He's still being a prude then?"

She leant back in her chair, letting it hover on two legs, which Sirius knew could not end well for her *or* the chair. "Big time. I don't get it. Is it the age thing?"

Sirius shook his head, rolling his tired eyes and glaring down at his now-empty cup of coffee. He thought about asking Kreacher for another one, but could not be arsed to speak to the little beast yet. "It's the commitment thing. Remus doesn't think it's fair that you'll end up stuck with a broken down, second-hand werewolf without a Sickle to his name."

She frowned, a heartbroken look in her eyes. "I don't care about that."

"I know," he assured her, reaching across the table to pat her hand. "As good as Mia was for his emotional health growing up, I think living with his old man after James and Lily died did a number on him. Lyall Lupin *hated* werewolves, and he didn't think Moony deserved to be happy because he *was* one. When Remus publicly announced his relationship with Mia, his dad cut him off completely. I'm guessing knowing that Umbridge is at Hogwarts, teaching in what should be *his* job, potentially turning a new generation into prejudiced little shits . . ."

"It's probably bringing up a lot of stuff," Tonks acknowledged aloud.

Sirius nodded his head, glancing around for a pack of cigarettes. Even thinking about the bitch had him stressing more than he knew he should, considering his attention was supposed to have been on the war and Harry—then again, it was not as though Sirius had any way of contributing.

"Remus doesn't bury emotions as well as he likes to think he does. When things happen and he's too close to the full moon, everything he tries to hide just rises to the surface. It would be a lot easier if he just spoke his mind and told everyone how shitty it feels to have people think of him as a monster, instead of trying to convince himself that they might be right. That stupid Umbridge bitch, though . . ."

"Speaking of Umbridge," Tonks said, setting the front legs of the chair back on the ground, much to Sirius's relief. "Are the kids still doing that secret defence group?"

Sirius smirked proudly, giving up on his hunt for his cigarettes. "As far as I can tell. I gave them Molly's warning," he said, rolling his eyes, "followed by *my* wholehearted support and approval."

Tonks laughed, and the sound cheered him. Grimmauld Place was dark and dank, and when it was not quite as a tomb, it was filled with the sounds of either Kreacher's mumbling, his mother's portrait screaming, or Order members bitching and stressing about one thing or another.

"Care to tell me why Molly Weasley has it out for you?" Tonks asked, leaning back in her chair again. "She seemed like a sweet, little house-witch the first time I met her."

Sirius laughed loudly at the thought. "She's anything *but* a sweet, little house-witch. Don't let that dainty, white apron fool you. I'm guessing that her original issue with me has everything to do with my reputation. You should have seen the look on her face when I transformed in the hospital wing at Hogwarts. Woman started screaming her bloody head off."

"Yeah, but you're not a murderer now. I mean . . ." Tonks winced, almost losing her balance in the process, but grabbing the edge of the table just in time. "Not that you ever *were*. You know what I mean."

"I may not be a murderer, but I *am* Harry's godfather. Once my name is cleared, that gives me rights," he growled. "She's been playing parent to *my* kid since he started Hogwarts. I'd normally be grateful for what she's done, but she has it in her head that a jumper every Christmas makes her more parent to Harry than me. I've overheard her more than once saying she hopes that he'll take a liking to her daughter once they're of age. Not to mention she's said the same thing about Hermione and her youngest boy."

Tonks scoffed. "That'll end well."

"If Molly *or* her kid makes Hermione cry again, and I find out about it, it'll end—period." Sirius's knuckles turned white as he clenched the coffee mug in his hands. He could not decide whether he wanted to refill it himself or launch it across the room.

"Who made her cry?"

"Remus said that Ron has a temper and takes it out on Hermione," Sirius said. "He's not the best friend to Harry, either, but I'm not going to say anything and jeopardise my relationship with my own kid. *Molly* made Hermione cry, too. Last year, the *Daily Prophet* and *Witch Weekly* wrote—"

"Oh, I read what they wrote," Tonks said, rolling her eyes.

"Yeah, well, Molly bought all that bullshit and gave Hermione the cold shoulder for a while."

Tonks frowned, setting the legs of the chair back on the floor. "Poor thing. What do you think will happen when Hermione becomes, well, *Mia*? Molly's not going to react well to *that* revelation if she thinks of the girl like a daughter, not to mention whatever she wants to happen with Hermione and Ron."

"I couldn't give a hippogriff's arse what Molly thinks about it," Sirius snarled. "Though I'm honestly looking forward to the day I get to introduce Molly Weasley to Mia Potter."

"Why's that?"

"Because I have a feeling Molly will have some right nasty things to say to me," Sirius replied, a dark grin crossing his face, "and Mia has a delightful habit of hexing the *shit* out of witches that call my respectable character into question."

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### December 18th, 1995

When the portrait of Phineas Nigellus alerted Sirius that Arthur Weasley had been attacked, and Grimmauld Place needed to allow a Portkey through to bring the Weasley children and Harry, he was quick on his feet to prepare himself to deal with a lot of emotional teenagers. Thankfully, when the group arrived, Sirius was still just frightening enough to keep them all in place, considering the boys—save for Harry—were ready to rush off to St Mungo's half-cocked, Order of the Phoenix be damned.

A few butterbeers later, they had mostly calmed down.

The Weasleys gathered together to comfort one another, inadvertently leaving Harry out in the cold. By the look of it, Harry seemed more than happy to *not* be included in the group. Sirius took to his godson's side and draped an arm around him, occasionally offering words of support and comfort, assuming he was in shock over the attack.

Hours later, when Molly Weasley made her way into the house looking worse for wear, Sirius stood to greet her as she updated her children on their father's condition.

"He's going to be all right," she said, her voice weak with obvious exhaustion. "He's sleeping. We can all go and see him later."

Fred fell back into his chair with his hands over his face. George and Ginny got up, walked swiftly over to their mother, and hugged her. Ron gave a very shaky laugh and downed the rest of his butterbeer in one gulp.

Sirius awkwardly watched as anxiety and relief mixed in each of the Weasleys faces. He could tell that Molly had poorly tried to glamour away the red from her eyes, leaving them looking still-swollen and a bit pink.

Not knowing what else to do, he channelled his inner Lily and clapped his hands loudly as an idea came to mind. "Breakfast!" he shouted joyfully. "Where's that bloody house-elf? Kreacher! KREACHER!" But Kreacher did not answer the summons. "Oh, forget it, then. Bacon and eggs, I think, and some tea, and toast."

Hurrying into the kitchen, he began fumbling with items to make breakfast, a part of him wondering if he even remembered how to turn the cooker on; it had been years since he needed to cook for himself. Even living with Mia and Remus after Hogwarts, they survived mostly on takeaway and Mia's feeble efforts at cooking.

Harry was suddenly at his side, looking eager to help.

Sirius grinned down at his godson. "You know how to cook?"

Harry nodded. "The Dursleys made—er . . . *taught* me."

Sirius's nose twitched at the information that he filed away in the back of his head—in a box labelled: *Dursleys, Vengeance*—and patted Harry on the back. "That's good. Because I have no idea what I'm doing."

"You've never cooked before?" Harry asked.

"Not *well*," Sirius admitted. "Always had house-elves. Here at Grimmauld Place, at Hogwarts, and even at your grandparents' home. The only time I even had the need to cook was when I shared a flat with Remus after Hogwarts. We mostly lived off of food from the Leaky Cauldron and snacks from the sweet shop."

He watched curiously as Harry began breakfast, impressed by the way the boy naturally took to cooking. Knowing that Harry was most likely trying to help to hide away whatever guilt he was feeling over Arthur's attack made Sirius feel inadequate as a parent since he had no idea how to address the problem other than to reassure Harry that none of this was his fault. From what he knew of him, Harry would be too stubborn to take the words to heart.

In the end, he figured that if Harry wanted to work off his emotions, Sirius was not going to stop him.

While Sirius poked at eggs in the frying pan—mostly to look as though he was actually participating—Harry turned to grab plates from the nearby dresser. Mrs Weasley approached the boy, lifted the plates from his hands and pulled him into a tight hug.

"I don't know what would have happened if it hadn't been for you, Harry. They might not have found Arthur for hours, and then it would have been too late. But thanks to you, he's alive. Dumbledore's been able to think up a good cover story for Arthur being where he was; you've no idea what trouble he would have been in otherwise."

She turned away, wiping tears from her eyes and looked at Sirius, paused for a long moment before she sniffled, and then spoke. "Sirius, I . . . I've been wrong about you. I can't tell you how much I appreciate you looking after my children and . . . and Harry," she added in a whisper, looking down ashamed.

"It's *my job* and my honour to look after Harry," Sirius said, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder, wondering if she would take the movement as the possessive one that he meant it to be. Whether Molly noticed it or not, Sirius smiled when she bobbed her head in agreement. "It was my pleasure to have been able to help your family, Molly. The kids are supposed to be out of Hogwarts anyway, and Arthur will need time to recover. Why don't you all stick around here for as long as you need to?"

Molly burst into a fresh set of tears and wrapped him in a tight hug that Sirius grimaced at. He was not used to physical affection these days, least of all from witches, and Tonks certainly did not count. He cleared his throat and lightly patted Molly on the back.

"Oh, Sirius, I'm so grateful. They think Arthur will be there a little while, and it would be wonderful to be nearer. Of course, that might mean we're here for Christmas—"

Sirius's eyes lit up. "The more the merrier!" Glancing back down at the pan, he noted that the eggs had turned a shade of brown that did not look healthy. "Make yourself useful? Save this food, will you? I should have let Harry handle all of this."

**December 20th, 1995**

Sirius was not entirely sure what had happened at St Mungo's when the Weasleys and Harry were escorted there by Tonks to visit Arthur, but when they all returned, Harry sequestered himself in his room and refused to come out or speak to anyone. By the mid-afternoon, when not even Ron or Ginny could get Harry to say a word to them, Sirius was worried.

"Where's Harry?" Remus asked as he walked into the drawing room where Sirius was sitting in his large armchair, tapping his foot anxiously while swirling eggnog—in place of firewhisky—in a crystal tumbler.

"Stuck up in his room." Sirius gestured to the stairs. "Won't come out. Not for meals, not for his friends, and not for me."

"What happened?"

"Fuck if I know, Moony. Can you get up to Hogwarts?"

"Of course. What for?"

"Tell Dumbledore to send Hermione."

Remus raised a brow. "What? He's not going to just—"

"He will." Dumbledore *owed* him, owed the Weasleys, and certainly owed Harry. "Harry needs her. She'll get him out of there and fix whatever's wrong with him."

"How do you know that?"

Sirius finished off his eggnog and stood up to get a refill. "Because Mia would have done it for James."

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Hermione and Remus stepped through the front door of number twelve covered in snow. Sirius was there to greet them, belting out "God Rest Ye Merry Hippogriffs" as he sauntered down the stairs and into the front hallway, grinning at the sight of the young witch, who looked at him and smiled politely.

"Hermione! You're here, thank Merlin!" Sirius skipped toward her, stopping short of giving her a hug. At the awkward moment, he turned and wrapped an arm around Remus instead and leant against his best friend, who was shaking the snowflakes from his hair.

"We took the Knight Bus," Hermione mumbled, her polite smile breaking. "It was . . . awful. Just awful. I'm glad I didn't eat breakfast this morning."

Sirius turned and narrowed his eyes at Remus. "You took her on the Knight Bus?"

Remus shook his head, clearly feeling the similar after-effects to the mode of transportation as Hermione did. "Dumbledore suggested it. Don't look at me like that, you know I hate riding on that thing."

"A new experience," Hermione said, sounding as though she was trying to find the silver lining. "One that I would like to *never* repeat."

Both Sirius and Remus grimaced when she was not looking, each knowing already that the Order had decided the teenagers would return to Hogwarts by the Knight Bus as the train would draw unwanted attention. They had already risked too much by using a Portkey to get the Weasleys and Harry to Grimmauld Place in the first place.

"Are you sure it's okay for you to be here? Your parents . . ." Sirius began to say, forcing himself to remember that Hermione still had a Muggle family.

A part of him had worried about them instinctively, knowing that Mia had once informed them all that her family had been taken from her—which was how she ended up on the Potter family tree. Remus reminded Sirius that because they did not know exactly what would happen to Hermione's parents, there was little they could do other than to place security wards around the Granger home, which had apparently already been done by Minerva the previous summer.

"I told them I was staying behind at school to revise," Hermione explained as she removed her jacket and mittens, handing them to Remus first, even though it was Sirius who extended his hands to receive. "I've told them how important my O.W.L.s are, so they'll believe it. Frankly, I'm surprised they even had me agreeing to come home in the first place. I really *should* have stayed behind to revise."

Remus chuckled affectionately.

"You didn't have to lie to them for us," Sirius told her, feeling guilty for having pulled her away from her family.

"Yes, I did," Hermione insisted with a frown. "I lied to them for me, and for Harry, and mostly for themselves. They're Muggles. They don't understand."

Understanding, Sirius said nothing more. He remembered long conversations with Lily about her family. She had considered it a matter of great pride—and had spoken often

of—being Muggle-born, but there were many downsides, the greatest of which was being alienated from her own family—more thanks to Petunia than anything or anyone else. Even after Lily's parents died, she kept conversations minimal with her sister. She could only know so much for her own safety.

"Besides, if I hadn't started lying to my parents about the Wizarding world when I was twelve, they would have pulled me right out of it the moment I said the words *mountain troll*." She rolled her eyes and then looked up at Sirius, hands on her hips and a determined look on her face. "Where is he?"

"Upstairs." Sirius gestured. "He won't open the door for anyone."

Hermione scoffed and made her way to the stairs. "We'll see about that."

Sirius stood beside Remus, watching as Hermione ascended the stairs. Even after she was well out of sight, they could hear as she rapidly pounded her fist against the door.

"Harry, I know you're in there, will you please come out? I want to talk to you."

Miraculously, the door opened.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked, allowing Hermione inside and shutting the door again.

Sirius stood staring up the flights of stairs, wide-eyed. "That girl is absolute magic. Was it any trouble getting her—Moony?" He stared at Remus, who had his lips pursed tightly, his hands shoved in his pockets like he was suspiciously filing away evidence. "What are you hiding?"

"Nuffing," Remus mumbled, cheeks puffed.

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Merlin, does she keep a stash of Honeyduke's bars on hand just in case she runs into you? You're spoilt," he insisted, poking his friend in the chest.

Remus laughed in response as he swallowed. "You're jealous."

"Git."

"Prat."

"Prick."

"Stupid mutt."

"Wanker."

"Tosser."

"Bloody fucking wolf."

"Language!" Molly Weasley snapped as she came walking into the hallway. "Honestly. Sirius, you're supposed to be setting an example for the children." She shook her head in disappointment at him before turning to Remus and smiling sweetly. "Hello, Remus, dear, how are you?"

Sirius scoffed. "How come *he* doesn't get—?"

Remus grinned, unashamed over the obvious favouritism. "I'm wonderful Molly, it's good to see you."

"Would you like something to eat?" she asked as she and Remus *both* ignored Sirius's pouting. "I put a stew on for dinner, but I'm sure I could fix up a sandwich or two for you while we're waiting."

Remus shook his head. "Oh, I don't want to be any trouble."

"No trouble at all, dear," Molly insisted, patting him on the shoulder before shuffling down toward the kitchen.

Remus turned to head after her but was stopped when Sirius took a hold of his robes and yanked him back. "Not so fast, Moony. I need you to play fetch first." He reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a small bag of coins. "Take this money and get Christmas presents for everyone. Something real good for Harry. Decent defence books maybe. He's already got the best broom on the market. And Christmas decorations, too. I've sent Dung out to get a tree."

Remus grinned, the line between his brows softening. "Sounds nice. I don't remember having a good Christmas since—"

"When Prongs proposed to Lily," Sirius finished with a smile. "I'd say it's about time we start making good memories again, wouldn't you?"

## Chapter One Hundred Eighteen

### *Common Bonds*

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*Hanging from my fingertips, you're a phantom limb  
Start to slide, branches die, I'm buried under it  
Thought I was climbing by your side, you left me behind  
I saw our future up ahead, now it's caving in  
(Avalanche - Flyleaf)*

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**December 25th, 1995**

It was late Christmas evening when Sirius found Hermione curled up in the library with a book. It had been the best holiday he'd had in years, for obvious reasons; it was not as though the warden brought Christmas trees into Azkaban, after all.

"Hey there," he said, smiling at the little witch, who turned and smiled back at him when she looked up from her textbook.

"Hello, Sirius."

He took a seat across from her in a big, leather chair, setting down two steaming mugs of hot chocolate on the table between them. He gestured to one, and she blushed prettily as she accepted it; the pink on her cheeks reminded him of the wild peonies that grew around the outside of the Hogwarts greenhouses.

"This is delicious," she told him after taking a sip.

"Remus's recipe. Also Remus's chocolate, but you didn't hear that from me," he told her and then winked.

She laughed, and he felt like his heart could burst at the sound.

"Are you having a good Christmas?" she politely asked him as she took another sip of her drink, closing her book and setting it down on the sofa beside her.

"Grand," he answered joyfully. "Surrounded by family and friends, and decorations all over that are doing their hardest to cover this horrid place with holiday cheer." He chuckled and then looked back down at her, noticing the brief flash of sadness in her eyes. "At least, it was pretty cheerful until you lot came back from St Mungo's. Is everything okay? Molly's pretty much fit to be tied, but I'm not stupid enough to ask her what's wrong just in case it's something *I've* done."

Hermione shook her head. "You've done nothing wrong. It's very generous of you to open your home like this to us all."

"It's generous for all of you to take pity and keep me company."

She bit her bottom lip, hiding the smallest of smiles. "Mrs Weasley is upset because Mr Weasley allowed one of the Training Healers to use Muggle stitches on his wound."

Sirius chuckled, rolling his eyes in amusement. "Isn't that where they stick a needle and thread through your skin?"

"Yes."

He shook his head, just picturing the look on Molly's face on seeing that. "Arthur gets fascinated with the strangest Muggle things. I stick to the basics: food, music, clothes. So, I get why *Molly's* upset. But what about the rest of you?"

Hermione frowned, no longer attempting to cover her sadness. She looked down into the cup of hot chocolate as though she wanted to hide away in it.

Sirius reflected on the day that began with stacks of presents. Harry was overjoyed at being able to spend Christmas at Grimmauld Place, and not even the homework planner that Hermione had bought him as a gift had been able to ruin his good mood. The trip to the hospital, on the other hand, seemed to have brought everyone down.

"We ran into Neville at St Mungo's."

Sirius's brows furrowed, feeling terrible that he had done little to reach out to the son of some of his closest friends. Then again, he remembered Frank's mother and figured she would not willingly let her grandson near him without Aurors present. "Was he in an accident? Remus mentioned that Neville occasionally has trouble with cauldrons."

"No. He was . . . He was visiting his parents."

Sirius swallowed hard and whispered, "Alice and Frank?"

"You know them?"

"I . . . I knew them. I was already in Azkaban when I heard what happened to them. When the Aurors brought in my—"

"Bellatrix Lestranger?"

*"You will not touch my family, you bitch!"*

*"You dare speak to me that way? Do you have any idea who I am?" Bellatrix shrieked at Mia, her hands shaking with rage, and her eyes alight with fury.*

He realised now that Mia *had* known who Bellatrix was. *Exactly* who she was and what she was capable of.

*"You filthy little blood-traitor, I will enjoy watching you die screaming!" Bellatrix threatened.*

Sirius had been afraid in that moment. It had been his fault that Mia met the crazy witch in the first place, since he was the one to drag her along with him to Narcissa's wedding. But Mia had not even flinched in response to the threats made against her by his cousin. Instead, she had offered one of her own.

*"And I will enjoy watching you die . . . gasping."*

Years later, knowing all that he knew about Mia and Hermione and the bloody Time-Turner, Sirius wondered what exactly she had meant by that.

"My cousin," he growled as he pulled himself out of his thoughts. "If anyone belongs in Azkaban, it's her."

"It's horrible what happened to them," Hermione whispered. "And to see Neville so sad. I wish there was something I could do."

Sirius raised a brow. "*Do* you?"

Hermione would go back into the past knowing all there was to know about the future. About what happened to Alice and Frank. About what happened to himself and Remus. About what happened to Lily and James. Why hadn't she done anything to stop it?

"Of *course*," Hermione insisted. "I just don't know what."

Sirius frowned and brought his mug to his lips. "I'm sure you'll think of something," he assured her, not fully believing his own words.

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Hermione did not know how the Weasleys and Harry slept through the noise, but when she heard the scream, she leapt from her bed and rushed out the door, wand grasped tightly in hand even though she knew she was not allowed to practise magic outside of Hogwarts.

Crookshanks was right on her heels as she slipped down the stairs, following the cries until she found herself outside of Sirius's bedroom. Her heart pounded violently as she listened to the sobs coming from the other side of the wooden door. She looked up and down the stairs, hoping that someone else would come and help. Torn between her

worry for Sirius and not wanting to intrude on the man's privacy, she reached for the doorknob and lightly turned it.

Scanning the dark room, she was unable to see much except for the shadows, but when Sirius cried out again, clearly terrified, she could see the silhouette of his body thrashing in his sleep. The sound brought tears to her eyes, but she did not know what to do. A part of her said that she should shut the door and leave immediately, that his business was his own, and he would probably be furious with her if he woke and found out that she had sneaked inside his bedroom.

Before she could think of what to do, the door opened further. She looked down and quietly hissed, "Crookshanks! Get back here!"

Crookshanks sauntered into Sirius's room and jumped up onto the bed, curling up next to the sleeping man. Almost instantly, Sirius stopped moaning. Hermione could hear his breath evening out. She let out a long sigh of relief, and the ache in her chest subsided somewhat.

Not knowing what else to do, she retreated into the corridor, leant her back against the wall and slid down to the floor, bringing her knees to her chest. She had hoped that once Sirius was *properly* asleep, she could call for Crookshanks and get him out of the room. If Sirius were to wake to find her familiar in his bed, he would more than likely have questions, and she would not even begin to know how to answer them without blushing awkwardly.

It was less than twenty minutes later when her eyes grew heavier and closed of their own accord.

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"Hermione?" Remus whispered when he stumbled upon the little witch sleeping in the hallway, her wand gripped tightly in hand. "Hermione, are you okay?"

She blinked a few times, looking up at him. "Professor?"

Remus grimaced at the title as usual. "Hermione, is there a reason you're sitting outside of Sirius's bedroom?" he asked, poking his head inside the cracked opening of the door to see his friend snuggled up on his bed, an arm slung over Hermione's ugly cat, both snoring softly.

"I heard noises," Hermione mumbled nervously. "He . . . He was shouting."

Remus frowned in understanding. "Oh, I'm sorry, Hermione. He normally puts up Silencing Charms."

"Normally?" Her eyes widened. "This happens often?"

He dipped his head sadly. "He was kept in Azkaban for twelve years. That much exposure to dementors should have rendered him either completely insane or powerless. I hate to say it, but he's lucky to walk away with *only* nightmares and memories. I try to help when he lets me." He looked back in the bedroom at his best friend and he sighed. "He's a very stubborn man."

"Harry has nightmares, too," Hermione confessed. "Ron tells me he talks in his sleep, screams, and cries sometimes. He won't talk about them, least of all to me. So I tell Ron to take care of him. I wanted to . . ." she began, looking into Sirius's room.

"What is it?"

"I don't like that Sirius is having nightmares. It makes something inside of me hurt." She brought her hand to her sternum, pressing two fingers just below the hollow of her throat. "I feel the same way when I know Harry is having nightmares, or if he's in danger."

"So . . . *often*?" Remus said, trying to lighten the mood.

"And I feel the same way during the full moon."

His eyes widened in shock at her words.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She covered her mouth, clearly embarrassed. "I don't know why I said that. I don't know why I feel this way. I just—"

"You have a big heart, Hermione," he said, his chest warming at the thought that she worried for him. "You have the gift of empathy. There's nothing wrong with that."

"I don't feel the same way about others. Not even Ron."

Remus stilled his expression as he processed her words. It made sense to *him*. He, Harry, and Sirius would all eventually share deep magical bonds with her, though none were sealed or even provoked at this juncture—at least for her. Still, emotions were what prepared the bonds: the Familial Bond with Harry, the Soul Bond with Sirius, and the Pack Bond with himself.

"Well . . ." He scratched the back of his neck, trying to come up with a lie to placate her curiosity for the time being. "I suppose Harry, Sirius, and I should consider ourselves

quite lucky to have you worry about us. Though I assure you, it's hardly necessary. It's late, I was heading down to get a cup of tea. Would you care to join me?"

Hermione jumped as Crookshanks made his way back out of Sirius's room. "No, thank you, Professor. I just . . . I wanted to make sure Sirius was all right," she said and turned to head back up the stairs.

"I . . . I'll take care of him," Remus called after her. "I promise," he added softly, feeling lighter when she smiled at him as though this pleased her.

Once out of sight, Remus stepped into Sirius's room and sighed, closing the door behind him. He could see Sirius beginning to stir without the kneazle in his arms. Frowning, Remus lifted the blankets and peered down to make sure that his friend was at least clothed.

"Oh, thank Merlin," he muttered in relief before giving Sirius a good shove. "Move over."

Sirius's eyes slowly opened. "Whosere?"

"Move over." Remus shoved him again and then crawled onto the mattress. He leant his back up against the headboard and yawned, looking down as Sirius stretched diagonally across the bed, his legs nearly hanging off the side. "You were having a nightmare."

"Nothing new," Sirius grumbled into his pillow.

"Hermione heard you."

"Fuck." Sirius sighed loudly and turned, looking up with bleary eyes at his friend. "Is she all right?"

"She's worried about you. Get some sleep."

"It's not the same," Sirius admitted as he sat up and looked at the right side of the bed which remained empty.

"Yeah," Remus whispered, running his hand against the vacant spot beside him where Mia used to sleep—James next to her. When he felt Sirius grab his hand and place it on top of his head, Remus rolled his eyes. "Really?"

Sirius pouted and nudged him. "Indulge me. I had a nightmare."

Groaning, Remus awkwardly ran his fingers through Sirius's hair. "Any better?"

"You're shit at this, Moony."

Remus laughed loudly. "Merlin, we're a mess, aren't we?"

"Very pathetic."

"Don't tell Dora about this."

"She's going to find out eventually," Sirius mumbled through a yawn. "One day we'll have everything. Mia will be right back there on your right where *she* belongs, my head in her lap where *it* belongs. And you can have my cousin there on your left, if you like."

"I really think we should stop the bed-sharing at thirty-five."

"Fifty," Sirius argued.

Remus let out a self-deprecating chuckle, rubbing his tired eyes with his free hand.

"This is weird, Pads."

"Fine," Sirius conceded. "We'll stop at forty-five. Not like it matters. You're still old enough to be Tonks's father."

"Go to sleep, you hypocrite."

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### January 11th, 1996

"No." Sirius put his foot down, shaking his head as he looked at the letter in his hands, signed by Dumbledore. He waved his wand over it, verifying the signature and scowling when it came back clean. "The old man's gone mental. I don't care what he says. I know what it feels like to be taught Occlumency. The person who taught *me* loved me more than anything, and it *still* hurt like hell."

He narrowed his eyes up at Snape, who stood with his arms folded across his chest, his hands buried in his robes, returning Sirius's disdain with equal measure.

"As it stands, Black," Snape drawled. "It is not up to you. The headmaster has requested—no, *demand*ed—that the boy be taught, and I have been given the assignment to complete the task."

"Sirius, Dumbledore says that Severus is the best for the job," Remus whispered. Tonks stood next to Sirius, hand on his shoulder. Remus took the letter, reading it himself. "Harry needs to do this."

"Why *him*?" Sirius asked.

"Because the headmaster wants it done *correctly*," Snape sneered.

"And how do I know that you'll do it right?" Sirius asked, glaring up at the man. "What proof do I have that you're not just looking for some excuse to torment Harry?"

"Because I have better things to do than wander around the mind of an insolent fifteen-year-old," Snape offered with a scowl. "And do not call into question my abilities, *dog*."

"I'll call into question whatever I fucking want, you big-nosed, fucking twat."

Suddenly, there was a wand in his face, and Snape was angrily shouting, "*Legilimens!*"

*"You're always so fucking tight." Sirius groaned loudly as he wrapped his arms around Mia's waist. She had her back to him, skin glistening with sweat.*

*"Are you ready for this, love?"*

*Sirius looked over Mia's shoulder to see Remus staring into her eyes, requesting permission and gaining her consent to join them. All together, moving as one, the three groaned, growled, and whimpered. Sirius ran wet kisses up and down her spine as he continued to bury himself inside of her each and every time Remus withdrew.*

*"I need . . . Please, Remus."*

*"Do you . . . ? Do you feel that?"*

*Sensing the end approaching, and unable to hold back any longer, Sirius reached for her neck and turned to bare her shoulder to Remus, whose eyes glowed gold as he stared at the clean flesh. Sirius pressed his lips against Mia's, feeling her tense briefly indicating that Remus had bitten her.*

"You son of a bitch!" Sirius screamed as Snape finally withdrew from his mind. He launched himself at the Slytherin, only to be held back by someone—likely Remus. "You're dead, Snivellus! You're fucking dead!"

"What the hell?" Tonks shouted as Sirius continued to fight against Remus, struggling to attack Snape with all his might. Turning her eyes on the Potions Master, she demanded, "What did you do?"

"Proved my abilities," Snape said, looking smug.

"What happened?" Remus asked Sirius, looking shocked. "What did he see?"

Sirius rubbed his eyes first, angry to feel them wet. Then he tapped the shoulder that bore his Pack Mark and clenched his jaw. "Orchards."

Remus's eyes shifted bright gold faster than Sirius had ever seen them. Much too quick for even Tonks to get in his way, Remus sent a balled up fist into the side of Snape's jaw, sending the man to the ground in a pile of black robes.

"Remus!" Tonks yelled.

The door burst open, and Molly stepped inside just in time to gasp at the sight of Remus, snarling, as he hovered over Snape's crumpled body. Tonks was trying to pull him back while Sirius sat at the table, clenched hands threaded tightly through his hair as his shoulders shook.

"What on earth is going on in here?!" Molly shrieked.

"Unfinished business," Remus growled down at Snape.

"Remus, let's go for a walk," Tonks insisted, pulling on his arm until he finally relented, letting her drag him from the room.

"What happened?" Molly demanded, turning to look at Sirius, who only replied by shoving Dumbledore's letter toward her. She read the request and then sighed as she looked over at Snape, who had finally pulled himself to his feet, looking incredibly sore but infuriatingly proud of himself at the same time. "Can I trust the two of you to be left alone in the same room while I fetch Harry so he can know what's to happen?"

Sirius gave her a stiff nod, angry to find his hands still shaking.

"Grown men," Molly muttered under her breath as she walked out of the room, closing the door behind her.

"You had no right," Sirius growled.

"Perhaps next time I'll just hang you upside down by your ankle," Snape hissed, black eyes narrowed. "Or lead you into an underground passage with a werewolf on the other side."

Silence filled the room as Sirius forced himself to calm down. Snape silently cast a Healing Charm on his own face. It did not take very long before Harry stepped into the room, looking as though he were facing the gallows. He cleared his throat, announcing his presence.

Sirius took a sharp breath, trying to school his expression into something a little calmer. There would not be a way to explain what had happened anyway. In the end, it would only make Harry fear Occlumency lessons.

"Sit down, Potter," Snape instructed.

"You know," Sirius said loudly, leaning back on his rear chair legs and speaking to the ceiling, as he was unable to look at Snape's face without seeing red, "I think I'd prefer it if you *didn't* give orders here, Snape. It's *my* house, you see."

"I was supposed to see you alone, Potter," Snape ground out, "but Black—"

"I'm his godfather. I've a right to be here."

"I am here on Dumbledore's orders."

"You need my permission."

"By all means stay, Black. I know you like to feel . . . involved. Tell the boy what the headmaster wants. You are very good at . . . *sharing*."

Sirius's eyes widened, and the image of himself in the orchards with Remus and Mia came quickly to mind. "What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?" he growled, letting his chair fall back down on all four legs with a loud bang.

Snape sneered maliciously at him. "Merely that I am sure you must feel frustrated by the fact that you can do nothing *useful*," he said, putting a delicate stress on the word, "for the Order."

Sirius looked back down at the table as he tried to rein in his temper, something that Harry had already seen too much of in the short time they had spent together. Sirius did not want his godson to think poorly of him, but it was hard to ignore the fact that Snape had witnessed one of Sirius's most sacred and intimate memories to date. Something that had not even been spoken of—in detail—to James, who had actually been a part of the pack.

When Sirius said nothing, unable to speak without screaming, Snape took the cue to continue. "The headmaster has sent me to tell you, Potter, that it is his wish for you to study Occlumency this term."

"Study what?" Harry asked.

"Occlumency, Potter. The magical defence of the mind against external penetration. An obscure branch of magic, but a highly useful one."

"Why do I have to study Occlu . . . thing?" Harry blurted out.

"Because the headmaster thinks it a good idea," Snape responded. "You will receive private lessons once a week, but you will not tell anybody what you are doing, least of all Dolores Umbridge. You understand?"

"Yes. Who's going to be teaching me?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "I am."

Sirius felt Harry's panic and glanced up to see terrified green eyes staring at him, pleading for help. He winced at the sight, feeling so incredibly inadequate. "Why can't

Dumbledore teach Harry?" Even though he'd already asked before, he had to look like he was doing something for the boy's benefit. Otherwise, he would just appear weak, which was how he felt—weak and useless. "Why you?"

"I suppose because it is a headmaster's privilege to delegate less enjoyable tasks. I assure you, I did not beg for the job. I will expect you at six o'clock on Monday evening, Potter. My office. If anybody asks, you are taking Remedial Potions. Nobody who has seen you in my classes could deny you need them." Snape turned to leave, his black travelling cloak billowing behind him.

"Wait a moment," Sirius called out, sitting up straighter in his chair.

Snape turned back to face him. "I am in rather a hurry, Black. Unlike you, I do not have unlimited leisure time—"

"I'll get to the point, then." Sirius approached Snape carefully, keeping an eye on the wand hand of his childhood rival. "If I hear you're using these Occlumency lessons to give Harry a hard time, you'll have me to answer to."

"How touching," Snape said mockingly. "But surely you have noticed that Potter is very like his father?"

"Yes, I have," Sirius replied proudly.

Snape smirked. "Well then, you'll know he's so arrogant that criticism simply bounces off him."

Sirius rounded on Snape, pulling out his wand as he went; Snape whipped out his own. They were squaring up to each other, Sirius livid, Snape looking calculating—his eyes darting from Sirius's wand tip to his face.

Sirius thought he heard Harry call his name, but it did little to stop him. "I've warned you, Snivellus, I don't care if Dumbledore thinks you've reformed. I know better."

"Oh, but why don't you tell him so?" Snape whispered. "Or are you afraid he might not take the advice of a man who has been hiding inside his mother's house for six months very seriously?"

Sirius's jaw tightened. "Tell me, how is Lucius Malfoy these days? I expect he's delighted his lap dog's working at Hogwarts, isn't he?"

"Speaking of dogs," Snape said, "did you know that Lucius Malfoy recognised you last time you risked a little jaunt outside? Clever idea, Black, getting yourself seen on a safe

station platform. Gave you a cast-iron excuse not to leave your hidey-hole in future, didn't it?"

Sirius raised his wand higher.

"No!" Harry yelled, vaulting over the table and forcing himself between them, "Sirius, don't—"

"Are you calling me a coward?" Sirius roared, trying to push Harry out of the way, but Harry would not budge.

"Why, yes, I suppose I am!"

"Harry, get out of the way!"

The kitchen door opened, and the entire Weasley family—plus Hermione—came inside, all looking very happy, with Arthur walking proudly in their midst.

"Cured!" Arthur announced brightly. "Completely cured!"

He and all the other Weasleys froze on the threshold, gazing at the scene in front of them, which was also suspended in mid-action: both Sirius and Snape looking toward the door with their wands pointing into each other's faces, and Harry—immobile between them—a hand stretched out to each as he tried to force them apart.

Sirius's eyes drew immediately to Hermione, who was staring at the scene, horrified.

"Merlin's beard," Arthur muttered, the smile sliding off his face. "What's going on here?"

Both Sirius and Snape lowered their wands.

"Six o'clock Monday evening, Potter," Snape ordered and then left.

Sirius frowned, tucking his wand back into his pocket. "It's nothing, Arthur. Just a friendly little chat between two old school friends." He forced himself to smile. "So, you're cured? That's great news, really great."

Remus walked through the door, flexing his fingers—which looked slightly reddened. He paused at the sight of the large group and scowled as all attention turned on him. Molly was shaking her head in disapproval.

"Arthur." Remus inclined his head in greeting. "You're looking better."

"What happened to you?" Arthur asked, gesturing to Remus's hand.

"Nothing to worry about," Remus insisted, briefly looking at Hermione. With how quickly he averted his gaze, Sirius figured that he was still thinking about sealing the Pack

Bond, and did not want to associate that memory with the underage witch. "I just smacked my hand against something . . . unpleasant."

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### **February 14th, 1996**

After the students returned to Hogwarts and the Weasleys returned to the Burrow, Sirius was alone in Grimmauld Place once again. Remus—thanks to Order missions—rarely returned unless it was the week of the full moon. Thankfully, he knew that Sirius had Dora to keep him company more often than not.

Remus felt terrible about not having enough money to properly celebrate Valentine's Day with his girlfriend, and spending the night at number twelve was hardly the most romantic idea. He hoped that Dora would understand.

When he returned to headquarters that night, he was shocked to see the candlelit dining room and setting for two.

"What—?" he began to ask in shock.

"Sirius did it." Dora smiled brightly as she greeted him with a kiss.

"In exchange for what?" Remus asked suspiciously.

"Don't trust me after all of these years, Moony?" Sirius asked as he appeared from around the corner, a large box in his hands.

"Not in the slightest, Pads," Remus said with a small smile nudging at the corner of his mouth.

"He said all I had to do was pick up a few things for him from Diagon Alley," Dora insisted.

Sirius smiled down at the long box in his hands. "Valentine's Day gift for Hermione."

Both Remus and Dora widened their eyes in shock at the revelation, but it was Remus who spoke first. "Sirius, I know you've been getting closer, but she's still only sixteen and—"

Sirius nodded thoughtfully and held the box out to Remus with a sad sigh. "I know, but it's still tradition. She was always a pain in the arse to shop for, but there was one

present the witch could always appreciate." He smiled and then bowed his head slightly to each of them in parting before he turned and walked out of the room.

Presumably, Sirius was off to spend Valentine's Day alone in the room he had set aside for Buckbeak, celebrating the holiday with a hippogriff and a bottle of bourbon. So far, the Muggle liquor had been the only type of alcohol to even remotely affect him these days. Firewhisky, he said, he drank for the memories.

Dora pursed her lips as she eyed the box. "What did he mean by that?"

Remus slowly opened the box and smiled as he saw the large selection of chocolates. There, on the top was a handwritten card that read:

*For my witch, who does not yet know the depths of my love—  
and her stupid werewolf, who she pretends to like more than me.*

"Mia never liked Valentine's Day," Remus said thoughtfully. "She hated the cliché gifts, and Sirius had a history with witches trying to sneak Love Potions into his food. So when they started dating, Sirius would buy her a box of chocolates, and then give them to me. She said that taking care of me was the best gift that . . ." His voice broke, and he pressed his lips tightly together, fighting against the rising emotions.

Dora smiled sweetly at him and snatched one of the chocolates from the box, tossing it into her mouth with a grin. "I know I've said it before, but I think I like Mia Potter."

## Chapter One Hundred Nineteen

### *Watch Me*

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*And I just can't keep living this way  
So starting today, I'm breaking out of this cage  
I'm standing up, I'ma face my demons  
I'm manning up, I'ma hold my ground  
I've had enough, now I'm so fed up  
Time to put my life back together right now!  
(Not Afraid - Eminem)*

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**April 6th, 1996**

"How bad is it, then?" Remus asked as select members of the Order gathered around the large table at number twelve, Dumbledore at one end and Sirius at the other.

"I do believe that Cornelius will insist that Madam Umbridge take my place at Hogwarts, at least temporarily. As of tonight, I will be considered a known fugitive." Dumbledore did not appear the least bit worried, despite the rest of the members of the Order around the table looking near apoplectic.

"I knew it!" Molly cried. "I knew that little club of theirs would lead to trouble!"

"Do not blame the children, Molly. I am quite proud of them all and incredibly honoured that they named their group after me. It has, in fact, given us an interesting opportunity. Instead of twenty or so students being expelled, it is only one silly, old man in hiding."

"Two," Sirius reminded him. "Though I'd hardly call myself old."

Dumbledore smiled.

"How did Umbridge discover their secret?" Remus asked, still shocked that Harry and Hermione's group had been discovered. When he and Mia had established a similar group in the school, he was certain that not a single adult had the slightest inclination that anything was happening right under their noses.

"It appears that one of the students involved was questioned. Though, she was unable to provide details regarding the group save for a sign-up sheet that has, unfortunately, cost her dearly," Dumbledore said, his blue gaze falling on Remus and Sirius.

"What do you mean?" Arthur asked. "What happened to her?"

"Well, when she was brought into my office, Miss Edgecombe had a terrible skin condition, you see. It seems that purple pustules had broken out on the poor girl's face, spelling the word 'SNEAK' across her forehead."

Almost instantly, unable to contain themselves, Sirius and Remus burst into laughter.

It had taken at least ten minutes before Molly's scolding was enough to stop them from laughing at the expense of some poor, unsuspecting Ravenclaw—because *of course* she turned out to be a Ravenclaw. In the end, Remus and Sirius still excused themselves from the table while the rest of the Order tried to figure out what to do next now that Albus would no longer be at the helm of Hogwarts for the time being.

Out in the hallway, Sirius was wiping tears of laughter from the corners of his eyes. "She's coming back to us. Sneak. Can you imagine?"

"I can *remember*." Remus sighed happily, feeling slightly terrible that his own joy came at the expense of a young girl. "Merlin, I can't believe that I forgot how absolutely—"

"Slytherin she could be?" Sirius finished the sentence and then laughed again.

"Oh, that poor girl." Remus chuckled softly and shook his head. "You think Hermione's still Hermione enough to lift the curse?"

"For selling out Harry?" Sirius shook his head. "That Edgecombe girl should get used to wearing fringe for the rest of her life. My witch is relentless when it comes to defending those she loves."

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### April 27th, 1996

"Do you think we should start planning for it?" Sirius sat at the kitchen table staring down at his cup of hot chocolate, which he was certain Remus made with a *cheap* brand even though he had the good stuff hoarded away in cauldrons around the house.

"Planning for what?"

"Mia."

"*Hermione*," Remus habitually corrected.

"No, I meant to say *Mia*. She turns seventeen in a few months." Sirius looked up to find Remus glaring at him. He growled in response, knowing the reason behind Remus's expression immediately, and the implication of it pissed him off. "Don't look at me like that. I'm not saying that since she'll be of age, I'm going to jump at the chance to shag the girl."

Remus looked down, wincing. "Sorry."

"But she's . . . she's coming back to me, right?" Sirius asked quietly after a few moments of silence, feeling nervous and vulnerable. "You said you saw it."

Remus nodded. "I did. On her *nineteenth* birthday."

"Fine, fine." Sirius waved his hand. "Two years. But do you *have* the Time-Turner? Do you know how to make it all work?"

Remus sighed and ran a hand through his hair. Sirius always noticed the grey more when his friend was stressed or upset.

"I've been reading up on Time Magic since before she left. She completed most of the calculations herself, I just need to finish figuring out how to adapt it to a specific time and place. But since I *don't* have the Time-Turner yet," Remus said, and Sirius grumbled in disappointment, "I honestly don't even know where to begin looking. Department of Mysteries, I suppose."

"Maybe when the mess with the Prophecy is over, you and I can go in and—"

"*We* are not doing anything. *You* are staying here," Remus insisted, eyes flashing gold.

Sirius felt a twinge in the mark on his shoulder, recognising the words as a command, though he wondered if Remus had done so intentionally.

Despite Pack magic trying to work on him, Sirius's stubbornness fought through. He had been locked away inside Grimmauld Place for almost a year, and the company of one prejudiced house-elf was not doing him any good. Not only was the frequency of visits from friends on a steep decline, but contact from Harry was next to nothing. Umbridge had begun inspecting student's incoming and outgoing mail. He had not seen Hedwig in far too long, and the lack of news was putting him on edge.

"I'm sick and tired of staying here."

Remus groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose in obvious frustration. "I know that. *Everyone* knows that. You've been a bit of an arse about it. Stop letting Severus get

inside your head." He winced, looking regretful when Sirius shot him a dirty look. "Don't look at me like that, you know I don't mean *literally*. It wasn't just *you* in that memory he intruded on in your mind. You're letting him provoke you into reckless action. You're not a coward, and the people who matter the most know that."

"Fine," Sirius huffed. "So Department of Mysteries. Why don't you snoop around when you're down there guarding the prophecy?"

"Because that's not my job when I'm down there," Remus argued. "Protecting Harry is the most important thing right now."

"I know that," Sirius barked. "I'm just . . . nervous. *You're* the one that sends her back. *You* send her the stupid letter. *You* got to see her memories. I can't do shit for the Order, I can't protect Harry, and I have no part in getting Mia back. I'm fucking useless."

"We have more than two years to get her back, and there's still a war going on."

The reminder, however, went in one ear and out the other.

"But the war *will* be over. She said so. She told you, right?"

"It was the reason she didn't change anything; the reason Dumbledore would not let her. The war was over, and we'd won in her time."

Sirius watched the frown etch itself on Remus's face. He understood, feeling the corners of his own mouth turn down. The war being over, having won, was the reason for many of the horrible things that had happened in their past—all known and apparently ignored by Mia. It was the reason she did not save James and Lily, the reason she did not stop what happened to Alice and Frank, the reason she allowed Sirius to end up in Azkaban, and Pettigrew to go free.

It was the one thing that gave Sirius hope in the dark times of this war. The memories Mia had shared with Remus told them that, *at the very least*, he, Tonks, Harry, Hermione, and Remus would make it through this, and the war would be over in less than two years.

"The letter says that you get the Time-Turner in the Department of Mysteries. I know you're acting like it's all guesswork, Moony, but the *letter* says—"

"Just because the letter says—"

"What?" Sirius snapped. "Don't you trust yourself? It says that you go to the Department of Mysteries!"

"To rescue *you!*" Remus yelled. "*That's* what the letter says. Which means at some point in the future, you do something idiotic like leaving Grimmauld Place and end up in danger! We can't have that happen, Sirius!"

"It's *meant* to happen," Sirius insisted, ignoring Remus's temperamental outburst. "Nothing can change what is meant to be."

"Years at Hogwarts watching you and Mia bullshit one another about avoiding Fate and 'Fuck you, Remus, we should have a choice,'" Remus said mockingly, mimicking Sirius when he threw two fingers up at him, "and *now* you're quoting about what's meant to be? Give me the letter. I know you have it," he ordered, extending his hand, palm up.

"What? Don't get mad at me, they're *your* words!"

"Yeah, well, they sound stupid coming out of *your* mouth. Give me the letter, Pads."

Sirius grumbled as he reached into the pocket of his jeans, pulling out the thirty-year-old sheet of parchment that had been touched, gripped, folded, and read so many times it looked like it was ready to fall apart at any moment. Petulantly, he threw it at his friend.

Remus unfolded the letter, trying to lay it flat on the table. "Now go off and pout to your hippogriff over what a bastard I am."

"I will." Sirius stood and loudly shoved his chair back under the table. As he turned his back, he muttered, "Fucker," under his breath. "But I'm not leaving because you told me to. I'm leaving because I've lost my house-elf again, and I need to find him before the little tosser pilfers more of my stuff."

"Arsehole," Remus muttered as he leant his elbows against the table, looking over the faded words in front of him in his own handwriting:

*When I was much younger, I was given knowledge that I've protected for many years. Knowledge, instructions, and a mission. That mission has now been fulfilled, and you hold in your hand the fruit of my labours. You might recognise the Time-Turner in your hand from when you entered the Department of Mysteries to rescue Sirius. Once I saw it and recognised it for what it was, I knew it was almost time. You needed to go back.*

"What am I supposed to do, Mia? What the hell is Sirius going to do?"

"Sirius!"

Remus jumped, startled by the voice coming from the fireplace.

He turned toward the green flames and blinked a few times until he recognised the face in the fire. "Harry? What are you . . . ? What's happened, is everything all right?"

"Yeah," Harry answered. "I just wondered . . . I mean, I just fancied a chat with Sirius."

"He went upstairs to look for Kreacher. I'll call him down," Remus said, getting to his feet and heading for the stairs. "Sirius!"

"Piss off!"

"It's Harry!"

Sirius appeared, looking down over the bannister, grey eyes wide and panicked. "What about Harry?"

"He's in the fireplace! Hurry up!"

Sirius rushed back down the stairs, nearly shoving Remus out of the way as he made his way back toward the kitchen.

"What is it?" he asked urgently, sweeping his hair out of his eyes and dropping to the ground in front of the fire so that he and Harry were level. Remus knelt down beside him, concerned. "Are you all right? Do you need help? Is it Umbridge?"

"No," Harry replied, "it's nothing like that. I just wanted to talk . . . about my dad."

Sirius and Remus shared a look of surprise.

"What do you want to know?"

"I . . . I was having my Occlumency lessons with Snape, and . . . I . . ."

"Go on, Harry," Remus encouraged, placing a hand on Sirius's shoulder as he noticed his friend clenching his fists tightly at the mention of the Potions Master.

"I may have . . . accidentally . . . on purpose . . . sort of . . . gone into his Pensieve." Harry cringed as though he were waiting for either of them to start yelling.

"Oh, Harry." Remus sighed. "What did you see?"

"Yeah, son, what did you see?" Sirius inquired, paling slightly.

Remus tried to school his own expression so as not to reveal the panic he was feeling. There was no telling what Snape could have put into the Pensieve, and considering *Sirius's* last encounter with the Slytherin, he was terrified that Snape had bottled up the memory of the Potter Orchards. Granted, he was certain if Harry *had* seen that they would be having a much louder conversation. That and Harry had mentioned wanting to talk about James.

"I saw you two and my dad and . . . and Pettigrew. My dad had Snape in the air, and my mum came to rescue him, and she . . ." Harry looked disturbed by the memory he had seen.

When Sirius seemed to recall it, he had the grace to look ashamed.

"I wouldn't like you to judge your father on what you saw there, Harry. He was only fifteen," Remus said quietly.

"*I'm* fifteen!" Harry countered.

"Look, Harry . . ." Sirius began with a sigh. "James and Snape hated each other from the moment they set eyes on each other. It was just one of those things. You can understand that, can't you? I think James was everything Snape wanted to be; he was popular, he was good at Quidditch—good at pretty much everything. Snape was just this little oddball who was up to his eyes in the Dark Arts, and James . . . Whatever else he may have seemed to you, Harry, he always *hated* the Dark Arts."

"Yeah," Harry muttered, clearly not listening to every word Sirius was saying. "But he just attacked Snape for no good reason, just because . . . well, just because *you* said you were bored."

"I'm not proud of it," Sirius uttered quickly. "There are a lot of things I'm not proud of from back then, son. Snape's memories will never show me in a good light. The same goes for your dad."

Remus frowned at Sirius, remembering that the Slytherin had been attacked for a reason. It might not have been a good one, but Mia's character had been called into question at the time, and he remembered something about Snape laughing at a joke made at her expense.

"Look, Harry. What you've got to understand is that your father and Sirius were the best in the school at whatever they did," Remus said and then smacked Sirius when he had the audacity to look smug about it. "Everyone thought they were the height of cool. If they sometimes got a bit carried away—"

"If we were sometimes arrogant little berks, you mean," Sirius interjected.

Remus smiled.

"He kept messing up his hair," Harry mumbled in a pained voice.

Sirius and Remus laughed.

"I forgot that he used to do that," Sirius said affectionately.

"Was he playing with the Snitch?" Remus asked.

"Yeah," Harry said. "I thought he was a bit of an idiot."

"Of *course* he was a bit of an idiot!" Sirius said. "We were *all* idiots! That's what being a teenager is for. Well, not Moony so much."

"Did I ever tell you to lay off Snape?" Remus asked, still feeling guilty—even all these years later. "Did I ever have the guts to tell you I thought you were going too far?"

"Yeah, well. You made us feel ashamed of ourselves *sometimes*. Nowhere near as bad as . . ." Sirius hesitated as his eyes darted back to the fireplace where Harry still sat looking at the two of them. "That was something."

"And, he kept looking over at the girls by the lake, hoping they were watching him!" Harry snapped.

Sirius looked at Harry as though he was expecting for him to blurt out "and one of them looked just like Hermione!" Thankfully, he did not.

"Oh, well, he always made a fool of himself whenever Lily was around," Sirius finally said, shrugging. "He couldn't stop showing off whenever he got near her."

"She threatened to hex him," Harry pointed out.

Sirius snorted; the noise almost caused Remus to lose his own composure as memories of James wearing porridge on his head, rubbing sore hexed spots, and once putting out a fire on his trouser leg came to mind.

"Well, I didn't say he was very good at it," Sirius said. "Your dad could charm house-elves, professors, his friends, and he probably could have done well with other witches, but the only one he ever had eyes for was your mum, and she never fell for the stupid tricks that he tried with her."

"How come she married him?" Harry asked miserably. "She hated him!"

Sirius laughed at Harry's dramatic exclamation. "Oh, she did not."

"She started going out with him in seventh year," Remus said, remembering the way Mia clung to his arm when Lily burst into the common room and jumped into James's arms as though she had not spent the previous six years hexing him for looking at her the wrong way.

Sirius smirked. "Once James had deflated his head a bit."

"And stopped hexing people just for the fun of it."

"Even Snape?" Harry asked.

"Well," Remus replied slowly, thinking back to the train ride back to Hogwarts at the beginning of seventh year. "Snape was a special case. I mean, he never lost an opportunity to curse James, so you couldn't really expect James to take that lying down, could you?"

"And my mum was okay with that?"

"She didn't know too much about it, to tell you the truth," Sirius answered. "I mean, James didn't take Snape on dates with her and jinx him in front of her, did he?" He frowned at the look on Harry's face. "Look, your father was the best friend I ever had, and he was a good person. A lot of people are idiots at the age of fifteen. He grew out of it."

"Yeah, okay." Harry sighed. "I just never thought I'd feel sorry for Snape."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Did we treat Snape like shit? Yes. But what I'm sure he failed to put in that Pensieve were his own actions. I can admit that I was rotten, but everything I ever did was provoked, I promise you that," he said firmly and then looked at Remus who was staring at him. "What? It was. Granted, I overreacted . . . a lot . . . but still, provoked. I was *provoked*."

"Harry, what did Snape say when he found out you'd seen the memory?" Remus asked, trying to change the subject.

"He told me he'd never teach me Occlumency again," Harry said indifferently. "Like that's a big disappointment—"

"He WHAT?!" Sirius shouted.

"Are you serious, Harry?" Remus quickly asked, eyes wide. "He's stopped giving you lessons?"

"Yeah, but it's okay. I don't care. It's a bit of a relief to tell you the—"

"I'm coming up there to have a word with Snape!" Sirius snapped and made to stand.

Remus gripped his shirt and yanked him back down. "If anyone's going to talk Severus, it will be me. But Harry, first of all, you are to go back to Professor Snape and tell him that on no account is he to stop giving you lessons."

"I can't tell him that, he'd kill me!"

"Harry, there is nothing so important as you learning Occlumency!" Remus said sternly. "Do you understand me? Nothing!"

Once Harry's face left the fire, Sirius and Remus both stood up, the former running his hands through his hair in frustration.

"Fuck! What do we do? Don't get me wrong, Moony, I hated that Dumbledore wanted Snape to teach Harry, but he *needs* to learn it. If what Dumbledore says is true and Voldemort can see in Harry's head without even being near him—"

Remus nodded, feeling a cold sweat run down his back. "We're all in danger."

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### **June 18th, 1996**

*"Master will not come back from the Department of Mysteries! Kreacher and his Mistress are alone again!"*

The house-elf's words echoed in Sirius's mind as Kingsley and Tonks stumbled through the Floo to grab Remus. He knew they had hoped he would not be in the room when they arrived, but there was nothing to be done about it now. Snape had contacted Kingsley to let the Order know that Dolores Umbridge had detained Harry and his friends for breaking into her office, and she was requesting Veritaserum.

It was Harry's warning message to Snape that made the Order members most anxious: *"He's got Padfoot at the place where it's hidden."*

"I've summoned Albus," Kingsley announced to the rest of the small group, which consisted merely of himself, Sirius, Moody, Tonks, and Remus. It was anyone's guess where everyone else was, which only made Sirius more nervous.

"So what do we do?" Tonks asked, her blue eyes directed at Moody, awaiting official orders.

"Well, clearly You-Know-Who has infiltrated Potter's mind. If the boy thinks that Black is in danger—"

"We need to get a message to Harry," Remus said, interrupting Moody. "If he's anything like his father, he'll stop at nothing to save Sirius if he thinks he's in danger."

Tonks nodded in agreement. "Not to mention the kids that are with him. Hermione and Ron wouldn't let him go at it alone."

"I can contact Severus to see if he can pass a message along," Kingsley offered, "but if Umbridge is in league with loyalists as we suspect, he could jeopardise his role as spy, and then we'd lose—"

"I don't give a fuck what we'd lose!" Sirius shouted, launching the glass in his hand across the room where it shattered against the wall. No one even flinched at the display, each and every one of them accustomed to his behaviour by this point. "This is a trap, and Harry's going to walk right into it if we don't do something! Snape *knew* it was a trap! He's one of *them*, and I've been saying for years that he can't be trusted! I don't care if we have to break down the front fucking door of Hogwarts. Harry needs to be alerted!"

"Sirius—"

"No!" Sirius shouted, pushing away from Remus, who stood to try and calm him down. "Moony, this is it. Department of Mysteries. Gone to rescue Sirius," he muttered so only they could hear. "This is it."

"Then they've already left," Remus acknowledged.

"What are you two whispering about?" Moody snapped, his one good eye narrowed while the magical one spun in its socket, looking behind him every half a minute so. Being kept a prisoner in his own trunk for nine months by a psychotic Death Eater had clearly done nothing to curb his paranoia.

"We need to get to the Ministry *now*," Remus insisted. "Harry and the others will have already escaped Hogwarts."

"How?" Tonks asked.

He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. We're wasting time."

"We can't just storm into the Ministry of Magic," Moody scoffed loudly. "At least not all of us. You heard Snape yourself, Black; someone needs to stay here to tell Dumbledore everything that's happened."

"Let the fucking elf tell him," Sirius snapped.

"You're not going!" Moody shouted.

Sirius turned and glowered at the rest of the group, his jaw tight. "Watch me."

## Chapter One Hundred Twenty

*All Things Subsist and Do Not Die*

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*Now I am mute despite myself  
All of them are gone  
The silence overtakes me  
The idle words forsake me  
And I am left to face me  
(In the Dark - Flyleaf)*

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**June 18th, 1996**

They stepped into the infamous Hall of Prophecy and saw nothing but wreckage. Thousands upon thousands of shattered prophecies littered the floor. One end of the hall looked to be the eye of the storm; several shelves that used to hold prophecies had been blown apart, crashing down in various directions but ultimately leading down a long pathway.

"This is madness," Kingsley whispered, staring wide-eyed at the mess.

"We're not here to sightsee!" Sirius snapped angrily. His dragonhide boots crunched against the shards while he stormed ahead. "Mourn the thousands of prophecies lost another day; right now, it's nothing but broken glass!"

Remus was fast on his heels.

The group ended up back in the open circle room. His attention lingered on the strange burn marks on some of the doors; they looked like they had been done on purpose—at least he hoped so and that it was not a stray curse.

When they had arrived, the Order had gone straight for the Hall of Prophecy, knowing that Death Eaters were focused on obtaining the one about Harry and Voldemort. Remus had not paid much attention to the remaining doors, as they had previously been closed. Now, however, some were cracked open, and shouting could be heard coming from behind them.

"What now?" Remus asked, trying to focus his hearing so that he could pinpoint Harry and Hermione's exact location.

"Split up!" Moody ordered. "Everyone take a different room."

And they did so.

Just as Remus opened one door, he heard Dora shout "Hermione!" from another room and went running toward the sound as though his very life depended on it.

Once inside a large room surrounded by strange water tanks, Remus dropped down beside his girlfriend, who was waving her wand over Hermione's motionless body. To the side, he could see Ginny and Luna unconscious; Ron was giggling maniacally in the background.

"Hermione?" Remus called to her, cupping her chin in his palm. "No, no, no."

"She has a pulse," Dora assured him.

"What happened to her?" Sirius demanded as his knees hit the floor beside Hermione. Remus wondered if they had just given out on him. Sirius's fingers were shaking as they gently brushed the hair from her face. "Where's Harry?"

"Dora, take care of Ron," Remus insisted, gesturing to the boy who was struggling against brain-like creatures attached to his arms. "And then check on Ginny and Luna."

He watched as she turned without a word and pointed her wand at Ron, throwing a Full Body-Bind Curse at the boy in order to get him to hold still.

When he turned back to Hermione, Remus frowned to see that Sirius had her pulled into his arms, whispering softly to her. "Hermione? Kitten, love, please wake up, please wake up. What was she hit with?"

Remus tried to console his friend. "I think she'll be all right."

"You *think*?!"

Remus continued, ignoring the outburst. Now was not the time to lose control. "I've seen this. In the Pensieve."

"*This is how I got my scars; all of them,*" Mia had told him inside the Pensieve before they entered the memory of the hospital wing at Hogwarts.

Remus scooted closer to Hermione's body and reached for the bottom hem of her shirt, lifting it slightly.

"What're you doing?" Sirius demanded.

"The scar." Remus showed him the bottom inch of a very recent, long, purple wound that would be all too familiar to them both.

Sirius gasped at the sight. "That's from . . ."

Remus dipped his head.

Looking frantic and a bit manic, Sirius cupped her face, his eyes wide. "Mia? Mia, love, wake up."

Frowning, Remus squeezed Sirius's shoulder. "It's still not her. Pads, we need to stay focused."

"Ron's still a little dopey," Dora said as she re-joined them. "Ginny and Luna both have pulses and should regain consciousness soon. How's—?" Her eyes fell on Hermione, narrowed down at the sight of the blistering wound peeking out from beneath her shirt. "Oh Merlin. Is she—?"

"She'll be fine," Remus insisted. "We need to get them all back to Hogwarts. She'll be unconscious for several days if I remember correctly." He gently pried Hermione out of Sirius's arms to lay her back down on the ground. They were not even close to being finished here; Harry and Neville were still missing.

"Are you sure?" Sirius asked, looking down at Hermione, unconsciously scratching at his tattooed chest with one hand while the other anxiously tugged on the silver chain around his neck. "Moony, that . . . that looks like the same curse that killed—"

"Charlus," Remus interrupted. "I know, but her attacker had been silenced this time. She'll live. I swear it."

Sirius leant down and kissed Hermione's forehead, whispering, "I'll see you soon, love. I promise."

"Pads, we need to find Harry and Neville."

Sirius looked up as though he suddenly remembered his purpose. "Neville's here, too?"

"I remember from Mia's memory."

"Ward the room so no one can get in," Sirius ordered as he rushed out of the room.

"On it!" Dora yelled after them.

"A little help!" Moody was shouting as he battled a Death Eater in the centre of the circular room. He did not look as though he actually *needed* assistance, more like he was annoyed that the others were not fighting anyone like *he* was.

Kingsley walked out of what seemed to be an empty room, aimed his wand at the back of Moody's Death Eater, stunning and binding him on the ground.

"Took you long enough!" Moody snapped.

"*Crucio!*"

The incantation of the Unforgivable came from behind a closed door and everyone turned to stare in horror. Even the sound of the word sent a painful chill down Remus's back, and he was not the intended victim. The idea that it was Harry being tortured made his fists clench tightly, and a low growl vibrated inside of his chest.

"Bellatrix," Sirius breathed out the name and darted forward.

"Pads, wait!"

Remus followed right behind as Sirius kicked open the door. They stepped through into a large, dimly lit, rectangular room. In the centre was a pit surrounded by benches that descended into the area like a great theatre. A large stone dais sat in the middle of the room, where a massive archway stood, unsupported by any surrounding wall.

They glared at the sight of Death Eaters closing in on two teenagers. Neville was bleeding profusely from a clearly broken nose, and both he and Harry were kneeling on the ground while Bellatrix Lestrange aimed her wand at them.

The rest of the Order joined them, gaining the attention of the Death Eaters.

"*Stupefy!*" Dora shouted as Lucius Malfoy raised his wand at her.

Remus growled at the sight of someone attacking his mate, and he moved to follow her, but another Death Eater jumped in his way. He saw Sirius briefly hesitate, looking like he wanted to help, but Remus shook his head. "Go. I've got this."

Sirius gave a quick salute with his wand and spun around, leaving Remus behind him.

Near the bottom of the ground where the stone dais stood, a masked Death Eater held Harry tightly in his grip, pressing on his windpipe. Sirius passed by Kingsley—who was fighting two Death Eaters at once, looking pleased with the fear they each displayed at his prowess. Tonks was halfway up the tiered seats, firing spells down at Bellatrix.

A Death Eater appeared before Sirius, shouting, "*Avada Kedavra!*"

The green light passed just over his shoulder; Sirius actually felt the heat of the spell as it missed him.

"It really pisses me off when you pricks try to kill me," he muttered dangerously, sending a Stunning Spell at his attacker, who dodged it and advanced forward.

"Aargh!"

The scream distracted Sirius and his opponent, and both looked to see Neville stabbing a Death Eater in the eye with a wand.

Using the horrifying sight as a diversion, Sirius shouted, "*Petrificus Totalus!*" at his opponent, who froze up immediately and fell over. Leaving the Death Eater, he rushed to where he saw Moody crumpled on the floor, bleeding from his head.

"Get up, old man," he mumbled, running his wand over the wound on Moody's head—a simple enough Healing Spell that would at least get him out of this place alive. He was not good enough at Healing Charms to fix it permanently.

With Moody handled, Sirius turned back to look for Harry and growled at the sight of Antonin Dolohov stalking toward his godson.

The Death Eater raised his wand just as Sirius charged, and Harry threw up a *Protego*. Sirius rammed the Death Eater with his shoulder, sending him flying out of Harry's path and unfortunately into his own.

"Black!" Dolohov roared when he regained his footing.

"This is for my father!" Sirius snarled and raised his wand, shouting every curse—legal or not—at the Death Eater responsible for Charlus's death, responsible for killing the Prewetts, responsible for Hermione's current state.

Dolohov was quick and dodged Sirius's attacks, only occasionally taking a hit to the arm here and there, which somehow did not even throw the man off balance. Not like it did when Dolohov hit Sirius in the shoulder with a *Slicing Hex*.

Springing up, Harry yelled, "*Petrificus Totalus!*"

Dolohov's arms and legs snapped together and he keeled over backward, landing with a crash on his back.

Sirius grinned at his godson. "Nice one!" he shouted and jumped up, forcing Harry's head down as a pair of *Stunning Spells* flew toward them. "Now, I want you to get out of—"

They both ducked again when a jet of green light sailed toward Sirius, narrowly missing him. Across the room, Sirius saw Tonks fall from halfway up the stone steps, her limp form toppling from stone seat to stone seat, and Bellatrix, triumphant, running back toward the fray.

Sirius's eyes widened and he turned to search for Remus, who was barreling down upon a pair of Death Eaters twenty feet from where Tonks was, unaware that Bellatrix had turned her eyes on him. Sirius turned back to Harry in a panic. "Take the prophecy, grab Neville, and run!"

He then dashed off to intercept Bellatrix.

"*Cruci—*" she began, aiming her wand at Remus's back.

"*Lacarnum Inflamare!*" Sirius shouted.

A ball of fire flew from the end of his wand, hitting his cousin in the chest and momentarily setting the witch on fire.

Bellatrix screamed in fury and extinguished the flame much too quickly for Sirius's liking. Her dark, hooded eyes pinned him with a glare, and she sneered at him. "You always did have a soft spot for saving *filthy* things. I'm going to enjoy killing you."

"You'll enjoy *trying*, bitch."

"Dumbledore!" Neville shouted, his voice muffled by his broken nose.

Every pair of eyes in the room turned to see the old wizard appear, wand aloft, his face white and furious. Dumbledore moved down the steps with the speed of a much younger man, past Neville and Harry. Shouts and screams echoed in the chamber. One of the Death Eaters made a run for it, scrabbling up the stone steps. Dumbledore flicked a spell that pulled him back effortlessly as though he had hooked him with an invisible line.

Momentarily distracted by Dumbledore's assault, Sirius barely managed to duck from a hex that Bellatrix sent his way. He growled, looking back at her, throwing a curse that she only barely dodged.

She looked enraged as she descended upon him, losing what little grace she still possessed as she flung her wand about in the air like mad, throwing everything she could at him as though she were merely hoping something would stick.

Sirius laughed loudly at the sight of her. "Come on, you can do better than that!"

The next jet of light hit him squarely in the chest.

The laughter had not quite died from his face, but his eyes widened in shock.

Remus turned just in time to watch Sirius's body curve backward, sinking through the ragged veil hanging from the arch in the centre of the dais. He did not feel the panic set in until Sirius completely vanished, and then an old familiar coldness sank into his chest.

"No," he whispered as he realised what had just happened.

Sirius was gone.

"SIRIUS!" Harry yelled, "SIRIUS!"

Remus ran as quickly as he could, unable to let the moment sink in at the sight of Harry rushing toward the veil. He grabbed the boy around the chest tightly, both of them

tumbling to the floor in the process. Harry fought in vain to free himself from Remus's grip.

"There's nothing you can do, Harry," Remus muttered, staring at the veil with wide eyes while the wolf inside his head snarled and howled at the sudden missing magic in the Pack Bond. It was something he had only felt once before in his life: the night James and Lily died. "He's gone."

"Get him, save him, he's only just gone through!" Harry continued to scream.

"It's too late, Harry."

"We can still reach him!"

Harry struggled hard, but Remus would not let go. Even if he wanted to, *Moony* would not allow Remus to let go. Dora was not in sight, Hermione was unconscious and injured in another room, and Padfoot was . . . Moony was *not* letting go of Harry. The wolf was pacing, scratching, and clawing inside of Remus's head

Harry cried in his arms, and Remus fought against the urge to do the same as he held the boy tightly, trying to be the strength that he needed him to be now. "There's nothing you can do, Harry. Nothing. He's gone."

"He hasn't gone!" Harry yelled. "SIRIUS! SIRIUS!"

"He can't come back, Harry," Remus said, his voice breaking in time with his heart. "He can't come back because he's d—"

"HE. IS. NOT. DEAD!" Harry roared. "SIRIUS!"

Remus was shaking and knew that if he did not get control of Harry soon, he would lose his grip, and the boy would certainly kill himself by running through the veil. Grabbing tighter than he probably should have, he physically dragged Harry away from the dais toward Neville, who was still fighting against a Jelly-Legs Jinx.

"Harry, I'b really sorry," Neville said, his voice still muffled a bit due to his injuries. "Was dat man . . . ? Was Sirius Black a . . . a friend of yours?"

Harry nodded.

"Here," Remus mumbled, pointing his wand at Neville's legs. "*Finite.*" Neville's legs fell back to the floor and remained still. Remus looked around for someone else to help him with the boys. "Let's find the others. Where are they all, Neville?"

"Dey're all back dere," Neville replied, pointing at the door. "A brain addacked Ron, bud I dink he's all righd. And Herbione's unconscious, bud we could feel a bulse."

Remus sighed, knowing that there was nothing left to do but clean up and take care of the wounded and . . . and move on. He knew he was in shock because, though it hurt like hell, the real pain had not settled in yet. Still, the wolf in his mind remained unsettled, howling as though he could feel everything that Remus was trying desperately to remain numb to.

There was a loud bang and a yell from behind the dais. They all turned to see Kingsley yelling in pain as he hit the ground. Bellatrix LeStrange turned tail and ran as Dumbledore whipped around. He aimed a spell at her, but she deflected it. She was halfway up the steps just as Harry broke from Remus's side and rushed after the witch.

"Harry! No!" Remus cried.

"SHE KILLED SIRIUS!" Harry bellowed. "SHE KILLED HIM! I'LL KILL HER!"

Remus moved to chase after the boy, but Kingsley was back on his feet and went to stop him, placing both hands on his shoulders and pressing down. Losing the strength he had left, Remus collapsed backward against one of the stone steps, fighting the urge to scream and cry and run after Harry to help skin the bitch alive for killing . . . for . . . for . . .

"Dumbledore's gone after him. He'll be fine," Kingsley insisted.

Harry was out of his grip, and Hermione was safe in the other room, which made Remus immediately think of his mate. "Where's Dora?" he inquired, searching the room for his mate, and panicking when he could not spot her.

"Moody's taking care of her," Kingsley promised. "All the Death Eaters that didn't vanish have been stunned and bound."

"Where's Dora?" Remus repeated, feeling like he was lost in a thick fog that was slowly trying to suffocate him. "Where's . . . ? Hermione and Harry and . . ." He gasped, struggling to breathe, the visual of the large veil in the corner of his eye stood solid and still, taunting him.

"Remus? Tonks was hit pretty hard. Moody's taking her to St Mungo's."

Remus shook his head, not fully understanding. "St Mungo's—No. I can't . . . I can't go there. They won't . . . They won't let me in."

"I know, mate," Kingsley stated, patting Remus on the shoulder. "I know. I'm so sorry about Sirius."

"No!" Remus screamed and tore away from Kingsley's touch. "It wasn't supposed to . . ." He had seen it. Mia's memories. Sirius was *alive* in them. None of this was supposed to happen. He remembered seeing Bellatrix, Hermione, and Sirius at Malfoy Manor. He remembered seeing Sirius and Hermione in the library at Grimmauld Place. She was nineteen. That had not happened yet. Sirius was supposed to be alive. What had happened?

*"It says you used a Time-Turner before? To save Sirius?"*

*"He got in trouble," Mia said in a clipped tone.*

*"He does that. And the Department of Mysteries?"*

*"That's a long story. And one better to be lived, I think."*

*"What lives are lost?" Remus asked her. "Who dies in the war?"*

*Mia frowned and averted her gaze. "You know I can't say that."*

"Fuck!" Remus screamed as the tears finally broke free. He threw a fist out into the air, needing to strike something. He came into contact with nothing, so he fell back to the ground, crumbling to his knees where he dug fingers through his hair and sobbed loudly. Something had happened. Something had *changed*, and the future was gone. *Sirius* was gone. *Mia* was . . . She would never forgive him for losing Sirius. He was supposed to take care of him. He had promised her. He had failed her again.

He looked up at Kingsley, his face wet, his eyes swelling. "I need to see Dora. Is she okay?"

"She'll be fine. Remus. Moody already Disapparated her out of here. We need to take care of the kids, though."

Remus inclined his head. "Hermione," he said and immediately rushed out of the room.

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## June 23rd, 1996

For days, Hermione remained unconscious in the hospital wing of Hogwarts. Though he stayed protectively by her side, Remus asked for constant updates on Dora, who was staying at St Mungo's until she recovered; she, too, remained unconscious after the battle. Unable to go to his mate, Remus tried to ease the panicked wolf inside of him

by staying by Hermione's side, hoping that whatever was left of the Pack Bond magic would help her heal faster if he were close by. It would not work, of course. She was not sealed to him—not like Mia had been, and Sirius . . . but Remus felt he needed to do something, even if it was to stay out of everyone's way, guarding one little witch while she healed.

"Could have died," Madam Pomfrey said when she first examined Hermione's body. Remus stood at the foot of the bed shaking.

Once the adrenaline from the battle had worn off, he had collapsed by Hermione's bedside, sobbing into his hands. He felt a slender pair of arms encircle him and looked up to see a teary-eyed Minerva McGonagall staring down at him. He felt all of twelve years old as she hugged him, remembering when his mother used to comfort him, remembering when Dorea would do the same.

"I was supposed to take care of him," Remus choked the words out; they felt like sandpaper on his tongue. "I promised her."

"You couldn't have predicted this, Remus."

"Why me?" he asked, his voice breaking again. "Why am I the one that always gets left behind?"

"You are not alone," Minerva promised, exchanging her recently soft tone of voice for her usual clipped way of speaking. There were tears in her eyes; Remus could not recall another moment when he had seen such a thing. "Now, you need to take care of yourself, young man. If you're not going to allow anyone *else* near Miss Granger, then you need to be up to the task of looking after her by looking after yourself."

Remus numbly nodded, not catching all of her words. When she left, only to be replaced by Madam Pomfrey again, he paid more attention to the mediwitch who he at least allowed to heal Hermione. With the other students in bad shape from the battle, he was left in charge of Hermione's potions, just as Mia had been left in charge of him so very long ago.

When Hermione finally regained consciousness, Remus was there, sitting in an uncomfortable chair by her side, her hand held gently in both of his. He heard her breathing change and felt her stirring long before she spoke. Not knowing what to say to her, he remained silent.

"Harry?" Hermione mumbled quietly.

Remus frowned and tightened his grip on her hand slightly. "Hermione?"

"Professor Lupin?" Hermione replied, sounding surprised.

At her words, he let her go and sighed. What he would not give to hear her call him by his name. To be his best friend again. Mia would know what to do. Remus had never felt more lost without her.

"What happened? Can you cast a Lumos? I don't know where my wand—"

"No. It's . . . It's better that it's dark." Turning his head away from her, he rubbed his eyes. He did not want her to see him crying. "You've been unconscious for several days, and . . . and the light could be painful," he muttered, choking on the words as they left his lips.

"What happened? Where's Harry?"

"Harry is fine," he promised her. "Safe, at least. The Order arrived at the Ministry in time. Or, well, none of you were . . . Some were injured, but you, Neville, Ron, Harry, Ginny, and Luna made it back."

He had chosen his words carefully, not even knowing how to tell her that Sirius was dead. A part of him wondered if she could feel it the way *he* could.

"What happened to me?"

"Not sure," Remus lied and then cleared his throat. "You were hit with a powerful curse. Neville and Harry mentioned that the Death Eater who threw it had been silenced. We think you survived because of it."

He remembered Charlus's body, hit with the same curse at their graduation. He was relieved that, thanks to a simple Silencing Spell, Hermione had survived the same fate.

"Can I see it?" Hermione asked.

Remus remembered the first time he had seen the scar in the Shrieking Shack after a night of lovemaking followed by a full moon and a morning of languid exploration. He had seen the scar which had worried him at first but somehow endeared her more to him. He was covered in scars, and she had always told him he was beautiful.

After about a minute, he wordlessly lit the end of his wand and handed it to her. He kept his eyes forward, aimed at the curtains that surrounded her bed to offer her privacy as she examined her own wound. He listened as she undid her bandages, heard her gasp of breath followed by the whimper that she tried to stifle.

"They're just scars, Hermione," Remus cleared his throat, still unable to look at her. "Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars."

"That's beautiful."

"Khalil Gibran," he mumbled. "Poet."

"Wizard?"

Remus let out a shaky breath. "Muggle."

"Professor, is there something you're not telling me?"

*"Remus, promise me something?"*

*"Anything, love."*

*"Promise me that . . . that you'll always trust Sirius. Always remember that he's a good man. And when he needs you the most, please take care of him for me."*

Take care of Sirius. At Hermione's words and the memory of his broken promise to Mia, Remus's shoulders began to shake. His head fell forward into his hands, and the tears returned with a vengeance. After a few moments, he could feel Hermione's small hands patting his back, consoling him.

"Sirius is dead."

Hermione gasped. "No!"

*I'm so sorry, he silently thought. I'm so sorry I failed you, Mia. I failed you all.*

"Where's Harry? Oh my God. Oh, Remus." When Hermione said his name for the first time, he cried harder. "Remus, I'm so sorry. He was your best friend and . . . Are you all right? I'm sorry, of *course* you're not—"

"Are *you* all right?" he asked her, turning slightly to see the soft light from his wand reflected on her worried face.

"I'll be fine. I'm more worried about you and Harry."

"I'm . . . I'm used to losing the people I love. Don't worry about Harry. It's my job now to take care of him."

"Mine too," Hermione whispered.

Remus turned away from her and choked on a breath that was trying to escape. "Our job," he agreed after he was able to speak again. "Get some rest, Hermione."

"It still hurts. Is that normal?" she asked, touching her rebandaged ribs.

"Madam Pomfrey said I should give you one of these every three hours," Remus told her as he reached for a phial of purple liquid from the table next to her bed.

"How long have you been here?"

"Doesn't matter." Remus shook his head and uncorked the Pain Relief Potion, not wanting her to know that he had been at her bedside for days, not letting anyone but the mediwitch near her. "You should drink this. It'll make you sleepy, but you need your rest." As she took the phial from him, he brushed the hair from her face, tucking a curl behind her ear. "You need to get better."

Hermione nodded and swallowed the potion down quickly. "Tastes . . . funny."

He watched as the potion went to work right away. Hermione's eyes blinked rapidly, a sign of her fatigue. He was grateful that Madam Pomfrey had the good stuff on hand, and that Hermione did not need to be sent away to St Mungo's like Dora, where he could not be by her side.

"Sleep now, love," Remus whispered as he watched her eyelids begin to droop.

"I called you 'Remus,'" Hermione mumbled, clearly already fairly inebriated from the potion.

He smiled sadly. "That you did, love."

"You called me 'love' again. Why's that?" A strange, relaxed smile fell over her face.

Remus smiled back at her, remembering how Mia Potter could easily down a bottle of firewhisky and still hex someone sideways if they looked at her wrong.

"It doesn't matter. You won't remember this conversation when you wake up."

"Tell me anyway."

Remus hesitated before speaking. "I call you 'love' because . . . that's what you are to me. Precious. Essential. My heart." He took her hand, cupping it with both of his. "There's only one other person in this entire world that I could ever love more than you, and I'm all but certain that I don't deserve her."

He wondered if Moody or Kingsley had told Dora that Sirius was dead and that Remus, who was supposed to know the future, had not done a thing to save him.

"And she's safer without me."

"That's . . . stupid," Hermione muttered.

Remus laughed quietly.

After a moment, she whispered, "Still hurts."

"The Pain Relief Potion should have helped," he said, worried. "Your ribs were badly bruised as well. I can get a salve for—"

"Not *there*. Feels cold. Right . . ." Her fingertips brushed lightly over the hollow of her throat, slowly fluttering down over her heart.

Remus swallowed hard. He knew that pain. The pain of a broken bond—missing magic. She felt something missing, and she had not even known that she had it this whole time.

"Hermione, I didn't save him. Sirius died, and . . . Hermione, I'm so sorry."

"Ralph Waldo Emerson," she muttered, nearly incoherently.

"What's that?"

"It is the secret of the world that all things subsist and do not die," she began but never finished her thought as her eyes finally shut, and she fell into a deep sleep.

"But only retire a little from sight and afterwards return again," Remus finished the quote and swallowed hard, looking down at the little witch with wide eyes.

## Chapter One Hundred Twenty-One

### *The Right Thing*

---

*How do I get through one night without you  
If I had to live without you  
What kind of life would that be  
Oh and I, I need you in my arms  
Need you to hold  
You're my world, my heart, my soul  
If you ever leave  
Baby, you would take away everything good in my life  
(How Do I Live - Trisha Yearwood)*

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**June 30th, 1996**

Remus stood at the train station just outside of the barrier between platforms nine and ten, rubbing the bridge of his nose as a severe headache took hold of him. The lack of sleep he'd had worrying at Hermione's bedside—mixed with his anxiety over being unable to see Dora and the grief over Sirius's death—had made the lead-up to the full moon unbearable; the worst in decades.

Dora had made it out of the battle okay in the end. Despite her own grief over losing her cousin, her hair was bright bubble-gum pink which usually meant she was in a good mood.

The sight of her standing beside him must have looked ridiculous to the passing Muggles. She was energy, youth, light, and life, and he was an old, scarred, broken, bitter mess.

Never before had he identified more with a nineteen-year-old Sirius, who was too eager to bury his problem at the bottom of a bottle. Remus, however, knew that liquor would only make his headache worse and, considering how much he would need to drink to get properly pissed thanks to his lycanthropy, it would never be worth it in the end. Plus, firewhisky cost money—something Remus was sorely lacking.

Fred and George, the most recent ex-Hogwarts students, approached the gathered group grinning from ear to ear.

Remus stared at their obviously new jackets. "Dragonskin?"

Fred grinned. "The *best* dragonskin—"

"—that money can buy," George finished with a smirk.

"And money—"

"—is rolling in by the barrels."

"We'll be opening up our own shop in Diagon Alley soon," Fred proudly announced. "Already scouted a few places."

"I used to live on Diagon Alley," Remus said thoughtfully. "If you can find a balance between business and fun, you boys will do quite well."

"How do you know that?" George asked suspiciously.

"Because I was your professor for a whole year. Despite what you like to let people think of you, I know how smart the pair of you are."

"Since you were once our professor," Fred remarked speculatively, stepping closer to Remus to avoid the disapproving glare that his mother was giving them, "shouldn't you be telling us how we should drop all this nonsense and get back to Hogwarts?"

Remus shrugged, not caring much either way. Fred and George looked happy; Remus envied them. "Maybe, but don't you ever forget whose name came *first* on the Marauder's Map," he said with a smirk that felt a little too forced, as though he were trying to be happy when he knew he had no right to be.

Fred and George did not seem to notice. They each stood tall, adjusted their jackets, and gave a low bow before him that looked a little over the top and yet strangely genuine.

"We're much obliged, Mr Moony," Fred declared.

"Many thanks to you, Mr Moony," George proclaimed.

The two put an arm around one another and moved to stand with their parents, grinning in the face of the disappointment that was rolling off of Molly Weasley in thick waves.

Dora stepped closer to Remus and linked her arm with his. "You sure made those two happy."

Remus sighed, wondering if he could shrug off her arm without causing a scene. "Remember that when they tell Molly what I said and she starts screaming at me."

"You all right, love?"

"Fine," he lied. "Just eager to see Harry and Hermione."

A glance at his mate made him wince internally. She was wearing a bright purple Weird Sisters t-shirt and patched jeans, but *her* patches were due to style, not because they

were the only pair she had. Quite different from the patches on *his* trousers and the shabby, threadbare condition of his jumper and overcoat

He looked away from her bitterly, tugging his arm out of her grip as the students stepped through the barrier, not bothering to look at Dora's face. He knew she would be gaping at him in concern.

"Ron, Ginny!" Molly hurried forward, hugging her children tightly. "And Harry, dear, how are you?"

"Hello, Harry." Remus offered a tight smile as he approached the boy, putting an arm around his shoulders. A part of him had thought to ask Dumbledore if he could allow Harry to return home with *him* for the summer—like he had always meant to. He had not had the chance to before Dumbledore was plotting out the next step for the Order, which was a familiar step for Remus and one that did not include a teenage boy being left in his care.

Before he lost his nerve, Remus had requested something else—something he felt that James, Lily, Sirius, and Mia would have approved of: a Dursley confrontation.

"Hi," Harry said. "I didn't expect . . . What are you all doing here?"

"Well, we thought we might have a little chat with your aunt and uncle before letting them take you home."

Harry frowned up at Remus, looking uncomfortable. His shoulders stiffened in a way that left Remus feeling more protective than usual. "I dunno if that's a good idea."

"Oh, *I* think it is," Moody snarled. "That'll be them, right Potter?" He pointed with his thumb over his shoulder. His magical eye was evidently peering through the back of his head.

Harry and Remus both turned to see the Muggle family staring at the crowd with shock and disdain.

Remus growled under his breath, a part of him eager to approach the Dursleys on his own and threaten Vernon the same way he had years ago in the middle of a Muggle cemetery.

"Ah, Harry!" Arthur called out, pulling Remus's attention back to their own little group.

His eyes fell on Hermione, who was off to the side speaking with a couple whom he figured were her parents. Her *Muggle* parents. It was a strange sight, seeing the little witch

hug the couple with great affection, the same way she used to hug Charlus and Dorea. He frowned at the memory, a part of him wondering how Mia's heart had been large enough to not only include all the strays she picked up along her path—James, Sirius, and himself at the forefront—but a second set of parents, ones that she loved with as much energy as she did this first pair. There seemed to be no limit to her affection.

"Well, shall we do it, then?" Arthur asked.

"Yeah, I reckon so, Arthur," Moody said.

The entire group, Hermione now included, approached Lily's sister and her family.

"Good afternoon," Arthur said brightly as he smiled at Vernon, who glared back at him. "You might remember me; my name's Arthur Weasley. We thought we'd just have a few words with you about Harry."

"Yeah," Moody said. "About how he's treated when he's at your place."

Remus watched closely as Vernon's moustache twitched at the obvious implication. He glared at the man just for existing. Glancing down at Hermione, he saw she was offering the Muggle the same expression as he was.

"I am not aware that it is any of your business what goes on in *my* house."

"I expect what you're not aware of would fill several books, Dursley," Moody snapped.

"Anyway, that's not the point," Dora interjected, stepping forward. Petunia stepped away from her, gaping in horror at the bright pink hair. "The point is, if we find out you've been horrible to Harry—"

"And make no mistake, we will hear about it," Remus added almost pleasantly, grinning a little when Vernon's attention was drawn to him. He purposely forced his eyes to shift gold, hoping to remind the Muggle that yes, they *had* met, and yes, he *was* still just as dangerous as he had been back then, and that yes, all threats he made years ago still applied.

"Yes, even if you won't let Harry use the fellytone," Arthur began.

"Telephone," Hermione whispered.

"Yeah, if we get any hint that Potter's been mistreated in any way, you'll have us to answer to," Moody said.

"Are you threatening me, sir?" Vernon asked, so loudly that passers-by actually turned to stare.

Moody grinned, his crooked smile looking sadistic. "Yes. I. Am."

"And do I look like the kind of man who can be intimidated?" Vernon barked.

Moody pushed back his hat to reveal his sinisterly revolving magical eye. Vernon leapt backward in horror and collided painfully with a luggage trolley. "Yes, I'd have to say you do, Dursley." He turned back to Harry. "So, Potter, give us a shout if you need us. If we don't hear from you for three days in a row, we'll send someone along."

Remus looked at Petunia, who was staring at him with horrified recognition, and he growled low at her in reply, enjoying the way that the woman whimpered in fear. It pleased him knowing that Sirius would have threatened the Muggles similarly if he had . . . if he was . . .

"Take care, Harry," Remus said, patting the boy on the back. He went in for a hug, but Molly was all too eager to grab the boy and smother him, and needlessly shouldered Remus out of her way. Annoyed, he turned back to Moody, who was already limping away from the Muggles as Molly released Harry into their care.

"Right then," Moody began, going right back into Order mode. "Potter's taken care of. Weasleys, grab your brood and get out of here. Everyone else, I suppose, wait for news from Albus when he figures out how to access Headquarters without Black. Could've just used Tonks if the old bugger hadn't gone and got the goblins involved. Now who knows who the bloody owner of the house is? Lupin, if you've got time today, I'd like to—"

"I don't," Remus stated firmly. "I'm taking Hermione and her parents home. Minerva set up security wards for the Grangers, but I'm going to check and strengthen them." He turned to look at the witch, who smiled at him in gratitude. He could tell that, especially after the recent battle, she was worried for her family. He dipped his head to her as she walked away from the group to tell her parents to wait for him.

"Tomorrow, then," Moody said.

"Owl me in a week."

Moody huffed, not used to having his orders ignored by anyone other than Sirius. "If you've got something better to do than—"

Remus turned on the man and snarled, feeling the wolf hovering just under the surface of his skin. He could see his gold eyes reflecting back at him in Moody's magical one. "I'm *sorry*, Alastor, but yes, I *do* have something better to do! Tomorrow's the fucking full moon, so I'll be trapped in my cellar while all of my bones break and then reset

themselves. Then, if it's all the same to you, I'll be recovering from *that* for a few days while simultaneously grieving over the fact that one of my best friends was just murdered . . . *again!*"

Everyone froze in utter silence.

Molly had pressed her lips into a tight line, whether to hide her sympathy over his loss or her disapproval of his language, he was not sure. Arthur's expression was nothing but piteous, which pissed Remus off. Even Fred and George had stopped smiling. He refused to glance at Dora. He could almost feel her emotions pouring off of her.

Moody stared at Remus, unblinking, which Remus gave him a lot of credit for. Not many men would be able to stand in front of a raging werewolf without flinching. "Right. Take care of yourself then. Next week."

It was the closest to an apology as anyone would ever get out of the man.

"Do you want me to come with you to the Grangers, love?" Dora asked as the rest of the Order parted ways.

"No."

"Remus—"

"I said no, Nymphadora," he snapped at her, wincing immediately at her hurt reaction. He looked down and sighed in regret. "Just . . . I'm sorry."

"It's all right. I know the moon's approaching."

Yes, yes, the moon was coming, and Remus was sorely prepared for it. He and Sirius had been *planning* for this moon. The first moon of the summer, and they were hoping to have Harry back at Grimmauld Place, where they would overindulge in chocolate cake and whatever other sweets they could convince Molly to bring them before he and Sirius would retire to the basement to wait out the moon. Now, though . . . he would be alone, back in the cellar of Lupin Cottage.

"Can we meet tonight?" Remus asked.

She smiled at him lovingly. The naive innocence in her eyes was like a needle right through his heart. "Dinner at your place?"

He shook his head and tore his gaze away from hers. "I'd prefer drinks. There's a pub down the way here," he answered, gesturing.

"Not the Leaky?"

The suspicion in her voice was evident, so he looked back at her, hoping that eye contact would prevent her from making a scene. "No, it's umm . . . it's a Muggle place."

She raised an eyebrow and her blue eyes stared at him as though she could see into his mind. Remus looked away again. "A *Muggle* bar? Remus, what's going on?"

"I have to go. I'll send you a Patronus when I'm done," he said quickly and then turned away from her, rushing over to where Hermione stood with her parents.

"Mr and Mrs Granger, how do you do?" He forced a smile to his face and extended a hand to the pair of Muggles. "I'm Remus Lupin."

"Richard," Hermione's father introduced himself. "My wife, Helen," he said, gesturing to the brunette standing beside him.

Remus looked the pair over, surprised at how much Hermione looked like them both. He had been equally surprised to learn long ago that Mia had been adopted. Granted, she had never had the unfortunate "Potter hair" as Dorea called it, but he had still always looked at the witch as a smaller copy of her Slytherin mother. Yet here, standing in front of the Muggles, he could not deny the obvious similarities.

"Pleasure." He smiled at the couple and shook hands with each of them. "I'll be accompanying you home this year. I know that Professor McGonagall put up some standard security measures for your home a while back. She's asked me to double-check them for her."

Helen frowned. "Is everything all right?"

Remus glanced briefly down at Hermione, who smiled sweetly but very subtly shook her head in a gesture that only *he* appeared to catch and understand. "Nothing to be concerned about," he assured them with lies that tasted like ash in his mouth. "Like I said, it's fairly standard. Most magical homes have their own personal *family* protections, so Hogwarts likes to take special care of the Muggle-born students who don't have access to such things."

"Oh, are you from Hogwarts then?" Richard asked.

"Lupin," Helen whispered and looked down at her daughter. "Hermione, didn't you once have a teacher named Lupin?"

"Yes, Mum." Hermione nodded. "This is Remus Lupin—formerly *Professor* Lupin."

Remus was thrilled to finally be rid of the girl seeing him as a strict authority figure.

"I see," Helen said as her brown eyes raked over Remus. "Well, it's so nice to meet you. Hermione just went on and on about how wonderful you were in her letters home."

Hermione's cheeks flushed red. "Mum!"

Remus forced himself not to groan miserably. "She's a very bright young witch," he said politely and then reached for Hermione's trunk. "Let me get that for you, Hermione."

"I'm fine, Remus," she assured him and then paused. "I mean Profess— *Mister* Lupin?"

Remus blanched, almost dropping the trunk in the process as he shook his head emphatically. "I told you, Remus is fine. I've got this. You shouldn't be lifting anything heavy."

"Why not?" Helen asked.

Hermione's face went momentarily pale. "Oh, I umm . . . I was in a little accident at school."

"Accident?" Richard's eyes widened. "What kind of accident?"

"I fell off my broom," Hermione lied.

Remus stared at her. Broom? *That* was the best she could come up with?

"You said you hated flying," Helen said suspiciously.

Hermione laughed, nerves evident in her tone. "And what do you know? Now I hate it more. It's nothing, Mum. Just a few scrapes. Madam Pomfrey sent me home with some potions. It's hard to explain. You . . . You wouldn't understand."

The Grangers turned and looked at Remus as though he could perhaps explain it better, but Remus only offered an apologetic smile in return.

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Remus stepped out of the front door of the Granger home after checking on Minerva's wards and adding about *six* of his own personal ones, just in case. Hermione's parents offered him tea and biscuits and then even insisted that he stay for dinner. The reminder that he still had drinks planned with Dora forced him to decline, which was just as well seeing that tomorrow was the full moon, and he was not sure he was in full control of himself. Considering how much Hermione had kept about her injuries from her parents, he was fairly certain that she had never told them that she knew a werewolf, or that they

even existed, and he was not in the mood to answer questions from curious and/or frightened Muggles.

"Thank you for not telling my parents anything," Hermione said as she walked him out.

"You were right. They wouldn't understand."

She nodded and folded her arms across her chest, letting out a sigh. The stress played on her the same way it did him, making her look years older than she really was. "They'd take me away. Make me leave Hogwarts and the Wizarding world. I can't do that. Harry needs me."

Remus smiled softly at her. "You are the most loyal friend I have ever known." When she smiled up at him, a piece of his soul he thought was dead along with Sirius felt like it was trying to spark itself back to life. "Harry . . ." Remus cleared his throat. "Harry is so lucky to have you."

"Are you going to be okay, Remus?"

"Don't you worry about me, love," he said and leant forward, pressing his lips against her forehead in a chaste kiss. "Enjoy your summer, take care of Harry, and . . . and I'll write when I can," he promised and turned around to Disapparate.

"Remus!"

He looked back to see her frowning. He sighed, hoping that she did not ask him for details about what he would be doing or where he would be going. It was going to be a hard enough day, followed up by a worse rest of his life.

"For after tomorrow," she said with a soft smile and slipped something into the pocket of his overcoat.

Remus looked down and saw the familiar foil wrapping of a Honeydukes chocolate bar. He smiled in gratitude but closed his eyes, unable to look at her as he Disapparated.

---

Dora was glaring at him, which, with the current colour of silver-grey eyes she was sporting, left him feeling genuinely frightened of her.

"A *Muggle* bar," she said, looking around. "Very public. Somewhere I'm legally not allowed to hex you without breaking the International Statute of Secrecy."

He winced and looked down, reaching for the pint of beer that the bartender had placed in front of him and drinking half of it in one go. He did not want to linger any longer than he needed to.

"A crowd like this," she continued, "I'd have to call in at least twelve people down from the Obliviation Squad. Interesting choice: a crowded Muggle bar. Considering you hate crowds, to begin with, especially the day before the full moon."

"Dora—"

"I'm not stupid, Remus," she glared at him. "I know what you're doing."

"You are very young . . . and . . ."

Her eyes flashed dangerously, and he immediately knew he had said the wrong thing.

"I may not be able to hex you, but I'll break your fucking nose if you finish that sentence."

He believed her. Remus swallowed hard at the sight of her fury, a voice that sounded a lot like Sirius piped up in the back of his head: *I told you witches are sexy when they're angry.* He did his best to silence that voice as well as the wolf in his head who was fighting against him, knowing what he was trying to do.

"You don't get to break up with me, Remus Lupin." Dora shook her head defiantly. "You're grieving, so am I, and you're panicking and just—"

"I'm trying to do the right thing."

"I'm your mate!"

Remus looked around, eyes wide, thankful that no one was paying them much attention. Still, a public display was now something she was clearly not worried about, and he was not going to let her throw her career away by causing a scene and breaking the law. He grabbed her hand and pulled her out the door, tossing some Muggle money on the counter.

Once they were outside, they passed a few buildings until they came to a small alley where Remus threw up a Muggle-Repelling Charm and a Notice-Me-Not for good measure.

"You *are* my mate," he said, agreeing with her. "Which is why your protection and happiness are the most important things in the world to me. You are not safe with me. You deserve . . . you deserve—"

Dora petulantly rolled her eyes. "Someone younger? Someone wealthier? Someone not a werewolf?"

"Yes!"

"I don't care! I want *you*. I love *you*. Don't do this."

"You deserve a choice."

"I *made* my choice!" She gripped him by the lapels of his overcoat.

"No. No. *Magic* did. *Fate* did," he insisted, trying to gently pry her hands away from him. This was already hard enough. Saying no to her had taken practise, and it was killing him to push her away. "You just don't know any better because we jumped right into this, and I didn't even give you the option to say no."

"Remus, we're meant to be."

*"You two are meant to be," Remus told a stubborn Sirius.*

*"I don't want to be meant to be! I want her to have a fucking choice, so she's not forced into a shit life because fate thought it would be hilarious to have her bound to the Black blood-traitor!"*

"I don't want to be meant to be," he mumbled softly, nearly a whisper as he looked down. He winced when she placed her hands on either side of his face. "I want you to have a choice and not be forced into a life because fate decided to bind you to a monster."

She finally pulled away from him, scoffing loudly. "Oh, please. You are not the big bad wolf that you like to tell yourself you are. You are freaking out because Sirius died, and Hermione and I were injured, and you think it's all your fault. You can't save everyone, Remus. It's not your job."

"It *is* my job! And I . . . I can't do it. I'm not good at it. Everyone I love dies, and the future has changed. I changed something. I ruined everything. I don't know how, but . . . I lost James and Lily, and Sirius, and Mia . . . and now . . ." He stepped away from her, the pain in his chest tightening, the coldness spreading, and his magic stretching inside of him, trying to reach out for the broken pieces of him that were now lost forever.

"So you think that everyone's gone and instead of clinging to me, you're just tossing me aside to . . . what? Make it easier for us both?"

"Hoping to."

"You're a fucking idiot."

"I'm aware."

Silenced filled the gap between them as they each leant on the brick walls of the alley, facing one another. He was waiting for her to yell and cry, call him an asshole and slap him across the face. Maybe tell him that she had never really loved him or curse him for breaking her heart. What he had not expected was:

"I refuse."

Remus blinked, confused. "Excuse me?"

"I said I fucking refuse," she spoke slowly, as though he were stupid. Maybe he was. "I'm your mate, so you're stuck with me."

Remus groaned, rubbing a hand over his face. "Dora, please don't make this any harder—"

"Have you *met* me?" she asked with a forced laugh. "I make *everything* exceptionally more difficult and, up until two weeks ago, you *loved* that about me. I'm a Black, and just because Sirius is dead doesn't mean you get to toss the whole family away. You don't want to date me? Fine. You'll get over it. Sirius told me you went through weird relationship shit with Mia, too."

Remus winced at the memories. The way his father had looked at him in St Mungo's, as though being in public with Mia had been a sin against his very nature: scandalous and unnatural.

"You can't have a life with me. No witch can. Dora, you were injured, you could have died, and I couldn't even go to see you." She was an Auror and clumsy to boot. She would always end up getting hurt. Did she expect to just sit in St Mungo's each and every time while her boyfriend, lover, husband—whatever he could be to her—sat at home twiddling his thumbs? "I can't offer you anything but danger. The war is getting worse, and Dumbledore wants me to—"

Her anger briefly subsided as her eyes widened. "Wants you to what?"

"I'm going undercover," he whispered and then added, "again."

"What do you mean *again*?" After a moment, she inhaled sharply as she put the pieces together. "Wait . . . the packs? Remus, is the . . . is your Pack Bond strong enough for that? Sirius said that last time you almost—"

"It'll have to be," he answered, unsure of himself.

Dora shook her head in a panic. "Don't go."

"I have to. *This* is what I can do for the Order. *This* is how I can help."

She brought her hand up to her mouth and nervously chewed on the edge of her thumbnail. After several moments of anxious silence, she made eye contact with him, looking determined. "Mark me."

His eyes widened at the words, the volume of his voice drowning out the sound of the howling wolf in his mind. "What?! No! Absolutely not!"

She stepped closer to him as though she knew how weak he was at the moment—knew that the full moon was tomorrow, and he was weak. Weak because she was offering him *everything*, right there on a silver platter. She had no idea that the simple words made him harden instantly, his body aching, the need to bury himself inside of her stronger than it had ever been before.

"Mark me," she whispered against his lips, not yet kissing him.

Remus held his breath to avoid her scent, knowing it would send him over the edge, and he would lose himself entirely to the wolf.

"Bring me into your Pack."

He shook his head desperately. "It'll put you in danger. It's practically marriage."

"Then marry me!"

He shut his eyes tightly; even looking at her was painful. "Dora, you don't know . . . you don't know what you're saying."

He should have expected it when she had first said that she refused to let him break up with her. She was certainly a *Black* witch, kissing him at his weakest with his eyes closed, unprepared for the assault. Her lips crushed against his, and before he had a chance to even think about what he was doing, his fingers were buried in her pink hair as he thrust his tongue into her mouth, tasting the sweetness of her. She tasted like sugar and magic and sunshine and life, and when she moaned, the sound went straight to his cock which was already painfully throbbing.

He had always worried about hurting her, about losing control with her, but instead, it was *Dora* taking charge as she shoved him against the brick wall, jumping into his arms and latching her thighs around his hips. He was drunk on the feel of her touching him, tempting him into submission. Moony did not appreciate being submissive. Suddenly, overpowered by the wolf, Remus's hands were gripped tightly on her arse, pulling her hard against him. He rutted his erection against her like a bloody teenager—like a wild animal—trying to take control of the situation.

She broke their kiss and stared deep into his eyes which he knew had to be molten gold by this point. Both were panting as they tried to catch their breath. Almost as if she had worried he'd forgotten—which he *had*—Dora tilted her head to the side and bared her shoulder to him.

"No!" Remus practically threw her away from him. "I'm sorry. I . . . I have to go," he said in a panic and ran down to the end of the alleyway.

"Remus!" Tonks called after him, tears in her eyes.

He turned back and watched as her vivid pink hair began fading from the roots as though draining away from her and seeping out into the ether, leaving behind a dull mousy brown.

Weak and knowing that it was cowardly, Remus closed his eyes and Disappeared away.

## Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Two

### *I Miss the Pink Hair*

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*I'm going away for a while  
But I'll be back  
Don't try to follow me  
'Cause I'll return as soon as possible  
See, I'm trying to find my place  
But it might not be here where I feel safe  
(Misguided Ghosts - Paramore)*

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October 1st, 1996

*Dear Remus,*

*I hope this letter finds you well. I sent a few over the summer, but the owl returned them, so I can only assume that means you were on a mission somewhere. I hope you're safe. Harry's not handling Sirius's death well. I don't think anyone is, really.*

*I've been having nightmares. I wake up feeling cold, like there's this empty pit in my chest that'll never be warm again. At first I was worried about dementors, but this is different. Maybe it has something to do with whatever curse I was hit with. I wish I had more information.*

*I'm sorry to burden you with my problems, but sometimes I feel like we're sitting here behind Hogwarts walls hiding from whatever is happening out there—where you are. Harry made Quidditch Captain and Ron made the team—Keeper. Harry's doing quite well in Advanced Potions, and I am trying to temper my jealousy. Professor Snape took over Defence Against the Dark Arts.*

*You are very missed.*

*Professor Slughorn has come out of retirement to teach Potions, and he's a very interesting character. Harry and I have been invited to his "Slug Club." Apparently, this is supposed to be quite the honour. I'm a little appalled by the elitist attitude he has, and he's not quite taken with Muggle-borns unless we show how amazing we are despite the "unfortunate circumstances of our birth." Still, it's something to do. And Slughorn keeps photographs of his favourite students from the past.*

*He has a picture of Harry's mum. She was beautiful.*

*Harry thinks that Draco Malfoy is a Death Eater. I think he's putting all of his grief into something to do—someone to blame, maybe, since he can't get to Bellatrix or Voldemort. I talked to Malfoy on the train after a prefects' meeting. He seemed . . . less hostile than normal. Didn't even call me a Mudblood; can you believe that? He looked sad . . . scared. He even said, 'Excuse me, Granger,' when I got in his way as he left the compartment. Pretty sure that was an accident. Polite Draco Malfoy is weird,*

*but it certainly doesn't scream "Death Eater." Of course, I could be wrong. He did break Harry's nose once we'd all gotten off the train. Tonks healed it. She doesn't look very well, and she's been having trouble with her Metamorphosing. I think she's taking Sirius's death harder than anyone thought she would.*

*Are you going to the Burrow for Christmas? I plan on stopping by for at least a day or two. I hope to see you there. There will be a large, chocolate-bar-shaped Christmas gift for you when I see you next.*

*Please stay safe. I don't know what I'll do if I'm left with no one but Harry and Ron to talk to. I love them both dearly, but if I have to listen to any more Quidditch talk, I will put myself in front of an oncoming Bludger.*

*"Good friends, good books, and a sleepy conscience: this is the ideal life."*

*Your friend,*

*Hermione*

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### **November 1st, 1996**

*Dear Hermione,*

*Mark Twain. Muggle.*

*I miss you, too.*

*Remus*

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### **November 2nd, 1996**

Ronald Weasley was disgusting.

It was not that she was jealous—*certainly* not of Lavender Brown—but Hermione knew that he had done it just to upset her—to get back at her for her comments about how she had suspected that Harry had slipped him Felix Felicis for the Quidditch game. A part of her said that there was something more to Ron's issues. She had known for weeks now, *years* really, that he was jealous and often compared himself to her and Harry. Even

though he *bated* Potions and thought that the Slug Club was ridiculous, he was bitter that *he* had not been offered an invitation. That was why she had invited him to the Christmas Party—as a friend, of course, though now she was deeply regretting it. She had wanted to make him feel included, introduce him to people at the party, and maybe show him that he *did* have something to offer.

His temper ruined all of that.

*Lavender Brown? Honestly!* The girl had been dotting on Ron since the beginning of school, and her behaviour had been improper *long* before he had shoved his tongue in her mouth in the middle of the Gryffindor common room. It was indecent.

Hermione would *never* be caught dead snogging anyone in public like that. Private matters should be . . . well . . . private.

Not that she'd even *had* any offers.

Not that she'd *accept* any should they become available.

Hermione felt that her heart was closed off. A strange coldness had settled deep inside of her after the battle in the Department of Mysteries. She blamed the curse that Dolohov hit her with, whatever it was. But even if her heart *was* open, it would not be a welcome place for Ronald Weasley. He was using another girl to try and make her jealous. If Hermione was jealous of *anything*, it was that Lavender would likely not have to brush her teeth on her own for some time, as it appeared Ronald had willingly taken over the job of cleaning her mouth for her.

Still, the fact that he *thought* he could do something like that to hurt her on purpose, well, it hurt.

"*Avis*," she whispered, twirling her wand above her and watching as a small flock of canaries appeared.

She had spent years trying to stay friends with Harry and Ron, and somehow, she always did something to make them angry with her. She remained ever loyal to Harry, who at least had the grace to apologise when he was unkind. Ron, even when he *knew* he was in the wrong, would blush and grin crookedly at her as though that silently made up for everything.

"Hermione?"

She smiled sadly up at her friend as he quietly approached. "Oh, hello, Harry. I was just practising," she added, gesturing to the birds.

Harry sighed and put an arm around her shoulders, pulling her in close next to him.

She leant her head on his shoulder and smiled when she felt his chin rest on top of her hair. "I really am happy that you guys won the game. I know I don't appreciate Quidditch as much as you do, but . . . it's important to you, and—"

"I know," Harry said. "I'm sorry I got you in trouble with Ron because of the Felix Felicis trick I played on him."

"He seems to be *enjoying* the celebrations," she said bitterly.

"Er . . . does he?" Harry asked innocently.

Hermione sat up and stared at him incredulously. "Don't pretend you didn't see that."

Harry's face scrunched up into a grimace. "It's a side of him I never ever wanted to see. And that's saying something since I've shared a dorm room and communal shower with the bloke for going on six years."

Hermione laughed. "Ew, Harry."

"Still," he said with a frown, "he shouldn't have done that, least of all in front of you."

"He shouldn't do that in front of *anyone*," Hermione said emphatically. "He's just using poor Lavender, and she doesn't even know it."

"I think he likes the attention she gives him," he pointed out.

Hermione nodded. "That much is certain."

"I don't like when he hurts you. I'm supposed to take care of you. I promised—" Harry began but then looked down and away from her, clearly ashamed.

Hermione stared at him. "Harry, I'm upset that Ron is trying to hurt me on purpose. I'm upset that he yelled at me and accused me of not believing in him. Frankly, I'm still upset at him for abandoning you during the Triwizard Tournament two years ago, and for accusing poor Crookshanks of killing his stupid rat three years ago. I think I'll hex him the next time I see his face," she admitted with a laugh. "I've been upset for a long time, and I'm so very tired of burying it inside."

Harry sighed and then offered her a sympathetic smile. "I know the feeling."

"I wish we could have had a normal life here at Hogwarts sometimes," she said, looping her arm through his and lacing their fingers together. She treasured their friendship that, unlike hers with Ron, came with ease and comfort. Harry was the closest thing she

had ever had to a brother, and she knew he felt the same way; there was no need to address it.

"Sometimes I think that if you'd never met me—"

"Shut up, Harry."

Harry chuckled at her ire. "I thought you'd be upset about . . . you know . . ."

"You thought I was *jealous*? I don't see Ron like that. I might have thought about it a very long time ago, but, well, I haven't always had the most logical taste in men, have I?"

Harry shrugged. "Krum wasn't so bad."

"He couldn't pronounce my name."

"Professor Lockhart could," Harry teased.

Hermione rolled her eyes, doing her best not to confess her previous crush on *another* professor . . . or . . .

She frowned.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," Harry said. "I was just teasing."

"I know. It's . . . It's not that."

"If it makes you feel any better, I'm, well, lonely too."

"It doesn't make me feel better to know that you're lonely. Ginny will come around."

Harry blushed, his eyes widening. "Ginny—What? I-I-I never said—"

"You are the least subtle person I've ever met, Harry Potter." Hermione smirked at him. "I won't tell Ron, though."

Almost as though mentioning him was a Summoning Charm, Ron appeared, stepping through the door with a giggling Lavender on his arm. His red hair was mussed, and his lips were swollen. He looked at Hermione briefly—almost smug when their eyes met—and then turned his attention to Harry, purposely ignoring her.

*This is why my brain forces me to find men twice my age more attractive than adolescent idiots.*

Ron pretended to look embarrassed to have stumbled upon them in the room. Lavender actually did look a bit sheepish, but she giggled, flashed Ron a beckoning look, and then left without a word.

"Hey, Harry," Ron said, running a hand through his hair, clearly not planning on following his new girlfriend. "Was wondering where you'd run off to."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You shouldn't leave Lavender waiting outside," she advised him as she stood to leave the room. She glanced at his face when he tensed as she passed him. The way he showed fear pleased her, but when he sighed in relief as she moved for the door, irritation took over, and she turned and glared at her *supposed* friend.

"*Oppugno!*" she snarled and watched with mild amusement as the canaries she had summoned earlier turned and violently attacked him.

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### December 20th, 1996

Hermione was grateful when, after her last early morning class let out, she was given permission to go into Hogsmeade with a few other students to pick up clothing and other last minute items for Christmas—as well as for Slughorn's Christmas party. Walking down with the other girls, however, was a nightmare, and Hermione did her best to stay as far ahead of the others as possible. She could still hear Lavender giggling and shrieking with Parvati about her little *Won-Won*. Hermione did her best to hold in her breakfast as the blonde behind her described, *in detail*, attributes of Ronald that she would have preferred to remain in the dark about.

The sight of a familiar witch in the village brought a much-needed smile to Hermione's face. "Tonks!"

"Wotcher, 'Mione."

Hermione smiled kindly, ignoring the detested nickname. "Harry mentioned that you were stationed in Hogsmeade. How are you?" she asked, recalling Harry's theory over Tonks's sudden lack of shine.

*"I had a thought," Harry said tentatively. "You don't think she could have been, you know, in love with Sirius?"*

*"What on earth makes you say that?" Hermione asked, feeling a strange discomfort trying to crawl its way out of her.*

*"I dunno, but she was nearly crying when I mentioned his name. And her Patronus is a big four-legged thing now. I wondered whether it hadn't become, you know, Padfoot."*

"Oh, I'm all right." Tonks offered a sad little smile. "What're you doing down in the village?"

"Professor McGonagall is allowing some of us that are done with classes for the term to finish up last minute Christmas shopping. Plus, there's a Christmas Party tonight, and I needed to get a new pair of shoes."

"Christmas party? Hot date?" Tonks said with a teasing grin that did not quite reach her eyes.

Hermione scoffed, thinking of Cormac and the colossal mistake she had made in asking him. It was impulsive, and she was already regretting it. "He likes to *think* so."

Tonks laughed, and the sight made Hermione lighten up inside. She watched carefully to see if Tonks's hair would turn a bright-coloured shade, but it sadly remained mousy brown, looking lifeless.

"I'll walk with you. Tell me all about him."

"Oh, I can barely stand him," Hermione confessed. "His name is Cormac McLaggen, and I only asked him to go with me to get under Ron's skin," she admitted with a bitter sigh. "*Ronald* has acquired a new girlfriend for the purpose of making me jealous, and all it's actually doing is making me nauseous. It's not right that he's just using her. Though, I suppose I'm doing no better with McLaggen."

"Go easy on yourself," Tonks advised. "Wizards sometimes need their egos taken down a notch."

"Some need a little more reassurance, though," Hermione agreed knowingly, offering a small smile as Tonks turned and stared at her.

"Merlin, you really are too smart for your own good, you know that? How'd you figure it out?"

Hermione shrugged her shoulders. "Harry saw your Patronus. He said it *almost* looked like Padfoot. I remember summer and Christmas at Grimmauld Place, and you and Sirius weren't close—not like *that*."

"He's not taking Sirius's death very well," Tonks admitted quietly. She did not say out loud who *he* was, but Hermione knew. "Blames himself, I suspect. You haven't heard from him lately, have you?"

Hermione flushed slightly, chewing on her bottom lip. "What makes you think that—?" Tonks cut her off by raising an incredulous eyebrow. "He'll be at the Burrow for Christmas."

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### **December 24th, 1996**

Remus tried to be subtle about his excitement at being at the Burrow for Christmas, but the moment Molly greeted him at the door with a large slice of treacle tart, all subtlety had gone out the window. Normally, he detested the idea of anyone doting upon him—even in his youth it had taken serious effort to allow Mia, and later Dorea, to take care of him—but he was "much too skinny" according to Molly. He did not have the energy to argue with her as she set a plate down in front of him and piled it nearly six inches high with potatoes and roast beef.

He was thrilled to see Harry but disappointed in finding that Hermione had decided not to come to the Burrow for Christmas. When Remus had asked why her plans had changed, Ron mumbled under his breath, "She's probably too busy snogging Krum and Cormac to bother with us," and then left the room.

Remus turned a stern eye on Harry, who nodded in understanding, raising his hands in surrender. "I know. Believe me, I'm trying to fix it. They're both stubborn."

Remus spent the day catching up with Harry, who was very excited to tell him about their Quidditch season thus far, his suspicions of Draco Malfoy being a Death Eater—which Remus already knew about, thanks to Hermione's letter—and an Advanced Potions textbook he found to be quite useful. Remus did his best to caution Harry, especially if his suspicions were correct about whom the book might have originally belonged to—though the title "Half-Blood Prince" meant nothing to him.

"You really should turn the book in to Professor Slughorn."

The look Harry gave him as he bobbed his head was far too reminiscent of James, who had rarely accepted words of caution from anyone in his youth, especially when he had his mind set on doing something already.

Later in the evening, Remus made his way up the winding stairs to say farewell to Harry. Outside of the room, he overheard Hermione's name and decided to stop and listen at the door while Ron and Harry conversed on the other side. The voices were muffled, and—despite the advantage of werewolf hearing—Molly's wireless downstairs blaring Celestina Warbeck made it that much harder to spy on the teenagers.

"Aren't you a little old to be eavesdropping?"

Remus jumped, surprised that anyone was able to startle him at all. He must have been incredibly distracted. His gaze fell on Dora; her mousy brown hair made something clench painfully in his chest.

"What are Harry and Ron are whispering about?" She pressed her own ear against the door before looking up at him.

It hurt, even more, to stare at her because of the grey eyes that looked so much like Sirius's. Remus noted that there was a small beauty mark just below her left ear. He noticed a pattern of freckles covering her nose that had never been there before. All these tiny little things that he realised Dora used to use her abilities as a Metamorphmagus to cover up but no longer could.

He frowned, knowing that it was *his* fault her magic was not properly obeying her.

"More theories about how Snape's a Death Eater?" she asked him, looking eager to fill the silence that sat between them. "Or are they plotting against my little cousin again?"

"Hermione told me that Draco broke Harry's nose," Remus said.

"I don't know what's wrong with that boy." Dora sighed in frustration. "Mum says he's probably just like his father, and that his father was—"

"I went to school with Lucius Malfoy. Draco's *nothing* like him. He tries, but there's something different about him. Hopefully, the good blood in him will win out in the end."

"*Good* blood?" Dora snorted. "He's half Malfoy, half Black. You know us Blacks. Flip of the Galleon."

"I've only ever met one Black I didn't like." Remus growled at the memory of Bellatrix Lestrange's voice echoing in the Ministry of Magic, screaming of her victory over killing Sirius. The memory that Mia had shown him of the crazy witch only added to his anger. "And I'm not counting Walburga's portrait. Though, I suppose I *did* meet her once before she died."

Dora frowned in understanding. "Remus, have you—?"

"Shh." He leant his ear closer to the door.

"What's going on?"

"Well, so far I've learnt that Harry's obtained a bottle of Felix Felicis, Draco Malfoy keeps disappearing from the Marauder's Map, Ron has a new girlfriend . . . And I'm not entirely sure what a McLaggen is," Remus said with a low growl, "but I think I need to kill it."

"The boy 'Mione took to the Christmas party?" Dora asked with a smirk.

His eyebrows shot up to his hairline in surprise. "How do you know that?"

She shrugged. "Girls talk."

"You talk to Hermione?"

"I'm stationed in Hogsmeade. I like the little witch. I have since before I met her. We happen to have a lot in common," she said clearly, the look on her face saying more than her words ever could. "Or we *will*."

"Don't," he pleaded quietly. It was hard enough to stay away from Dora, but to be reminded that Mia might never return to him because of something that had gone wrong in the timeline . . . it hurt too much.

"Are you even still planning on it?" she asked, ignoring the way he stepped back from her. "Sending her back?"

"I don't know," he answered truthfully and then a sharp burn stung his wrist. "Ow!" He snarled, rubbing at the raw skin with a defeated sigh.

Dora chuckled, a slightly sadistic look in her eyes. He supposed that, after everything, he deserved that. "That's a yes. You apparently made a promise."

"Fucking Vow," he grumbled bitterly. "Sorry. I'm glad you and Hermione are friends. I worry about . . . about the both of you."

"You know I'm safe."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do. I'm an Auror. Plus, I know you've been coming to Hogsmeade the past few weeks." Dora grinned smugly when he looked down, guilty. "You know, the whole stalking thing was a lot more adorable when I got to snog you at the end of the day."

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"How'd your mission go?"

He sighed and leant against the wall behind him, groaning at the memory of his recent descent into the werewolf packs. "Not well. My Pack Bond isn't significant enough to keep me safe."

It had been a thought that occurred when Dumbledore asked him to look into the mission originally. All he had was Harry, Hermione, and Dora—and not a single one of them were properly marked. The Pack Bond was unsealed between himself and the witches, and Harry was only involved due to his connection to James. The magic just was not strong enough to sustain him properly and keep him safe at the same time.

"Thankfully, the only other Alpha currently alive is Greyback, and Dumbledore knows better than to send me into *his* group. I'd be dead there no matter what," he said, running a hand through his hair.

Dora listened to him, shoving her hands into the pockets of her Auror robes that had been left open, showing the Holyhead Harpies t-shirt beneath. "So, what's next?"

"Dumbledore wants me to go to Ireland for a few months," he explained, frowning when he could see the disappointment on her face. It was obvious she was hoping that, with the other mission ended, there would be a chance at reconciliation. Remus knew better. *This is for her own good*, he reminded himself. "There've been reports of rogue wolves grouping together. Safety in numbers."

She lifted a brow in obvious concern. "He doesn't want you to take over a pack, does he?"

Remus shook his head firmly. "No. Even if he did, I wouldn't. I have my own pack. Broken as it is, it's . . . still mine."

"I take it you're not over this whole self-deprecation thing?"

He sighed loudly, exhausted from arguing with her over the same thing. "I need . . . I need you safe. You deserve—"

"Six months."

"What?"

"I'm giving you six months, Remus. Six more months to do whatever you need to do to get over your issues."

His jaw tightened. "Are you giving me an ultimatum?"

She shrugged, looking completely unperturbed. He hated that he could not guess her emotions by the colour of her hair. "I suppose. Although I *was* trying to threaten you."

"And if I don't comply?"

"I'll force your hand."

He stood there, slightly shocked and a little nervous but tried not to show either.

"Meaning?"

"You love me, and I love you," Dora whispered as she stepped closer, her scent assaulting him like a tidal wave. "For some reason, you think I need to have time to make a proper judgement on our relationship, which is really just an excuse for distancing yourself from me because you think that being involved with a werewolf will put me in more danger than I already am. It's ridiculous. You *know* it's ridiculous, but considering what happened to Sirius, and how Harry's in danger, and Hermione's right on his heels all the time, you're feeling helpless. You've decided to take a stand in our relationship so that you can feel like you've got control over something."

*Well, Remus thought. She's not wrong.*

"And you're saying if I don't get over it, you'll force my hand? By doing what, exactly?"

"I don't know, something to rile you up. Run naked through Diagon Alley for everyone to see." She grinned when Remus growled involuntarily. "Oh, Moony doesn't like that idea?"

She belayed nothing that said she was bluffing.

*Blacks have no shame. She'll do it, and everyone will see her—desire her.*

"Six months," Remus agreed, trying to hear his own voice over the sound of the wolf snarling inside of his head.

It was painful to be away from her, but she clearly was not letting up. Six months would give him time to think of a new plan to get her to see reason. Six months would give him time to figure out how to keep her safe. Then again, with Sirius dead and the future changed, Remus did not know if he would survive the next six months.

"Six months."

A lynx Patronus soared in through a nearby window, landing in front of them. When its mouth opened, Kingsley's voice spoke. "*Happy Christmas Tonks. Mad-Eye says get back to Hogsmeade. He's in a mood,*" the lynx said and then promptly vanished.

Dora rolled her eyes and sighed irritably. "I've got to get back to work." She waved her wand, conjuring her own Patronus which, instead of the rabbit it had been a year earlier, was a massive, silvery wolf.

"That's . . ." he muttered in astonishment at the sight of the Patronus that looked to be a docile looking version of Moony.

"On my way, Kings," Dora responded, relaying the message to the Patronus for delivery. "Happy Christmas." When she was done, the wolf turned on its paws and leapt out the nearby window, vanishing into the night.

"That was—" Remus tried again.

"It was good to see you, love," Dora said with a sad smile before leaning up and kissing his cheek, shaking her head in disappointment when he tensed at her touch. "Stubborn wolf."

"Please stay safe," he called out after her.

Dora turned around and grinned at him. "You know me," she said and then promptly backed into a small shelf housing several of Arthur's Muggle toys, sending it to the ground. "Oops! Sorry, Molly!"

"Dora?" Remus swallowed hard as she turned her grey eyes to look back at him. "I . . . I miss the pink hair the most."

She smiled sadly. "Me too."

## Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Three

### *Young and Whole*

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*If you could only see the beast you've made of me  
I held it in but now it seems you've set it running free  
The saints can't help me now, the ropes have been unbound  
I hunt for you with bloody feet across the hallow'd ground*  
(Howl - Florence + The Machine)

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**June 7th, 1997**

Everyone in the infirmary was coming down from the post-battle adrenaline surge. When Remus received Dumbledore's owl upon his return from Ireland and the werewolf packs with no success, he was actually thrilled for something to do. However, patrolling Hogwarts grounds with several other Order members so that Dumbledore could leave the castle for a few hours was not what he'd had in mind.

Then again, he had thought it was going to be a boring night.

"You're okay?" Remus asked, hovering over Dora as she pulled bits of rubble from her brown hair, casually tossing the debris on the floor when Madam Pomfrey was not looking at her.

"I'm fine, Remus, just a little sore."

"You're sure?" he asked, his eyes flickering between her and Hermione.

Dora smiled, patting his hand which was gripping the handle of her chair tight enough to make his fingers turn bone-white. "Go on, love. Check on her before Moony completely loses it."

Remus nodded, grateful that despite all the pain he had caused her, Dora still somehow understood him in a way that very few ever had. She understood the way the wolf inside of him thought and worked, understood his driving need to keep her safe but to also keep Harry and Hermione safe—even when they tried like hell to make that as difficult as possible.

"Hermione?" Remus whispered as he approached. Hermione was perched at the end of a hospital bed, staring across the room where Bill Weasley was lying unconscious. He was being fretted over by Madam Pomfrey, while Ron stood at the foot of the bed

looking terrified. Drawing Hermione's attention away from Bill, he smiled sadly, trying to hide his anxious concern. "You're okay? You're not hurt?"

Hermione shook her head. "I'm fine, Remus, are you all right?" She reached up, tenderly touching the side of his face and turning him toward the light. "You've got a cut here on your forehead."

He pulled away from her touch, glancing back at Dora as he did so and catching the tail end of her rolling her eyes at him. Embarrassed, he refocused his attention on Hermione. "I'm fine. But you're okay?" When she nodded, he asked, "Where's Harry?"

"I've sent young Miss Weasley to bring him here," Minerva said, just as the doors to the hospital wing opened, revealing the boy in question.

"Harry!" Hermione shouted and leapt from her seat, barrelling past Remus.

He was quick to notice the way Harry clung tightly to Ginny's hand. For a brief moment, Remus's breath caught in his throat; he almost thought he was looking at James and Lily. Exhaling, he cleared his head and watched as Harry released Ginny's grip only to open his arms to Hermione as she flew into them.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked him.

"I'm fine, how's Bill?" Harry asked, watching anxiously as Ginny moved to stand beside Ron at the foot of Bill's bed.

Madam Pomfrey was still fussing over the unconscious body of the eldest Weasley boy, waving her wand, applying ointments to his skin, and stacking potion phials on the bedside table. "I've done everything I can do, but there's no cure for werewolf bites, unfortunately."

"But he wasn't bitten," Ron insisted. "He was scratched. And it's not a full moon. What does that mean?"

All eyes turned to Remus as though he were an expert. Well, he technically was, but it was annoying that they were looking at him *not* because of his former post as Defence Against the Dark Arts professor but because he *was* the subject matter he had previously taught.

"He won't be a full werewolf," he informed everyone, sighing. "But that doesn't mean there won't be some contamination. Those are cursed wounds. He'll have some wolfish characteristics from now on I suspect, and . . . and he'll be scarred like that . . . for life."

As if Bill's attack or the Death Eaters' infiltration had not been enough, Harry's sudden appearance followed by his delivery of what had happened on top of the Astronomy Tower had everyone in shock. Remus felt the wolf inside of him growl furiously as he fought to control his rage.

Dumbledore was dead.

Sirius had been right all along: Snape was a murderer.

Remus resolved to listen to every word his remaining friends said with great faith. He had made too many mistakes over the years by not trusting Mia and Sirius. As far as he was concerned, any word that came out of Hermione's mouth from this point forward was golden, if only because his history showed he had a serious lack of results when it came to making decisions on his own.

While the others began exchanging their version of the night's events to put the pieces together, he made his way back to Bill's side, somehow feeling responsible for the state the young man was in.

Remus had faced Greyback only twice in his entire life. The first, as a child—when he had been originally infected. The second, as a teenager—when he had formed his pack. Padfoot and Mia had distracted the older wolf in order to free Moony of the Alpha's power, and Prongs had run him into the ground, spilling his blood in the Forbidden Forest. Moony had done what he needed to do to assert his power over the other wolf, to break free, but he *should* have killed him—killed him right then and there. If he had, then Bill would not be lying in the bed before him, irreversibly damaged.

Suddenly, Bill stirred and tried to speak.

"Bill?" Remus asked as he leant over, looking down at the young man.

"Remus," Bill choked out. "We going to be sharing a cage anytime soon?"

Remus let out an exhausted laugh, smiling sadly. "Afraid not. I hope you like your steaks rare, though," he said with a bit of humour, feeling a strange weight lift off of his shoulders when Bill smiled at him. "Lie back and rest. You're being taken care of," he assured him as the redhead fell back asleep almost instantly.

Just then, the doors of the hospital wing burst open. Arthur and Molly Weasley were striding up the ward, Fleur Delacour just behind them.

"Molly, Arthur." Minerva stood to greet them. "I am so sorry—"

"Bill," Molly whispered, darting past Minerva as she caught sight of her son's mangled face. "Oh, Bill!"

Remus stepped aside to allow Molly to be close to her son, frowning as Dora tried to reach for his hand. Reluctantly, he pulled away from her, and she scowled at him. He did his best to avoid her glare, but he could feel it burning a hole in the side of his head as he resolutely stared at the floor.

"Of course, it doesn't matter how he looks. It's not r-really important . . . but he was a very handsome little b-boy. Always very handsome." Molly sobbed as she took the jar of salve from Poppy's hands and began to apply it to Bill's skin herself.

Remus frowned at her words, subconsciously scratching at the long thin scars across his own face. He had not meant to, but he turned his gaze up to find both Dora and Hermione staring at him, each as though they knew what he was thinking and were silently scolding him for it. Immediately, he removed his fingers from his face and cleared his throat.

Molly, meanwhile, had begun wailing. "And he was g-going to be married!"

"And what do you mean by that?" Fleur said suddenly and loudly. "What do you mean, he *was* going to be married?"

Molly raised her tear-stained face, looking startled. "Well, only that—"

"You think Bill will not wish to marry me anymore? You think, because of these bites, he will not love me?"

"No, that's not what I—"

"Because he will!" Fleur shouted, drawing herself up to her full height and throwing back her long mane of silver hair. "It would take more than a werewolf to stop Bill from loving me!"

"Well, yes, I'm sure," Molly said, "but I thought perhaps . . . given how . . . how he—"

"You thought I would not wish to marry him? Or perhaps, you hoped?" Fleur glared, her nostrils flaring. "What do I care how he looks? I am good-looking enough for both of us, I think! All these scars show is that my husband is brave! And *I* shall do that!" she added fiercely, pushing Molly aside and snatching the ointment from her.

Everyone stood utterly shocked, waiting for Molly's retaliation which did not look likely to come.

Remus took a brief moment to glance at Hermione, whose brown eyes were almost sparkling with awe as she stared at Fleur. He realised that Mia would have adored the French girl.

Lost in thought about his long lost best friend, he was not prepared when Dora smacked him on the side of the head.

"Ow!"

"You see?!" she shrieked loudly.

He gaped at the witch who, despite currently lacking her Metamorphmagi abilities, had been able to turn her face a lovely shade of red.

"She still wants to marry him, even though he's infected! She doesn't care!"

*Well, my six months is up*, was his first thought.

He attempted to speak, wanting to talk to her in private, but for some reason—perhaps because he was so used to pushing people away over the years—Remus opened his mouth and the words, "It's different," came out. "Bill's not a full werewolf, and he—"

"I don't care!"

Remus flinched at her rage, never doubting for a second that the woman standing in front of him was a Black.

"I've told you a million times—"

Embarrassed and defensive, Remus shouted back at her. "And I've told *you* a million times that I am too old for you, too poor . . . too dangerous." He chanced a glance at Harry and Hermione, who were both staring at him with looks of shock and disappointment.

*Great*, he thought. *Just fucking great.*

"I've said all along you're taking a ridiculous stance on this, Remus," Molly said, glaring at him with a look that could have rivalled Dorea Potter and made him feel just as foolish. Whatever ire he had expected her to give Fleur, she was now directing at him, looking as though he were one of her own children that she was disappointed in.

"I am *not* being ridiculous," he muttered petulantly. "Dora deserves somebody young and whole."

"But she wants *you*," Arthur spoke up with a small smile. "And, after all, Remus, young and whole men do not necessarily remain so." He gestured sadly at his son, lying on the bed.

"This is . . . not the moment to discuss it," Remus insisted, avoiding everybody's eyes as he looked around distractedly. "Dumbledore is dead—"

"Dumbledore would have been happier than anybody to think that there was a little more love in the world," Minerva said curtly.

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Remus had been grateful for a reprieve in the conversation, even if it was a change back to the topic of Dumbledore's death and what would need to happen next.

Minerva insisted that the students return to their beds, and the members of the Order—save for Molly, Arthur, and Fleur—all agreed to assist the staff in rounding up stray teenagers and escorting them back to their individual common rooms. Many had left at the sound of the battle in the corridors.

Slughorn went to the dungeons, effectively taking over as Head of Slytherin now that Snape had shown his true colours. Since Filius was still recovering from being knocked unconscious, Minerva escorted Luna back to the fifth floor to look over the Ravenclaws. Dora met up with Pomona in order to round up the large group of Hufflepuffs.

Remus had the worst job of all, searching for the recklessly brave, wayward Gryffindors, who had escaped the tower at the sound of a fight, eager to jump into the fray. He walked Harry, Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Hermione back to the common room before leaving once again to look for others.

An hour later, when the smallest first year lion was back in its den, Remus found himself walking up the giant staircase toward the scene of destruction from earlier. A part of him wanted to see for himself the last place Albus Dumbledore stood alive.

When he reached the broken Astronomy Tower, the last person he expected to see was Hermione, standing near the rails. He stepped over the broken pieces of rubble that had yet to be cleared away from the entrance. "Hermione?"

"Remus!" Hermione gasped. "Oh. Sorry, you startled me."

"Forgive me." He frowned, hands shoved into the pockets of his robes as he slowly approached her. "I didn't think anyone would be up here. I didn't think anyone would *want* to be up here—not for a while at least."

"I couldn't sleep," Hermione admitted with a frown.

"Nightmares?" Remus inquired, his brow furrowed.

"What? No. I've just been thinking about Professor Dumbledore and, well, everything I suppose. I just can't believe that Professor Snape—I mean, I *know* he did it; Harry wouldn't lie about that." She wiped away a stray tear as it fell against her cheek. "It's just hard to imagine."

"I know what you mean," he said "I've been doubting myself for years over everything I once believed. For twelve years, I thought Sirius was responsible for James and Lily's deaths, and now a man I trusted because Albus Dumbledore asked me to is a . . . I don't even know if we can call him a traitor. I have to wonder if Snape was *ever* loyal to our cause."

"Was he always this bad?" Hermione asked. "You went to school with him."

He thought about all the times when Snape had caused problems for them as children. Then again, everything he did to them was well earned. Still, Remus wondered if he had played a part in Snape becoming a Death Eater by not telling James and Sirius to back off. Hell, for not telling *Mia* to back off.

"Went to school with a lot of Death Eaters," he said, letting a scowl pass his generally stoic face. "Of course, we didn't exactly know it at the time."

"Were you ever suspicious?"

He remembered the last time he saw *Mia* here on this same tower: years earlier, when they had still been dating. Remus felt ashamed as he realised that, even back then, *Mia* had been suspicious of the Slytherins—of the future Death Eaters.

"Some of us were," he whispered

"I'm sorry. I know it must be painful to talk about the past. What with losing—"

"Everyone?" Remus tried to joke, but they both frowned in the end.

"What's going to happen now?" Hermione wondered.

"There's the funeral, I suppose. And then the Order needs to find a new headquarters because Grimmauld Place has been—"

"I'm sorry, Remus," Hermione interrupted him. "I meant what's going to happen with *you*? I know Profe—*Snape*," she corrected herself, "was the one who brewed your Wolfsbane Potion. Is there another Potions Master who could help you? Professor Slughorn?"

"No, unfortunately not. Perhaps *you* could give it a try."

"Me?!" Hermione shook her head emphatically. "You put too much faith in me, Remus. I'm not anywhere *near* talented enough to brew such an advanced potion. I'd be terrified of hurting you."

He smiled sweetly at her, remembering the first time that Mia had ever given him the potion. She had appeared confident, but her heart rate betrayed her.

"I won't put that pressure on you. It's not your responsibility. But, for the record, I don't put *too* much faith in you, I just have confidence in you and your talents, Hermione." He stepped closer to her, reaching out to put a hand on her shoulder but stopping himself and, instead, running the hand through his greying hair. "I'll be fine, though. It won't be the first full moon I've gone without the potion."

"Will Tonks make it easier?"

Remus's eyes widened. "What?"

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to pry, but after the umm . . ."

He raised an unamused brow. "*Spectacle* in the hospital wing?"

She nodded, looking embarrassed. "Well, I assume she's your mate?"

"How would you know that?" he asked, surprised. Mia, of course, had known, and Remus figured that one day Hermione would discover it for herself, but he assumed that it would be a long way off.

"Books?" She shrugged her shoulders and laughed softly. "I once wrote a very interesting essay about werewolves, you see, and only in my third year. Two rolls of parchment worth."

"Three," Remus smirked, correcting her. "I read every word. I imagine, then, in addition to being able to recognise a werewolf, you learnt how a werewolf recognises its mate?"

Her smile faded. "You told Tonks that you were too dangerous for her."

"Also that I was too old and too poor," he reminded her.

"Excuses. You're not a very good liar, you know."

Remus chuckled. "Not many Gryffindors are."

"The safety of a mate is a werewolf's primary instinct," she said. "It goes above and beyond that of the need to hunt, even."

"Rivalled only by the need to protect one's pack." Remus frowned and turned from her, leaning against the rail to her side as he stared out at the open black sky, watching the approaching waxing moon with interest.

"Do you have a pack?" Hermione asked.

He closed his eyes thinking of their faces: James, Lily, Sirius . . . Mia. He bowed his head sadly. "I did. Once."

"And you lost them." Hermione sighed in understanding. "Is that why you tried to push Tonks away? Because you're afraid of losing someone else?"

His nose twitched. "For someone so against Divination, you have quite the skill for it."

"No, I just have eyes," she teased. "I know my opinion doesn't matter."

He laughed quietly, remembering his promise to himself earlier. Her words meant more than anything to him. "You'd be surprised, Hermione. You . . . You're a friend, and your opinion matters a great deal to me."

"I think you should be with your mate," Hermione said, blushing softly and looking as though it had taken her a great deal of courage to tell him what she thought. "Professor McGonagall is right: Dumbledore would have been happier than anybody to think there was a little more love in the world. How long have you known that Tonks is—?"

"Much longer than I feel appropriate to say aloud." Remus groaned at the memory of being locked in Sirius and Mia's bedroom while a five-year-old Dora pilfered his chocolate supply in the kitchen.

He turned to look at Hermione, and his attention fell on a large wound on her arm. His brows furrowed at the familiar triangular mark.

*I've been here*, he thought to himself as he stared at the small wound.

"Hermione, are you all right? Let me see your arm."

"It's nothing," Hermione insisted, tucking her arm in close to her. "Stray hex. Had you not been there, I'm sure it would have been worse."

*The Pensieve! The memories!*

Remus did his best to hold back his anxiety and excitement. This was a memory Mia had shown him. But if she had known this moment happened, she would have known that Sirius had died, wouldn't she? Had Sirius's death not destroyed the future that Mia had shown him?

"Did this happen in the battle?" he asked, already knowing the answer. He let the words fall out of his mouth as though he were reading them from a pre-written script. "Why wasn't it treated?"

"I cleaned it myself. It'll heal naturally."

"Madam Pomfrey should have some Dittany back in the infirmary."

"No. I . . . I need it to scar."

His mouth fell open, and he tried to hide how shocked he felt as the memories returned to him like a tidal wave.

*I need to remember.*

Hermione frowned and looked back to the railing. "I need to remember. I need to always be able to look down and remember Professor Dumbledore and . . . and Snape. I need to remember to always be on guard. Remember that not everyone can be trusted. Remember that Hogwarts isn't always safe."

"I . . ." Remus began, a frown on his face as he looked at the young witch, trying to understand what had happened and how things had changed—if they had truly changed at all.

He felt grief as the memory of Sirius's death came to the forefront of his mind, but at the same time, an excitement began burning inside of him. When Sirius died, Remus thought the future was irrevocably broken, which meant that there was little chance of him being able to send Hermione to the past and hopefully bring Mia back to him. But now . . .

"I should head back to the hospital wing," he muttered, hoping that he was a better liar than Hermione thought. "I want to check on Bill and make sure he recovers well."

"He's lucky to have you there for him. Who knows, maybe . . . maybe you could rebuild your pack. Tonks and Bill."

"Maybe." Remus nodded slowly, a part of his brain making a mental note to speak to Bill about it later. "In the meantime, there's a war to fight."

"You shouldn't wait," Hermione blurted out as he turned to leave. "I know it's none of my business, but you should let Tonks take care of you. And you her."

He stared at her and, in the reflection of the light, he could almost see small flecks of amber in her eyes. "I'll make you a deal, Hermione. I will think about taking care of Tonks, and even . . . *letting* her take care of me, but only if you promise to take care of yourself. And Harry."

"Those two things are often mutually exclusive," Hermione said with a smirk.

"If anyone can figure out how to balance the two, it would be you, Hermione." He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tightly against his chest—breathing in the scent of her as she leant into his embrace. It had been a dark night—one that would surely change the war they were already knee deep in—and yet her comforting touch made him feel like he was . . . home.

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Knowing that the conversation with Hermione had been something he remembered from Mia's memories all those years ago gave him hope. Sirius was gone—there was nothing to be done about that—but perhaps not all was lost. Perhaps he could still get Mia back, after all. Perhaps his future with Dora was not as bleak as he had convinced himself it would be a year ago when Sirius died and everything fell to shit.

Hope stirred something inside of him.

"Where've you been?" Dora asked as he rushed down the staircase. "I stopped up at Gryffindor Tower, and Harry said you'd left ages ago."

"I went up to the Astronomy Tower to think." He inhaled deep and, for the first time in a year, allowed her scent to envelop him like the drug it was.

"And?"

"I ran into Hermione."

Dora dipped her head. "Is she okay?"

"She will be," he answered with a hint of a smile, something that felt strange considering what had happened earlier that night. He tried to focus on Minerva and Hermione's words: Dumbledore would be happy to know that there was a little love left in the world.

"I think . . . I think everything might be okay," he said, letting the smile overtake him.

Dora lifted a suspicious brow and reached for her wand as though she was worried he had been Imperiused all of a sudden. "What happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it yet," he said and reached for the hand not currently gripping her wand, holding it delicately within both of his. "That's not important right now. *We're* what's important right now. I believe you issued an ultimatum at Christmas?"

Dora slowly began to smile at him. "Does that mean . . . ? Are you done being a dumbarse?"

Remus laughed. "I think so."

She inhaled, and Remus could hear every single beat of her heart, including the one that skipped.

"I need you to be sure, Remus," she said firmly. "I can't handle it if you're not—"

"I am so sorry," he interjected immediately. "I'm a . . . a dumbarse. And I swear I will make it up to you. Are we good to leave?"

"Leave?" Dora grinned slyly at him, placing a hand on his chest. "Planning on sweeping me off my feet, Mr Lupin?"

He gripped her wrist in his palm and tugged her forward roughly until she crashed into his chest and lost her balance. Instead of tumbling backward as she was prone to do, Remus held her tightly in his arms and kept her standing. He leant in close, kissing the line of her jaw that led back to her ear.

"Planning on putting you on your back, Miss Tonks," he whispered, his voice husky.

Dora shivered in his arms and breathed out, "Holy shit. Umm, and . . . and then what?"

Remus inhaled as he brushed his nose against her hairline, grinning victoriously as he watched it slowly turn from brown to purple. He pulled away from her to look into her eyes which were flashing gold. His chest rumbled at the sight, and he took her face in his hands and brushed his lips lightly against hers, fighting to control himself.

"Kiss you, lick you, love you, worship you," he whispered, feeling much like his younger, more poetic self. "Mark you, claim you . . ."

Dora whimpered at the words, and she exclaimed in a breathy voice, "Oooh, fuck me."

Remus grinned. "That's the plan."

If he had better control of himself, he would have slowed down to make it romantic for her. As it was, Dora had him pinned to the ground in front of his fireplace, straddling his lap and clawing at his robes with violence as though the fabric had personally offended her by existing as a barrier between their bodies.

He wondered how he had lost the upper hand in the few minutes it had taken them to Floo from Hogwarts to his home.

"Wait. Wait, wait, wait," Remus insisted, grabbing Dora's hands and stopping her from very literally ripping his robes off of him.

Her left eye twitched. "Remus, I swear to Merlin and Circe and Helga bloody Hufflepuff, if you go back on me now—"

"I'm not," he promised, but staring at the heat in her eyes was unbelievably intimidating, especially when they reflected his own golden hue. "I'm just . . . You need to be *sure*. This is final," he told her, trying to hold back the vulnerable way he was feeling as she paused to weigh the decision one last time. He was glad that she took her time and did not rush without at least giving it a moment of proper thought. When she took a moment too long, he whimpered. "Please be sure."

Instead of answering him with verbal confirmation, Dora grinned and crossed her arms in front of her chest, gripping the hem of her shirt and lifting it above her head to reveal the pink and purple polka-dot bra beneath it.

Remus chuckled softly, stroking a knuckle against her bared stomach. "You are unlike any creature I've ever met before."

She winked at him flirtatiously as she reached around to unhook the brassiere. No sooner had the piece of fabric parted from her flesh, the werewolf beneath her thighs finally snapped. He gripped her tightly around the waist with one arm and flipped her body, pinning her beneath him against the floor. His mouth sought her breast, growling against her skin when she tangled her fingers in his hair and held him tightly against her.

"Don't tease," Dora whispered. "We've been doing the foreplay thing for far too long."

Luckily, Remus had not planned on waiting long—not that he had planned any of this really. But it had been far too long since he'd last had sex, and he was desperately trying not to embarrass himself in the process. He sat up on his knees, purposely ignoring the stiffness of his joints as he rushed to rid himself of his robes and trousers.

Thankfully, Dora was doing the same, slipping out of her patched jeans and her black and green striped knickers.

It was rushed, panicked, and desperate.

The moment he parted with his last scrap of fabric, she was wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him with vigour. Her devotion to him was as obvious as his was to her. She was soft and warm, and yet she still felt slightly cool compared to the heat coming off of his body in waves and burning against her where they touched, which was almost everywhere as neither could get close enough to the other.

The desperation between them was incendiary.

In an overpowering need to ease their suffering, Remus reached between them, lined his cock up against her entrance and sank deep inside the tight warmth of her body. Dora threw her head back and moaned. Remus, however, was absolutely silent—overwhelmed, dumbfounded, and engulfed in a flurry of sensations he had either never experienced before or had long since forgotten. Soundless, save for the slow deep breaths that were shakily exiting through his nostrils, he had thought to give over and let the wolf, for once, be in control. However, the beast in the back of Remus's mind was just as buried by the tingling magic, the pulsing blood, and the crushingly pleasurable weight of the bond between them strengthening.

Dora rotated her hips once, the motion sucking the breath from his lungs.

Both man and wolf were revived in the motion, and they joined in synchronicity, pushing forward and returning the witch to her back. Completely unleashed, he thrust into her with all lack of restraint.

She moaned his name each and every time he filled her.

Nails dug into his shoulders. Hands pressed into her hips. Ankles locked behind his back. Teeth grazed against her throat. Fingers threaded through his hair.

Sweat and heat and magic rhythmically throbbed between them.

"I'm . . . I'm so . . ." she muttered incoherently as her body tightened painfully around him.

Remus watched as her hair shifted from purple to pink and red and then back again. Running on instinct, he withdrew from her and moved south, replacing his cock with his mouth before she had a chance to even feel the void he left behind. She tasted like heaven,

and the little whimpering cries she was making with every lick he gave her provoked the beast within that wanted nothing more than to devour her.

Her body tensed again, and Remus grinned smugly, never feeling more alive than in that moment—that is, until he gave one last long, slow lick that sent her over the edge. Her body thrummed, and her voice cried out, and he sank his teeth into the crevice of her hip, puncturing through soft skin.

He was drunk on the sound of her moans and instantly addicted. His heart beat rapidly, urging him on until he found his nose brushing against the tender skin of the opposite hip where he bit down there as well, sending an unexpected shiver up the witch's body, shocking her into prolonged pleasure.

When Remus finally pulled away, Dora was gasping for breath, her chest heaving rapidly and her hair a lovely and *familiar* shade of sky blue that left him with a conceited grin on his face.

He leant back down between her thighs and licked her once more, replacing the taste of blood in his mouth with just the taste of her. She shook at the contact and whimpered his name with longing. He yearned for her, too.

Crawling back up her body, he kissed her and thrust back inside her at the same time, capturing her cries and stilling his own at the feeling of tightness that was threatening to drown him.

With his witch sufficiently satisfied—at least according to her hair colour—Remus took his own pleasure and pistoned in and out of her, grinning when she was not too exhausted to participate again by rocking her pelvis up in time to meet his.

*Mine!* the wolf howled in the back of his mind as he started to come.

"Mine!" Remus shouted aloud, snapping his hips one last time and biting into her shoulder, marking her as mate and Pack and everything in between, unable to get his fill of her.

It was an hour later before either could even summon the strength to speak.

"Are you okay?" Remus asked softly, his voice hoarse.

He could feel it: the bond, thrumming around them and *in* them like a vibrating string that had permanently sewn them together. He could smell the sweat and arousal and blood, and still, she smelled like biscuits, and that drowned everything else in the world out.

Dora chuckled quietly in reply. "Can we do that again?"

Remus sighed in contentment and kissed the space between her breasts where his head had rested. Barely able to move, he snuggled further against her and whispered, "Marry me."

"Absolutely," she answered without a moment of hesitation, running her fingers through his hair, both the words and actions drawing a growl of contentment from him. "Fair warning: I'm a shit cook."

He smiled. Happy. "We'll survive."

For the first time in a year, he honestly felt like they would.

## Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Four

### *Life Debts and Promises*

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*I feel the burn, watch the smoke as I turn rising,  
A phoenix from the flames  
I have learned, from fighting fights, that weren't mine  
Not with fists, but with wings that I will fly  
(Beautiful Pain - Eminem)*

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**July 23rd, 1997**

Remus sat at his kitchen table, the cup of poorly brewed tea that his wife had made him getting cold in his hands. He smiled down at the liquid, which he only took small sips from when she was looking even though she likely knew he was doing it just to placate her. The same went for her cooking. More than once he had suggested saving up money and finding a new place to live—somewhere closer to places where takeaway was readily available. Between the pair of them, they were likely to starve to death or contract food poisoning.

Andromeda, his *lovely* mother-in-law, had given Dora an old family cookbook for their wedding. A wedding which consisted of himself, Dora, a Ministry official that could be trusted, and Dora's parents.

When his wife unwrapped the book, she had laughed loudly at her mother, who only smirked in reply. Dora's father, Ted, patted Remus on the shoulder, called him son—despite the fact that he was barely ten years older than Remus himself—and said, "Good luck. You're going to need it."

Remus was pleased when Mia's promise long ago that Dora's family would love him had been right. After marking her and asking her to marry him, he had felt terrible that he had not even properly met her parents, save for the few times in his youth when he had run across Andromeda—sans young Dora—visiting Sirius.

Meeting Andromeda as Dora's fiancé was quite a different experience.

*"How long have you known that my daughter was your mate?"*

*"Thirteenth of December, 1978," Remus nervously answered.*

*"And you waited that long after she'd left Hogwarts to even speak to her?" Andromeda asked, apparently in approval.*

*"Yes, ma'am," he mumbled.*

*Andromeda raised a brow. "Call me ma'am again, Remus, and I'll hex your tongue right out of your mouth. And I have a feeling that's one of many parts of you that my daughter would sorely miss."*

*He flushed bright red and looked down, mumbling incoherently about the Black family and how they would certainly be the death of him.*

It was not Andromeda's lack of shame, nor Dora's, that had Remus groaning and wincing at his kitchen table that morning, though.

*"Merlin, Hermione how did you do it?"*

*"He owed me a life debt."*

Sirius was in his house. In his house and very much alive. Alive thanks to Hermione, who had taken Remus into the Department of Mysteries, performed Blood Magic, and brought Sirius back through the veil that had claimed his life a year earlier.

And now the very much alive Sirius Black was masturbating in Remus's shower while loudly singing Queen's "Crazy Little Thing Called Love" as though it were just another morning and he had not been dead the day before.

Sirius skipped into the kitchen a few minutes later wearing nothing but a pair of old jeans and the silver chain around his neck, hidden beneath soaked locks of black hair. He reached for Remus's cup of tea and grinned before taking a sip.

The corner of Remus's mouth quirked upward when Sirius choked on the liquid and spat it out in the nearby sink.

"Merlin, how are the two of you surviving?" Sirius grimaced and put the mug of tea back on the table in front of Remus.

"Good morning, Sirius," Dora said brightly as she walked into the kitchen.

Remus quickly gulped down half of the mug of tea while she was watching.

"It *is* a good morning!" Sirius beamed brightly. "Do you know *why* it's a good morning?"

Dora walked behind Remus, wrapping her arms around him from behind and kissing the top of his head. "Would it have anything to do with what you were doing in the shower? If you don't plan on using Silencing Charms while you're staying here, don't expect us to use them, either."

"Agreed," Sirius responded with a laugh that only got louder when Remus rolled his eyes. "Oh, no, you don't. You don't get to ruin my good mood, Moony. I'm alive, and my witch is almost eighteen, *of age* for almost a year, thank you."

"Still a little creepy, Pads."

"*This* is still a little creepy," Sirius gestured to Dora. "You do know he's old enough to be your father, right?"

"Pot." Remus pointed at Sirius and then pointed back to himself. "Cauldron."

"When do we go see Hermione?" Sirius asked, bouncing on the balls of his bare feet like a child waiting for presents the night before Christmas.

"Order meeting tonight at the Burrow," Dora said, perching herself on Remus's leg.

"She's not Mia," Remus reminded him.

"Don't care," Sirius retorted, still bouncing. "Hermione, Mia, same witch, love them both."

"How are you so . . . energetic?"

"Well," Sirius answered as he finally took a seat at the table. "In my head, two days ago, I was living in Grimmauld Place with an elf that refused to bathe and a portrait of my mother. My witch was sixteen years old, Harry was being chased by Death Eaters, and Bellatrix was killing me."

"Harry's still technically being chased by Death Eaters," Remus pointed out.

"We'll kill them."

"And Bellatrix is still out there somewhere," Dora reminded him.

"I'll kill her the next chance I get," Sirius promised. "Nothing's going to bring me down today. I'm alive, and whatever it was that Hermione did to bring me back, it provoked her end of the Soul Bond," he said, running the tips of his fingers over the hollow of his throat and then down toward his heart. "Knowing, willing, loving. I'm at least one step closer to getting her back."

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**August 4th, 1997**

Dora was waiting on the porch for him when he Apparated through the wards. Remus felt worse than he had ever felt before. Thankfully, Dora looked like she actually felt bad for him, regardless of what had happened earlier that morning.

*"I . . . I don't understand."*

*"I'm pregnant. Would you like me to draw you a diagram?"*

It had been a rough couple of days. Bill and Fleur's wedding had been interrupted by Death Eaters, the Order had scattered, Sirius and the trio were in hiding, and Dora's parents had been tortured. The last thing Remus expected was a pregnancy in the middle of a war. When he had apologised for ruining her life, sobbed and screamed, and then burst out the front door, there had only been one place to go: Grimmauld Place.

It had been a mistake.

"I take it you found Sirius?" Dora asked with a raised brow, her focus on his jaw where a bruise had quickly developed.

Remus frowned, looking down shamefully. "He says congratulations. Harry, Ron, and Hermione send their best wishes as well. I'm to apologise for being the world's biggest idiot, rub your feet, and buy you ice cream. That is . . . *if* I'm allowed back inside."

Dora smiled, endlessly forgiving and wonderful and perfect.

"Mum owes me five Galleons. She thought you'd make it home in a day or two. I told her that if Sirius didn't knock you out cold, Hermione would send you back tonight."

"What can I do to make up for this?" he pleaded.

"Stop hating yourself because of who you are, for one," Dora said, grabbing his face in her hands, none too gently. "I'll make a list of the rest of the things you'll need to do."

Remus fell into her arms the second she opened them, wrapping his own around her waist and resting his cheek on her abdomen the way he had seen James do to Lily all those years ago when she had been pregnant with Harry. He forced himself to put his fears aside and embrace the still terrifying prospect of fatherhood.

"You know why I left, though, don't you?"

"You thought the baby would be infected."

"I was only four," he whispered, feeling tears sting his eyes. Despite Hermione and Sirius reminding him the basics of lycanthropy, Remus was terrified. "I still remember the pain. To do that to . . . I didn't want to be like Greyback."

"I know, love," Dora whispered and kissed his head. "You are a good man . . . and a terrible werewolf."

Remus laughed through his tears, taking her words as the highest of compliments. He sighed against her body. "How are you?"

"I puked in the bathtub."

Remus frowned, gently rubbing her stomach in soothing circles.

"I left it for you to clean up."

He sighed. "I deserve that."

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### September 3rd, 1997

Padfoot slept by her side anytime he was not taking watch outside the tent. The Horcrux locket was around his neck every third shift and would remain so, as he was unwilling to let Hermione touch the thing after being splinched. He would prefer that Harry not touch it either, but his godson was able to put up more of a fight about it.

Harry and Ron remained outside, talking about potential ways to destroy the locket while simultaneously watching the Marauder's Map to look for Ginny's name.

The witch in the bed next to him began to stir, and Padfoot watched as she sat up, only to notice she was not quite dressed. He turned around and shifted into his human form in order to properly communicate with her, knowing that if she moved too quickly, she could easily re-injure herself.

"Sirius! Where's my top? Why are you in bed with me? What happened? Where is Harry? And Ron?"

He reached out and placed his palm on her bare back—ignoring the way she flinched away from him—so that he could look over her injury.

"Calm down, kitten," Sirius spoke softly. "I'm just checking the wound."

Hermione blanched. "Wound?"

"You don't remember?" he asked, frowning. "You got splinched trying to get away from the Ministry. Tore your back open pretty badly. I tried to heal it as best I could, but I wasn't ever the one to take care of Remus after the full moon, so I got a bit lazy with Healing Charms. All we had on us was Dittany. There's going to be a scar."

"Is it ugly?" Hermione asked.

He could hear her trying not to cry.

"Nothing about you could ever . . ." Sirius began with a catch in his throat. He cleared it, brushing the edge of a knuckle down her spine and relaxing slightly when he saw gooseflesh breakout over her skin in reaction to his touch. The wound was bad, but it was healing into the familiar mark he knew from his youth. He remembered the first time Mia had ever shown him the scar and the way it had sparked a desire in him knowing that Remus had never seen it, touched it, or kissed it. He shifted uncomfortably on the bed at the memory.

"It looks all right," he said quickly and then pulled away. "I've seen a similar one before. It'll heal up nicely. You've lost a lot of blood, though, so you need to rest as much as possible. We ran out of Blood-Replenishing Potion."

"And, umm, my shirt?" she asked timidly.

"Oh." He stared at her bare back for a few seconds longer than he knew he probably should as he tried to come up with any excuse for her to stay undressed. Unfortunately, there was still a sliver of decency left in him, and he stumbled upon a *genuine* reason. "You probably shouldn't be lifting your arms much. But I can keep you covered. Or I can leave and sit outside if you need," he offered nervously, hoping she would not send him away.

"Just umm," Hermione swallowed. "Don't ... don't let Harry or Ron see me like this?"

"Absolutely, kitten. Only *I* get to see you like this," he teased, grinning when she turned and smacked his arm lightly, unable to do proper damage to him and still keep her breasts covered at the same time.

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**December 25th, 1997**

"Harry? Sirius?" Hermione called out to them as they worked their way through the small snow-covered cemetery. "They're here. Right here."

*James Potter - Lily Potter  
27 March 1960 \* 30 January 1960  
Died 31 October 1981*

"'The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.' Isn't that a Death Eater idea? Why is that there?" Harry asked as he stared at the headstone.

"It doesn't mean defeating death in the way the Death Eaters mean it, Harry," Hermione said, her voice gentle. She reached out and took his hand in her own, lacing their fingers together. "It means . . . you know, living beyond death. Living *after* death."

She turned back and looked at Sirius, who was staring at the gravesite, standing several feet behind them as though he were afraid to get any closer. She slipped her hand out of Harry's grip and reached out for Sirius.

He frowned, refusing to meet her eyes. Still, he took her hand, allowing her to bring him closer and join them in paying respects to James and Lily Potter.

"I'm glad we came," she whispered to him as he pressed a kiss to the top of her head, rubbing the pad of his thumb over her knuckles. "Are you both okay?"

"Yeah," Harry asserted, but Hermione could see he was already crying. "I'll be fine."

She looked at Sirius who was obviously fighting back the tears.

"Ask me again when this war is over," he replied before letting her go and pulling Harry into his arms.

Hermione fidgeted with her hands a bit, not wanting to intrude on the private family moment. Instead, she turned and looked down at the marble headstone. She dusted fresh snow from the top, and gently used her fingers to get some dirt off of the engraving of James Potter's name.

She raised her wand and moved it in a circle through the air, a wreath of Christmas roses blossoming before her. Taking the flowers, she knelt down and set them on the grave, hoping Harry's parents could hear her silently promising: *I'll take care of them.*

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**March 28th, 1998**

The large group arrived at Shell Cottage from Malfoy Manor, where Sirius assumed Draco was busy summoning Voldemort in the hopes of deceiving one of the greatest Legilimens of all time. The boy had been a prat growing up, according to both Ron and Harry, but Narcissa had not stopped crying since they left the manor. Sirius had never seen his cousin cry like this before. At least as a son, Draco Malfoy had value.

Bill and Fleur came out to greet everyone, welcoming them into their home. Fleur began to fuss over Hermione, whom Sirius refused to let out of his arms. She had held on as long as she could before the side effects of the Cruciatus Curse set in and the tremors began. Sirius had been at the end of Bellatrix's wand when he was a teenager, and he knew how her Cruciatus felt; sometimes he would hit an elbow or knee against a piece of furniture, and the stinging pain that normally came along would spread down his nerves like fire, as though his body was remembering the curse, even all these years later.

Fleur led them into a small guest bedroom where Sirius set Hermione down and immediately transfigured a nearby bookshelf into a large chair that he pulled beside her, taking her hand and gently stroking the skin of her palm until the Sleeping Draught that Fleur gave her kicked in. He brushed the hair from her forehead, muttering "my brave, brave witch" repeatedly as her body occasionally shook in her sleep. The wound on her forearm had been wrapped, though not healed; every few minutes, Sirius would lean down and press a kiss to the bandage.

"It really is her, isn't it?"

Sirius looked up at the sound of the soft voice to see Narcissa standing there staring at Hermione with wide eyes. He narrowed his gaze at his cousin briefly and stood, ready to defend Hermione should the need arise.

Narcissa merely waved off his defensive measures as though he were nothing more than an irritating pest there to disrupt a luncheon. "I've met the Granger girl before. Diagon Alley at the beginning of last year. I believe I was quite cruel to her," she said, a hint of a frown on her face. "Appearances and all. You understand. Had I known that—"

"That she wasn't just some Mudblood?" Sirius spat out.

Narcissa pursed her lips at him. "Don't be crass. You, more than anyone, know the situation I was in."

"The situation I tried to get you out of," he reminded her.

"Yes, my saviour," she said sarcastically, "a fifteen-year-old boy who, at the time, was safe behind the walls of Hogwarts. Tell me again, Sirius, what did *you* sacrifice when you disobeyed your parents?"

Sirius bristled.

"Precisely. You had Alphard and the Potters at your back. *I* didn't want to suffer, thank you." She exhaled shakily, tucking a strand of blond hair behind her ear. "Of course, looking back . . . Did you know she came to see me the night you were attacked? I was at St Mungo's as well, dealing with, well, a personal issue. She was a strange comfort to me despite how rude I was to her. I owe this witch a great debt."

"What debt?" Sirius asked.

"That's none of your concern. Words between witches," she replied firmly. "How is she still so young? And why did I not recognise her before today?"

"Magic."

"Don't be juvenile." She rolled her eyes. "Fine. Keep your secrets, then. I mean the girl no harm. I told you, I *owe* Mia Potter. Wasn't her mother a Black? The one *your* mother despised?"

Sirius nodded. "Dorea."

Narcissa had a pleased look cross her face. "You'll fix it all then, won't you? Our family? Our House? You'll save it from being lost forever."

"Busy saving the world first, Cissa," Sirius scoffed.

She smiled. "No one's called me that in a very long time. Bella and Lucius always preferred Cissy. It felt childish rather than affectionate."

"Well, don't get used to it," he insisted as he stood, flicking his wand out and summoning his Patronus. "I'm taking you to stay with Andromeda. Something tells me that she'll have an alphabetical *list* of things she'll call you before she gets to affectionate nicknames."

**April 30th, 1998**

"Out, *you!*" Narcissa waved her hand in Remus's face as he growled at her; she looked unafraid. "I'm aware that your animal instincts are trying to take over, but unless you plan on pulling out the child yourself, you will sit and be still unless called upon!"

He looked at Andromeda for support, but his mother-in-law was far too busy holding Dora's hand as she fought through another contraction.

"Are you sure there's nothing to be done for the pain?" Remus asked again, the wolf inside of his head whimpering at the sound of his mate's cries.

"As I've *repeatedly* said, this is how it must be done," Narcissa informed him. "If you'd like, send an owl to the Weasleys. If anyone has perfected the art of childbirth, it would be that woman. Honestly, this is why I was so pleased that Lucius wasn't allowed in the room when Draco was born. Men have no patience for these things."

"Don't you dare compare my son-in-law to that rotter of a husband of yours," Andromeda snapped.

"Ex-husband," Narcissa corrected coolly.

"Oh? Were you *divorced* when he died?" Andromeda asked bitinglly.

Narcissa stared calmly at her sister and then shrugged her delicate shoulders. "If there is a word that means 'joyful widow' then tell me. Until then, he's my ex-husband."

"Still," Andromeda said with a smirk, "don't put Remus into the same category as Lucius Malfoy. He's a *good* boy."

Narcissa rolled her eyes and muttered, "Hardly a *boy*," under her breath—her words drowned out by the sound of Dora screaming one last time.

"Speaking of boys . . ." Andromeda grinned and pulled a crying infant from her daughter, whose hair had turned turquoise by the end of her labour. She waved her wand in delicate movements to clean the baby up before she wrapped him in a soft blanket and placed him in Dora's arms.

Remus stood frozen at the foot of the bed, gripping the footboard so hard that the wood began to splinter beneath his fingers. He inhaled deeply, picking up the scent of new life and not a trace of lycanthropy.

"I have a son," he whispered reverently.

"He looks like you," Dora said with a bright smile.

"Not at all, love," Remus uttered as he leant closer. "He looks like *you*."

"What lovely dark hair," Narcissa said with a smile as she admired the infant, dabbing an embroidered handkerchief at the corners of her eyes.

"For now." Andromeda smiled slyly. "If he's anything like his mother, it'll change soon enough."

Dora looked up and grinned at Remus. "You should go tell the others."

"I will later," he said, gently sitting on the bed beside her. He tenderly brushed the tips of his fingers over the black hair on his son's head. "He looks a lot like Harry did when he was born."

"Harry should be godfather," Dora told him with a smile.

Remus grinned. "Sirius is going to be put out."

"I know," she said mischievously, as if that were the whole point. "But it'll tie Harry into the pack tighter. And Hermione should be godmother."

"Of course." Remus laughed. As though they would pick anyone else. "I'll tell her when, well, when things are better." Meaning, of course, when she was no longer Hermione.

"Hermione Granger?" Andromeda lifted a brow. "The little Muggle-born friend of Harry Potter? The one that Bella . . ." she began to say, but the look on Narcissa's face had her stopping her sentence. "I didn't realise that she was very close to the pair of you."

Narcissa grinned smugly, her blue eyes dancing with mischievous delight. "You mean you don't *know*?"

---

### **May 18th, 1998**

"We're rebuilding everything," Kingsley said with a grin as he stood in the entryway of number twelve, staring at Harry, Sirius, Ron, Hermione, and Draco. "And we could use your help. There's only so much that can be done in the Wizengamot, but *I'll* be working on that. In the meantime, we've lost too many good Aurors in the war, and, well . . . I'm offering you all a position."

"Absolutely!" Harry said immediately. "When do we start?"

"Wait, you mean I won't have to go back to Hogwarts?" Ron asked, a grin slowly spreading across his face.

"No, no, we're opening the Auror training and taking into account your experience; call it 'retroactive in-the-field training,'" the newly appointed Minister for Magic said with a laugh.

"I'm in!" Ron shouted enthusiastically.

"I'm going back to Hogwarts for my N.E.W.T.s," Hermione whispered. "At least . . . I think I might. I have things I need to take care of before then. Even so, I'd be a terrible Auror. I'd much prefer to help you reformat the Wizengamot if that's at all possible."

Kingsley inclined his head to her, clearly understanding her thinking. "Well, whatever you decide, Hermione, I'll find something for you."

"Thank you, sir." Hermione smiled. "Minister."

Kingsley chuckled at the title, clearly not used to it yet. He then turned to Draco and Sirius and smiled widely. "And the two of you?"

"Yeah," Draco scoffed sarcastically, the look on his face said he cared just as much for this Minister for Magic as he had for the previous ones. "People are going to *love* the idea of a former Death Eater out there keeping the streets safe for them. Let me know when my property and vaults are restored, Shackbolt, then we'll talk."

As Draco left the room, Kingsley chuckled. "He's a lot nicer than I'd imagined."

Sirius shrugged unapologetically. "He's half Black. We're very charming people."

"So what about it, Sirius? Wear the badge again?"

"Kings," Sirius said with a friendly smile, "if you can locate my old Auror badge, I want you to take it, find Cornelius Fudge, and shove that badge right the fuck up his arse."

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## June 17th, 1998

Despite having a home of their own, Remus, Tonks, and Teddy spent more time at number twelve than they did at The Den these days. Only a month after the war, Remus felt the need to stick as close to his family and pack as possible, and since Harry and

Hermione had officially moved in with Sirius, it made it that much easier. It also helped that Sirius was overjoyed to have everyone close by, and had taken to spoiling Teddy in an effort to outshine Harry—the boy's *actual* godfather.

Of course, it did not matter. Save for Dora, Teddy only had eyes for one person, and that was Hermione. Hermione, who was supposed to be home by now.

There was no sound of her arrival, at least one that humans could hear, but Remus heard her instantly and rose from his seat in the library to greet her. When the sound of sobbing echoed up the stairs, alerting the rest of the house to her arrival, he quickened his pace until he reached the little witch, who was crumpled on the floor of the entryway, crying her heart out. There was more frizz to her hair than usual, and her eyes were red-rimmed and glassy.

Without a word, already knowing what was wrong, Remus pulled her into his arms and let her sob against his chest as he took to the staircase, silently moving toward her room. He placed Hermione on her bed, sitting instinctively back against the wall and pulling her close to him in a hug, a large arm wrapped protectively around her.

"What happened? Were you able to see them?"

"They'll never know me again," Hermione sobbed. "I . . . I went all that way to Australia. I knew they wouldn't remember me, but seeing them . . . Remus, my parents are . . . They might as well be dead."

He frowned, running a hand down her hair, thinking of the lovely Muggle couple he had met at King's Cross. Though he would always associate Charlus and Dorea Potter as her parents, he understood the pain she was going through right now.

"In a way you're right, and I am so sorry for that." He spotted Sirius, Harry, and Ron standing in the doorway. The two younger wizards looked worried and uncomfortable at the sight of their friend sobbing. Sirius, however, stepped forward quickly, pulling Hermione from Remus's arms and holding her against him.

"It's okay if you need to grieve, kitten," he whispered. He stroked his fingers up and down her back consolingly, kissing the side of her head and ignoring the curious looks he was receiving from Harry and Ron as he did so. "You don't always have to be the strong one."

**September 17th, 1998**

"Just because I invited you to come over any time you want, does not mean that I invited you to drink my entire stash of firewhisky," Sirius said as he walked into the drawing room to find Draco sitting in his chair, drinking from a crystal tumbler. He snatched the glass from his cousin's hand and sighed loudly. "Besides it's ten in the bloody morning," he shook his head before draining the rest of the liquor.

"Don't let Granger see you drinking that," Draco cautioned. "Where's that good bottle of bourbon?"

"In the cabinet, and why shouldn't I let Hermione see me drinking?" Sirius asked, narrowing his eyes.

"She'll be in a mood," Draco said as he stacked his feet on the table in front of him, crossing his ankles. "Lupin sent an owl this morning warning everyone that Skeeter's new book will hit the shelves today, and something about the paper that I didn't bother reading."

Sirius sighed. "Fuck."

"Language," Hermione scolded him as she walked into the room. "And I am *not* in a mood, Malfoy," she said, narrowing her eyes at Draco.

"Good morning, kitten." Sirius smiled up at her, reaching his hand out and brushing it against her side gently as she passed him.

"Yes," Hermione said, eyeing the glass in his hand. "It is *morning*."

"I told him it was too early to drink," Draco insisted, tossing his cousin a smirk. "Honestly, Sirius, you couldn't even wait until lunch?"

Sirius narrowed his gaze at Draco, and the mirrored set of silver-grey eyes flashed in amusement.

"What're your plans for the day, kitten?"

"Probably just go back to bed. Read a book or two," Hermione said quietly as she took a lock of her hair and twisted it anxiously in her fingers.

Sirius sighed at the sight. "Absolutely not. You need to get out of this house."

"You want to go out?" she asked him, misunderstanding his words.

"Er, I actually have something to do with Remus," he told her, frowning. "I wish I could, I really do, but he needs my help on a . . . project he's working on. But you should go out. Do something fun."

"I *have* been wanting to get my own copy of *Theories of Transubstantial Transfiguration*," she said with a sigh that sounded as though she were mentally trying to talk herself into going.

Before she had the chance to argue, Sirius kicked Draco's legs off of the table and pulled his cousin up by his robes. "Draco will go with you."

"Is this because I drank your firewhisky?" Draco inquired, glaring at Sirius. "Fine. Hurry and get your things, Granger. I want lunch first, and the last time I went to the Leaky past eleven, the place was filled with people who were dead certain I was still a Death Eater. The whole bloody place was in an uproar. I'd be grateful if I didn't have to repeat that adventure," he said and then made his way into the other room, likely to search for Sirius's bourbon while he waited.

"Why do you keep making me babysit the Slytherin?" Hermione pouted as she leant against Sirius. "Do you know, the last time we went to Florean's, he lectured me for ten minutes on the redundancy of putting chocolate fudge on chocolate ice cream. By the time we got around to ordering, I didn't want to hear any more of it, so I caved and just ordered strawberry."

Sirius felt his face warm over, and he swallowed hard. After taking a moment or two to gather his composure, he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into a hug. "He needs a friend, and you're a good influence on him. If he's left with me for too long, he's going to turn into a fucking alcoholic, and no one will like him."

"Language," Hermione said quietly.

Sirius chuckled and kissed her forehead.

Hermione sighed happily, leaning into his touch with a very obviously nervous affection. The way she bit her lower lip was innocently adorable. "My birthday is in a few days."

"I know." Sirius smiled almost sadly, tucking a curl of her hair behind her ears.

"And . . . And the day *after* my birthday . . ." she mumbled.

"I know," Sirius repeated, staring into her chocolate brown eyes. "And I promise, I'll tell you everything then. There will be no secrets between us."



## Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Five

### *Remus's Gift*

---

*I wanted you to know that I love the way you laugh  
I wanna hold you high and steal your pain away  
I keep your photograph and I know it serves me well  
I wanna hold you high and steal your pain  
'Cause I'm broken when I'm lonesome  
And I don't feel right when you're gone away  
(Broken - Seether)*

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**September 19th, 1998**

"It belonged to Harry's family. Now it's yours."

Sirius's fingertips lingered on her skin as he clasped the bracelet around her delicate wrist. When she pulled away from him to look it over, he remained close by so that he could feel her unconsciously brush against him every few moments, especially when she began panicking.

"I'm not a Potter, Sirius, I can't accept this." Hermione shook her head, extending her wrist to Harry. He stood nearby, smirking at her as though it was funny that Sirius had just given her an expensive Potter *heirloom*. "Harry, you should—"

"Nope," Harry said, cutting her off immediately. "I agree with Sirius. You're my sister, and that makes you a Potter. Besides, I like the idea of you having something that connects you to my family. If anyone honours the words of my House, it's you. Courage and Craft? Might as well just say 'Hermione Granger.'"

"See?" Sirius gestured to Harry. "Even Harry says it's okay."

Hermione shifted, looking uncomfortable. "I still don't feel right about it, but fine. You can take it back anytime you want, Harry. When you have children of your own, you can pass it along to them."

Harry laughing, rolling his eyes fondly at her. "Just take the gift, Hermione, and stop arguing with everyone. You've fought every single person who brought you a birthday present tonight."

"Well, I told you not to get me anything in the first place, so it's not *my* fault," she countered.

"I think we're missing a big moment here," Sirius cut in. "I gave a birthday gift, and I haven't gotten any thanks."

"Thank you, Sirius," Hermione gently murmured before she leant in and kissed his cheek.

Sirius took the opportunity to breathe her in, lightly resting one palm against her waist on the side where Harry would not see. He heard her take in a sharp breath at the intimate touch, and he buried his ache for her beneath the anxiety that had been building in him for weeks.

He was more than nervous, he was downright terrified. Remus had emphasised that the original calculations for the Time-Turner-turned-Portkey had been done by Mia herself, but it did not do much to reassure him. They spent the entire summer fiddling with the Time-Turner that Remus had stolen from the Department of Mysteries over a year ago, testing the Portkey function with their fingers crossed and praying that they would not accidentally send themselves back in time in the process. Finally, Remus confirmed that everything looked to be in place. They were ready.

But Sirius did not know if *he* was ready. Ready to say goodbye to Hermione, who was just discovering her feelings for him. Ready to see Mia again, who knew him like no other and loved him like no one else in the world ever could. But why the hell would she still want *him*? He had practically destroyed himself in her absence. He was damaged goods at best.

"Now, if the two of you are done forcing presents on me, I'm excited to go down to the library and read all my new books." Hermione grinned excitedly, hugging Harry before disappearing down the stairs.

Seeing Remus approach them, Sirius turned to ask Harry, "Will you go make sure everyone has gotten out all right?"

"I was just going to say goodbye to Hermione," Remus mumbled absently, anxiously looking at Sirius. Thankfully, Harry did not seem to notice.

"You could stay here, Remus," Harry offered. "Or leave Teddy with us."

"I'll remember that when he's screaming in the middle of the night," Remus said with a chuckle. Sirius rather enjoyed knowing that the bags beneath his friend's eyes were from dealing with a child, rather than the full moon. "We have plans, thanks though. Maybe another night."

"Take care, then." Harry smiled, clapping his shoulder before walking back to the drawing room, leaving Sirius alone with Remus.

"Fuck." He groaned as soon as he knew Harry was out of earshot, running his hands through his hair. "I feel like I'm having a heart attack. Can wizards have heart attacks, or is that just a Muggle thing?"

"It'll be fine," Remus assured him.

"What if . . . we just *don't* send her back? *Hermione* likes me; I think I can live with that," Sirius muttered anxiously, his heart racing.

"If she doesn't go back, then I break the Unbreakable Vow, and I die," Remus stated, narrowing his eyes at Sirius. "I'd like that to *not* happen. I'd be greatly missed. Millions would mourn me."

Sirius scoffed. "You sure do think highly of yourself."

"Stop stalling," Remus turned him around and shoved him toward the staircase. "Go. We're supposed to be with her *before* she vanishes."

"It'll be fine. It'll be fine," Sirius mumbled to himself as he and Remus approached the library. Peeking into the room, he smiled at the sight of the witch, who was already looking at the box that held the Time-Turner within it.

Decades of missing her followed by years of waiting for this moment, and suddenly it felt like it was all happening too fast. Sirius almost wanted to stop her from opening the box.

"What's that?" she asked him.

Remus slowly stepped forward. "That's actually from me."

Hermione looked surprised. "Oh."

"Dora and I are heading out. I wanted to come and say goodbye."

Sirius watched as the two embraced. He envied Remus, who had known about this moment for years longer than he had. Remus, who would be the one to leave in the hopes that Mia would return to them. Sirius, meanwhile, had a much worse job to do.

"I hope you had a wonderful birthday, Hermione. You really deserve something good after everything you've done."

"Let me open your present while you're right here."

Sirius felt his heart drop into his stomach as she reached for the box. Thankfully, Remus stopped her.

"No. Wait until I leave. It's . . . private."

*Oh, for fuck's sake.* Sirius rubbed his hands down his face, trying to make it look like he was just tired.

"I mean, it's just . . . You might not like it. The next time I see you, you can tell me if you like it."

"Is everything okay?"

"Hope so." Remus gave her a tight smile before letting her go, placing a hand on Sirius's shoulder before vacating the library.

"Is he okay?" Hermione asked worriedly.

"He's got a lot on his mind," Sirius explained as he let out a breath he had been holding. "We've been going through a few stints of nostalgia lately. Brought up some intense memories from the past." He shrugged his shoulders and slowly walked completely into the room, reaching for her bracelet-clad wrist and tugging her toward him, grinning when she nervously swallowed. "It's almost the day after your birthday."

Hermione nodded, blushing.

Merlin, he was going to miss that.

"Before we dig into old magics and awkward adult conversations, will you allow an old dog one last moment of recklessness?"

She nodded again, the words apparently stolen from her.

Shaking, Sirius cupped her cheek with the palm of his hand and leant in toward her, ever so lightly brushing his lips against hers. He had to hold his breath to avoid catching the scent of her, as the urge to devour her would be too strong otherwise. He wanted to tell her everything right then and there, but Remus insisted that it was not how it happened the first time. One kiss was all he was allowed. He wanted to tell her that everything would be fine, and that he loved her more than he could ever possibly say—loved her just as she was in this moment, as Hermione Granger, Muggle-born witch. He wanted to tell her that he would always love her, no matter how she changed, or who she became, or what she was called.

"Happy birthday, kitten," was what he ended up saying. "No matter what happens . . . promise me you'll just try to be happy, all right?"

He thought of all the times Mia had been miserable growing up. The nightmares that Hermione was already having, the ones she would carry with her into her life as Mia

Potter. The worries about the future war and Death Eaters and James and Lily. He wanted to tell her that he had forgiven her.

*"My boggart would have been the two of you telling me how much you hated me."*

*"That's . . ." Sirius began.*

*"Impossible," Remus finished. "Mia, you're my best friend. I could never hate you. I actually can't think of a single thing you could do to ever make me hate you."*

*"He's right. Why the hell would you be afraid of something so . . . stupid?" Sirius asked.*

*"Because you're that important to me. Because . . . I'm terrified to think that in twenty years you'll both be gone, everything will have changed, and you'll just . . . hate me."*

Sirius stared into her chocolate brown eyes, reaching up one last time to touch her shoulder-length bushy brown hair. *I could never hate you.*

"Sirius, I don't under—"

"Nope, no more talking until tomorrow. Now, open Remus's gift. He's been fussing about it forever." Sirius stepped away from her, though his gaze never left her face, trying to commit his last moment with Hermione Granger to memory. He smiled at her, feeling bittersweet.

With that, he forced himself to move toward the double doors, taking one final look at her before slipping out of the room.

Once in the hallway, he met Remus, who was pacing back and forth. The two men stared at one another, eyes wide as they quietly waited—Remus chewing the inside of his cheek; Sirius nervously bouncing his leg. When a blue light from the library behind them pierced the hallway, reflecting on the walls for a split second before vanishing again, both men exhaled at the same time.

*"You look,"* Sirius said quietly, eyes closed.

Remus acquiesced and walked back into the library, returning after a brief moment. "She's gone."

"Oh fuck," Sirius whispered, leaning forward. He put his hands on his knees and took several deep gulps of air. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"It'll be fine," Tonks reassured him quietly as she approached, Teddy sleeping in her arms. "I'm going to take Teddy to Mum's. Do you want me to come back here?"

"I'll send you a Patronus when—"

"When you find her," Tonks finished. "You better go." She stood up on her toes, kissing Remus on the cheek. "Good luck. I'm so excited for you both. Sirius, breathe."

Taking a slow, deep breath, Sirius brushed off her concerns and gently shoved at Remus's arm. "Get out, Moony. I need to . . . Oh fuck. I need to tell Harry."

"It'll be fine." Remus patted him on the shoulder. "I better hurry."

With a final nod to Sirius and Tonks, Remus kissed the top of Teddy's head and rushed back up the stairs. Sirius could hear it when the front door closed, followed by the sound of Disapparition. Remus had long since been able to Apparate quietly, so the resounding crack that echoed from outside told Sirius just how nervous his friend really was. Merlin, he hoped he didn't splinch himself.

"Go on. I'm just a Patronus away if you need me," Tonks reminded him with a bright smile before moving toward the fireplace in the library and vanishing in a swirl of green flames.

Sirius stood in the hallway for several minutes, letting the silence of the house wash over him. He tugged at the silver chain around his neck nervously before finally growling at his own cowardice and walking up the stairs toward the drawing room.

When he found Harry lying on the sofa, finishing off a plate of birthday cake, Sirius grinned. A grown man, Auror even, but still just a boy at the same time. *His* boy. Sirius swallowed hard as he tried to imagine every possible scenario that could come from this kind of confession. There was a strong chance that Harry would be furious. He never was one that took well to information being kept from him, and for good reason, but Sirius was hoping that he would look at all the facts and decide for himself that the fewer people knew the better.

It was already bad enough, in Sirius's opinion, that Narcissa and Andromeda had found out. The two sisters had been badgering Sirius all summer for information regarding Mia's eventual return, as though they were already scheduling luncheons and tea with their long lost Black cousin.

"Harry, come have a drink with me." Sirius jerked his head toward the other room where he had already set out a bottle of firewhisky.

Harry looked up at him and nodded, setting his empty plate down on the nearby table before standing up and following Sirius into the next room. They sat down beside one another, and Sirius poured them each a drink.

"Is everything all right, Sirius?" Harry asked. "You've been acting, well, a bit strange the past few days."

"How could you tell?" Sirius attempted to joke.

Harry quirked his brow, looking impatient.

"Merlin, you look like Lily when you do that." Sirius chuckled softly, swirling his drink in the glass. "Would you like to know some things about your family?"

Harry's eyes lit up at the question. "Yeah, of course!"

Sirius stood and walked to a nearby dresser, waving his wand to unlock one of the cabinets at the bottom. He removed a large book and brought it back to the table. He set the copy of *Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy* on the table and looked over at Harry.

"I remember this," Harry murmured, reaching for the book. "We found it when we first came to Grimmauld Place after Bill and Fleur's wedding when we were looking for the Horcrux. You said that the Potters weren't in here." He looked from the book back to his Sirius, who had started tugging on the silver chain again.

"I umm . . . I lied. Potters were in there, but I vanished the page before you could see it."

"Why would you do that?" Harry asked warily.

"It'll all make sense soon," Sirius promised, opening the book. "It doesn't matter, though, because you'll find what we need on the *Black* Family Tree. What do you know about your grandmother?"

"She was a Black," Harry answered. "Dorea, right?"

"One of the most brilliant witches I've ever known in my entire life," Sirius said with a smile. "Your grandmother was as Slytherin as they came." He chuckled and watched as Harry's eyes widened.

"Back then, at least for Dorea, it was a good thing. Slytherins weren't always synonymous with Death Eaters and prejudice, you know. I was a prat about the House when I was a kid, but I knew a few that were actually pretty decent. The wizard that invented the Wolfsbane Potion? He was in Slytherin. Went to school with us, actually. And there were others," he continued, thinking of Regulus who, apparently, had not turned out to be all that bad in the end. There was Snape, whom the Wizarding world was calling a hero these days. And Mia's friend Laurel from the Ministry, who had put a great deal of effort into trying to help Sirius when Mia had first disappeared.

"Dorea was brilliant. Cunning and ambitious, but the most loving and accepting woman I'd ever met," Sirius went on. "She didn't just take me into her home when I ran away. I'd practically been living with your dad and his family from the start of Hogwarts. I think I started calling them Mum and Dad when I was fourteen or fifteen. They took in Remus, too. Remus had a rough go of it with his family as well, but the Potters, Dorea especially, we were hers. When she died, she was surrounded by her children, even though she'd only ever given birth to James."

Harry took the book into his lap, flipping through the pages of the Black Family Tree, which Sirius knew could be difficult to decipher, considering half of the Wizarding world was interwoven into the family in one way or another.

Sirius laughed to himself as he noted that Harry had purposely skipped over the page showing the Weasley connection to the Black family, clearly not too keen to find out just how closely related he and Ginny were.

"There she is." Sirius pointed to Dorea's name, letting Harry make the connection himself.

Harry scanned the family tree, his lips quirking up when his fingers brushed over his parents' names and then to his own. He lingered over the date of their deaths for a moment before his brow furrowed. Sirius knew exactly what had drawn his attention: the only movement on the page was a name down and to the right of James's, fading in and out.

"Who is Mia Potter?"

Sirius anxiously chewed on his thumbnail while bouncing his leg beneath the table. Instead of answering Harry's question, he reached for the tumbler of firewhisky and took a long drink, savouring the flavour which gave him a boost of courage—not from the alcohol but from the memories it contained.

"Mia Potter . . . was your father's sister."

Harry's jaw dropped. "My dad had a sister?"

Sirius dipped his head.

"How come I've never met her? Is she still alive? Why didn't anyone tell me about her?" The questions came quickly, not giving Sirius a chance to answer even one until he reached out and put a hand on Harry's arm to draw his attention.

"You've never met her because she went missing in September of 1979," Sirius explained. "She was a part of the Order like the rest of us, and one day she vanished. Dumbledore and Moody told us all that she had been on some sort of secret assignment and had been killed."

Harry frowned. "Oh," he said looking down. "So, how come her death date isn't listed? Or her birth date?"

"I asked those same questions when she went missing. Mia—She . . . I . . ." Sirius's shaking hand reached again for the firewhisky.

"You loved her," Harry finished for him.

Sirius nodded. "I *still* love her."

"Tell me about her," Harry insisted, and Sirius could tell that the boy was doing it more for him than himself. He had not looked at a mirror since earlier that morning, and Sirius wondered just how haggard he looked right then.

"She's the reason I met your father. We met in Diagon Alley when my mother took me to get all my supplies. She was introducing Regulus to some Wizengamot ponce," Sirius said, rolling his eyes, "so I sneaked off. I'd wanted to go look at the brooms, but when I was passing Flourish and Blotts, I saw some tosser knock over a little girl. Being the polite and chivalrous young man that I was," he said with a devilish smirk, "I went to rescue the fair maiden."

Harry chuckled at the story.

"She made a few jokes about my name and then introduced me to her brother, who'd run off screaming at the kid that pushed her," Sirius recalled. "Who happened to be . . . Snape."

Harry's smile faltered. "Snape? Snape pushed my aunt?"

"We were eleven." Sirius shrugged, knowing that after Harry had seen Snape's memories in Dumbledore's Pensieve, the boy had taken to getting riled up and offended on the Slytherin's behalf, especially since the man was no longer around to defend himself. "Remember how I told you before that we didn't get along with Snape from the beginning? I'm sure this was the trigger incident, even if it may have been an accident. But he was a prat about it, and your dad . . . No one hurt Mia. James loved his sister almost as much as he loved you and Lily."

"I get it," Harry said. "I feel the same way about Hermione. I meant what I said tonight when you gave her that bracelet. She's my sister."

"I know, son," Sirius said, feeling a rush of guilt for having stolen that from him. There was no real guarantee that Mia would return in place of Hermione. Even if she did, he had no idea how the witch would look at Harry: brother, nephew . . . maybe even stranger.

"So how did the two of you—?" Harry began.

"That's a story for another time." Sirius laughed, thinking of all the terrible and amazing run-ins in the fifth-floor corridor at Hogwarts. "Maybe when you're older."

Harry rolled his eyes. "So what was she like?"

"Brilliant. Fierce. Merlin help anyone that crossed her. She was bloody frightening when angry, and I should know because she was angry with me all the time. She was as studious as your mother but had a wild streak like us. She was so smart when it came to magic. She played some of the best pranks. One year, just because my brother punched me, she and I sneaked down to the dungeons, and she put a modified Notice-Me-Not Charm on the entrance to their common room."

Harry joined in when Sirius let out a happy laugh. "What happened?"

"They slept in the corridor until Slughorn came round to fix everything," Sirius said with a grin. "She could change charms and alter potions and transfigure anything. When she took her N.E.W.T.s, she beat out McGonagall's old record. Only Remus beat her exam scores, and she often said he cheated."

"She sounds like Hermione," Harry said, his tone full of awe. "Except for the pranking part."

Sirius snorted, feeling uneasy. "Yeah, she was . . . *very* much like Hermione."

Harry cleared his throat. "Sirius, I know you said it wasn't your place to say, and I've tried minding my own business, but Hermione *is* like my sister. If my dad was as protective over *his* sister as you say, it's only right that I do the same thing," he said and sat up tall in his chair. "I don't know what it is, but I know something's going on with you and Hermione, and I want to know what."

Sirius stared at him and did not make a sound.

"Sirius, if you're trying to replace your old girlfriend with—"

"No! Oh, fuck, Harry . . . Merlin, this is complicated. Look, Hermione and I . . . I . . . I can't tell you," he stammered out the words regretfully. "Hermione should be here for this."

"Fine." Harry stood. "I'll go get her."

Sirius's eyes widened.

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Remus Apparated outside of Hogsmeade and made the long walk up to the gates of Hogwarts, staring up at the still-broken castle. The new wards and protections had not been put in place yet, so the gates opened for him without hesitation. He stayed relatively quiet as he moved toward the school, knowing that the only people inside would be the few teachers that were preparing for the approaching term, still delayed due to the reconstruction.

He and Dora had talked about helping, but with Teddy so young, Minerva had all but completely refused their offer. She insisted that they be with their child as much as possible considering that the war had separated so many families. Remus had, however, taken a few days over the summer to come up and help with a couple of things—mainly constructing new protection spells for the areas that would be set up closer to the start of term. Minerva had offered him his old position as a professor back, ready to fight the Ministry and their anti-werewolf legislations on his behalf. He had politely declined, insisting that he could not bear to be away from Teddy and that both Dora and Hermione were practically forcing him to sit down and write a book. There was not enough information about werewolves available. Considering Greyback had basically been let loose at the command of Death Eaters during the past year or so, there were likely to be new werewolves emerging in need of guidance.

Gryffindor Tower had previously been demolished but was now almost entirely reconstructed, and Remus smiled at the sight of it. Slipping in through the front doors—all the other secret passageways had been destroyed during the war or discovered and blocked in the aftermath—he pulled out the Marauder's Map that he had nicked from Harry's room earlier that day and tapped his wand on the top of it.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," he whispered and watched as the map opened before his eyes. He saw Minerva pacing in the headmistress's office, no doubt going over lists of things to do before students began arriving in just over a month. Slughorn was in his chambers in the dungeons, Pomona in the greenhouses, Filius in his office, Filch in the kitchens, and Poppy was in the infirmary—very likely stocking up on potions regardless of the late hour.

The halls and classrooms were empty.

Remus moved swiftly, a part of him wishing that he had brought the Invisibility Cloak with him as well, but he figured that Harry would notice *that* missing before the map. As an Auror, even in training, he would be more likely to use it than a visual aid of Hogwarts.

Remus wondered how Sirius was doing with the conversation he had planned on having with Harry.

He quickly made his way through the halls and toward the old Defence classroom where he had charmed the Time-Turner to Portkey Mia. It was a risk, of course, sending her to Hogwarts, but as Mia informed Remus long ago, the Defence classroom was where she had arrived in 1971. After considerable thought, he decided it would be easier to keep the same Portkey destination for both trips to avoid any potential problems.

Opening the door and closing it behind him, Remus moved aside the desks and chairs in the middle of the room, just in case. He stepped up to the old desk—*his* old desk—and sat down on the edge of it, staring with anxiety and anticipation into the empty space in the middle of the room, willing it to be filled as quickly as possible. He glanced down at the pocket watch that had belonged to his father, noting the time and swallowing hard as his eyes turned back up toward the centre of the room as it was suddenly engulfed in a bright blue light.

# BOOK FOUR

*The Soul Bond*

## Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Six

### *Amber Eyes*

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*The worst is over now and we can breathe again  
I wanna hold you high, you steal my pain away  
There's so much left to learn, and no one left to fight  
I wanna hold you high and steal your pain  
(Broken - Seether)*

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**September 19th, 1998**

Remus held his breath, his heart pounding with anticipation.

The bright, blue light faded from his vision, leaving behind a witch kneeling on the ground and clutching her stomach.

He waited nervously, frozen in fear as his gaze raked over her familiar form. He had just seen Hermione at Grimmauld Place. But was she still *Hermione*?

She let out a few soft coughs before taking several deep breaths, her hands fisted. Barefoot and wearing nothing but a pair of green hot pants and a Gryffindor Quidditch jersey, long honey-brown curls fell over her shoulder, loosely braided. She slowly turned around, meeting his gaze uncertainly.

"Remus?" she whispered.

His eyes stung with unshed tears as he met her red-rimmed stare.

*Amber eyes.* She had amber eyes. Not daring to hope just yet, he swallowed nervously, his steps slow and precise as he moved toward her. The oversized Quidditch jersey slipped off of her shoulder when she stood up, revealing a silver crescent-shaped scar. Remus's eyes widened as the wolf inside his head howled in recognition of the mark.

He rushed forward and scooped her into his arms.

Mia sobbed loudly against his chest; he could already feel her tears soaking his shirt. He stroked the back of her head and breathed in her scent, repeatedly kissing her hair as she cried. She was alive and here, safe in his arms.

"No, no, no."

Remus pulled away from her, cupping her face in his hands to stare into those amber eyes. "Mia?"

"Send me back," she pleaded, tears streaming down her pink cheeks. "I want to go home."

At her request, he felt a stab of regret. He brought up a hand to wipe at his own eyes before lowering his head to kiss her forehead. "I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I did this to you."

She gripped him again, burying her face against his chest as she continued to weep.

"I'm so sorry, love," he repeated softly, over and over again.

A short while later, the tears were dried up, and the two sat on the floor of the classroom, Mia lying in Remus's lap. She sniffled as he ran his fingers through her hair, the braid long since having come undone.

"Am I really back?"

"Do you hate me?" Remus murmured quietly, absently running a finger along a mark on the ground. "I betrayed you and tricked you into touching the Time-Turner."

"I could never hate you," Mia snapped at him and sat up to stare him in the face. "You promised me you would do it, and you kept your promise. I didn't understand at first, but now I do. Oh, Remus," she whispered with a sad smile, reaching up to touch his face. "Look at you."

Remus chuckled, ducking his head slightly. "Old and ugly."

"You've always been beautiful to me." Mia leant forward, placing a chaste kiss to his mouth as she had done a thousand times before. When she pulled away, her eyes widened, and she shrieked, "Oh Merlin, you're married!"

Remus laughed, the noise sounding hoarse to his ears. His throat was still tight with overwhelming emotions. "Tonks understands. I told her everything long before we got married. She's actually a little . . . Well, you're a Black. You know how your family is," he said, rolling his eyes.

"You're *married*," Mia said in awe, looking down at his hand to admire the simple wedding band there. She smiled, looked up at him, and all too quickly smacked him in the arm. "You got married and didn't invite me to your wedding!"

"Ow!" He moved away from her repeated strikes. "Didn't really have a choice, did I? You weren't *you*. It would have been weird."

"I've always been *me*." She glared at him, scooting closer so she could run her fingers through his hair. The amused expression on her face told him that she was examining the

grey streaks. She turned her attention to his face, glancing over the scars that had not been there minutes earlier for her—years for him.

Suddenly, her smile vanished. "Jamie. Lily."

Remus frowned, his heart breaking for her. He remembered exactly what it felt like when he received the news that his friends had been murdered. He assumed that knowing about the event beforehand would not make the grief any easier for her.

She blinked her eyes rapidly, and he watched as she swallowed hard. "I know, nothing changes." She took in a slow breath and let it out through her nose. "What did Jamie think happened to me?"

"I left the flat right after you vanished, and I went to tell Dumbledore what happened," Remus said. "The Order was told that you died on a mission."

Her brows furrowed. "That doesn't even make sense."

Remus shrugged apologetically. "It's what they were told. Few believed it, of course, and an investigation was opened, but Dumbledore kept a tight lid on it. I think he even prevented the *Prophet* from printing anything about you. After a while, with so many others going missing and dying, people just kind of assumed that you were the first casualty, you know . . . after Mary." He sighed, refusing to mention the massacre at graduation where her father had been killed or the attack on St Mungo's where they had both lost their mothers. "And then Lily got pregnant, and James was . . . very busy."

Mia smiled faintly. "Harry."

"James was a good father," Remus told her.

"I knew he would be," she said quietly.

"I never wanted to cause you pain," he whispered, reaching up and brushing away the hair that had fallen in her face.

"I know, and it's not your fault." She sniffled, pressing her cheek into the palm of his hand. "What am I going to do? What am I going to do without Jamie?" she asked, her voice breaking again. "I never even got to say—"

"You'll do what we've all had to do. You'll grieve and then move forward."

Mia bobbed her head, visibly choking down another sob. "At least I have you. You were all alone, weren't you?"

"It's all right," he assured her. "You vanished, and I was the only one who knew why. It wasn't pretty. Peter, well, we know *now* why he wasn't around much."

Mia growled. "I should have killed him."

"He died anyway."

She shook her head. "Not soon enough. Not painful enough."

"Neither did a lot of people that probably deserved it," he said, trying to calm her down, petting her hair consolingly.

She turned and narrowed her eyes at him. If he had for a single second forgotten that this was no longer Hermione Granger, he was reminded in the reproachful look she gave him.

"Don't you talk down to me, Remus Lupin. Just because I *look* nineteen doesn't mean that my head isn't—Shit. How old am I?"

Remus blinked and tried to do the math. "Twenty-seven? Maybe?"

"I lost count a few years ago," she said with a frown, her nose scrunching up a bit. "Got frustrating to try and keep up, especially since I didn't even celebrate my real birthday. Not that it matters. The De-Ageing Potion I took altered me on a hormonal level, and I'm sure if I had the ability to look at myself on a cellular level I'd see—"

"I'll help you make the calculations later, love. Let's get you home." He reached out for her arm, interrupting her before she descended into a monologue.

Suddenly, she looked lost, sadness creeping back into her expressive eyes. "Where's home? Potter Manor? Godric's Hollow? Hogwarts?"

"Grimmauld Place."

Mia swallowed. "Okay."

Remus removed his travelling cloak and draped it over her. Attempting to lighten the dark mood that had fallen over the two of them, he said, "You're going to freeze like that. Honestly, what're you wearing?"

"I was getting ready for . . ." she trailed off, her gaze shifting to the side.

He did not bring up the subject again as he walked to the door, opening it for her. Reaching for the Marauder's Map, he recalled that he had left it in the pocket of his cloak. As they paused in the doorway to retrieve it, a figure appeared in front of them.

Minerva fixed Remus with a stern look. "I was under the impression that you had turned down the offer of Defence Professor. I should say that I'm thrilled if you've changed your mind, though it's quite late to be making house calls, don't you think? An owl would have been sufficient."

Remus nervously rubbed the back of his neck as though he had been caught out after curfew and she was going to give him detention any minute now.

Eyes turned toward Mia, Minerva took a deep breath and curtly said, "Right then, which one are you?"

For a moment, Mia looked stunned into silence by Minerva's appearance, but she slowly let a devious smile take over her features as she muttered, "Nice to see you . . . *Minnie*."

Minerva grimaced at the nickname bestowed upon her by Sirius. "Well, Miss *Potter*, I can't say that I'm extremely pleased to see you. It was only last week I was discussing with Hermione Granger about her return to Hogwarts to complete her seventh year."

"Oh." Mia waved a hand. "Yeah, go ahead and cancel that. I completed my seventh year already."

"I'm well aware."

Mia smirked, rocking back and forth on her heels. "Still upset that I beat your record?"

Minerva sniffed, her eyes narrowing just a smidge. "Considering you'd gone through Hogwarts twice, I'd hardly consider it fair."

"You should be proud. You educated a Muggle-born well enough that she one day passed off as a pureblood and became better at Transfiguration than you," Mia said before quickly amending her words. "I mean . . . when you were a student at Hogwarts. I don't think I'm better than you *now*."

Minerva let out a heavy sigh. "I will miss Hermione Granger. She was a lovely, polite, and hardworking girl. But . . . I am very glad to see you standing here and alive, *Mia*," she said, emphasising her name and reaching out to embrace the younger witch. "Please know that you will very likely have a rough road ahead of you, readjusting, but I am here should you need me for anything."

"Thank you, Minerva," Mia whispered, holding onto her.

"Now, you'll not be Apparating," Minerva continued briskly, looking at Mia's clothes. "Especially in *that*. Merlin, I've forgotten how ridiculous the fashions were twenty years ago. Never mind, it's freezing outside. You can use the Floo in my office."

Mia stayed rooted to the spot, her face frozen.

"Something wrong?" Remus asked, concerned.

"The portraits," Mia whispered. "Is Dumbledore there?"

Minerva glanced at Remus who silently shook his head at her. Dumbledore was not a subject to be trifled with when it came to Mia. Her hatred of the man was bone deep. He was not entirely certain, but he suspected that if he focused on it, he could feel her loathing through the Pack Bond.

"If you'd like," Minerva began, "I could go ahead and ask him to leave for the time being?" At Mia's quick nod, she smiled politely. "Right then, I'll go ahead, and you just come up whenever you're ready. Password is 'tabby cat.'"

Remus looked down at Mia once Minerva left to give them a moment. "Love?"

"I refuse to see him. He needs to be gone before we go up there. I didn't change anything, and he stopped me from—"

"I know you're angry," Remus interrupted with a sad pang in his chest, "but Dumbledore didn't kill James. Voldemort did."

"Four people killed my brother." Mia looked directly into his eyes, an angry scowl on her face. "Voldemort held the wand, Peter delivered them to him, and Dumbledore and I did nothing to stop it." She raised her chin, eyes shining with unshed tears. "Voldemort and Peter and Dumbledore are dead and I, unfortunately, will have to look at myself in the mirror every day for the rest of my life knowing what I've done—what I chose *not* to do."

"It wasn't your fault," he insisted.

She shook her head quickly, shrugging him off when he tried to console her. "I've no one left to take out my anger on. If I see Dumbledore's portrait, I will fucking set it on fire," she finished calmly with a blazing gaze.

"Mia—"

"No! He knew I could change things. He knew I could save lives. I may not have tried in the beginning because I was scared, and I thought he was right, but I wanted to . . . I wanted to try." She rubbed the tears from her eyes. "Even if I *could* forgive him for letting James and Lily die, he let the Dursleys raise Harry. I *know* what those Muggles did, and *that*, I will never forgive Dumbledore for. Never!"

"Come on, love." Remus kissed the top of her head. "Let's go home."

Stepping into the office, Mia saw it was evident that Minerva had settled into the space well. Despite her affection for cats, the walls were not plastered with ugly little kittens on plates as Dolores Umbridge used to have. Instead, there was an overall level of comfort and organisation, with everything having a welcomed place where it belonged.

Mia smiled at the sight, letting the unfamiliar decor of the room ground her, but then she glanced up to where she knew Dumbledore's portrait hung. Upon seeing the empty frame, she exhaled in relief and took a step toward the fireplace when a voice from the wall called out to her.

"Very interesting attire, Miss Granger."

She turned to stare up at the portrait of Severus Snape, having long forgotten how old her former professor looked. The last time she had seen him, he had been just a boy. She supposed being in Voldemort's presence and under Dumbledore's thumb had a way of taking years off a man's life.

"You have a problem with my clothes?" she boldly asked the painting. "I think I look quite fit in these." She did a little spin for him, smirking when the portrait blanched in disgust, only making her smile widen. "I'll thank you to not stare at my arse when I leave."

Snape's eyes narrowed as a realisation clearly dawned on him. He sneered in her direction, his upper lip curling as he spat out, "Potter."

"Snape."

"I see you've made it back after tumbling through time. Pick up any fleas along the way?" he inquired, his attention briefly turning to Remus who rolled his eyes in reply.

Mia snorted in amusement. "You don't bother me anymore, Snape. I think six years of listening to you prattle on about how inept I was at Potions and how I was a know-it-all at everything else was more than compensation for me punching you in the face."

"Twice."

"Twice," Mia agreed. "Which I apologised for if you remember."

"I remember." Snape cleared his throat, suddenly looking uncomfortable. He glanced at Remus and then Minerva, seeming annoyed that they were still in the room. "Thank you," he eventually mumbled, looking as though the words were painful to say aloud. "For what you said to me."

Mia's shoulders dropped. "I'm sorry she never forgave you. I truly am."

"It was not *one* moment of my life that ended our friendship," Snape acknowledged. "She was not so petty as to let one word destroy that. But I can admit now that I was not good to her—or for her. Not that your brother was any—"

"Watch it," Mia snarled, the growl coming from low in her throat.

Snape smirked as he fell silent, then gave a curt nod in her general direction.

Mia took a deep breath and sighed. "For the record, you were a better Potions Professor than Slughorn, and I am grateful for your instruction. Even though you were a giant arse about it."

Snape merely dipped his head toward her. Saying "thank you" once had clearly been more than enough for him for one day.

"Oh," Mia said with a grin as she stepped toward the fireplace. "By the way, it was me who set you on fire during my first year. And I also stole from your personal stores my second year to make Polyjuice Potion in order to sneak into the Slytherin common room. Oh, and I was the one who—"

"Lovely seeing you, Minerva," Remus interrupted, grabbing Mia's hand and tugging her toward him. He gave her a tight smile as he reached for a fistful of Floo powder, throwing it into the fireplace. "Number twelve, Grimmauld Place!"

"Minnie." Mia smiled pleasantly at her old professor as she stuck one foot into the flames before turning toward the painting of Snape, waving jauntily at him. "Severus, always a pleasure."

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Before Harry even took his first step toward the stairs, Sirius jumped up and grabbed his arm. "Maybe let's leave Hermione alone for a bit," he suggested, hoping that he did not look too suspicious.

He knew something like this could happen. Harry hated it when people kept secrets from him—with good reason. Sirius was very similar. He remembered more than one heated argument with Mia that started because of her secrecy. Granted, it turned out she had a pretty bloody good reason, and he finally understood the position she had been in for so long.

"Tell me what's going on," Harry demanded, looking at Sirius as though he could see right through him.

"Fine. Fuck. Right." Sirius ran a hand nervously through his hair. Knowing that he would have to start somewhere *educational* before he even got to the issues with Hermione, he cleared his throat. "What do you know about magical bonds?"

"Bonds?" Harry's brows furrowed in confusion. "Didn't Bill and Fleur have something like that at their wedding?"

Sirius groaned painfully. "Oh, Merlin, I've really failed you as a godfather."

Harry's ire visibly retreated a bit at the comment, and he shook his head to disagree. "What? Don't say that, you've—"

Interrupting, Sirius sat down at the table, dragging Harry by his elbow into the chair beside him. "I'm fixing this starting now before someone shows up and starts hexing my arse for neglecting my magical duty."

Already, he could see Mia's flashing amber eyes and hear her screaming: "*You didn't even teach him about bonds? That's the most important foundation a wizard or witch needs to know, Sirius!*"

"All right, so bonds," he began, clapping his hands together. "There are several different types. Familial, which you are usually born into unless adopted. Marital, which is self-explanatory. Servitude, meaning the bond between a wizard and a house-elf. And Soul, meaning, well, soul mates. Werewolf packs can also have bonds."

While he still looked slightly bewildered by the new topic, Harry appeared to be doing his best in trying to keep up. "So, Tonks and Remus?"

Sirius bowed his head in acknowledgement. "Are bonded twice, yes. Once, because she's his mate—similar to a soulmate but it's more werewolf pack oriented—and again because they were bonded at their wedding."

"Were my parents bonded?" Harry asked. "I've never really thought about their wedding."

Sirius smiled, remembering the way Lily's eyes lit up at the sight of the floating bluebell flames he had created for her. "Yes. It was . . . It was beautiful," he whispered. "When your mum and dad bonded, Lily was magically sealed into the Potter family. Divorce is nearly impossible in the Wizarding world, Harry. Breaking a bond is physically painful because your magic is interwoven with the others who share the bond. Familial is

a little different because it's so natural, but the bonds we choose, well, breaking them is . . ." He hesitated as he remembered Remus describing to him the cold, painful feeling that he had felt when James and Lily, and even himself, had died.

"What does a bond do?" Harry inquired, breaking Sirius out of his dark thoughts.

"Strengthens your magic. It ties you to the person, and you share magic really, but only if the bond is sealed. Every bond goes through three stages. Preparation, provocation, and sealing. So, for instance, you and I share *two* types of bonds. *Familial* because I'm your godfather. That bond was prepared when I became friends with your parents and shared bonds with them, it was provoked when your father asked me to be your godfather, and sealed the first time he placed you in my arms. Usually, bonds are sealed through a ritual, but we don't really have one for godparents. You share a similar bond with Teddy."

Harry's eyes widened suddenly as though he finally understood. "Is that why I'm so protective over him? I didn't want to say anything because it seemed weird, but I feel like he—"

"Belongs to you?" Sirius asked, and Harry slowly nodded. "Yes. That's exactly how I feel about you." He ignored the tightness in his chest at the look of sudden elation on Harry's face. Instead, he smiled and cupped the back of Harry's head in his palm. "You're not just the son of my friends, you're mine. *My* boy."

Harry cleared his throat and swallowed hard, looking like he, too, was trying to fight through the emotions that were surfacing.

"It's all right, Harry," Sirius said, offering him a bit of relief. "There's more to go through. You share another bond with Teddy that connects you and I, through Remus. A Pack Bond. When we were teenagers, your father, Mia, and I became a part of Remus's pack."

"Not Pettigrew?" Harry asked curiously.

"Fuck no," Sirius spat, scowling. "Cowardly little shit wasn't there when . . . Sorry. Mia wouldn't have had him in the pack anyway. She couldn't stand Peter."

Harry's brows furrowed again. "She couldn't? Then . . ."

"Why were the rest of us still friends with him?" Sirius asked and then shrugged. "She had pretty decent reasons at the time, but Mia got really smug when she was right about something and, well, your dad . . . Once you were friends with James, you were

family. There were a few times when Peter and I had a falling out, but James would never have let it become permanent."

"So, how does the Pack Bond include me?"

"It's a very strong bond that extended to your mother and to you because the wolf in Remus saw Lily as my sister and James's mate. You're their, well, their pup, or I suppose baby deer." He chuckled at the annoyed look on Harry's face that so resembled James. "Either way, Moony sees you as a son of the pack. Teddy being Remus's son connects you that way. Pack members kind of share."

Harry raised a brow. "Share what?"

Sirius forced the image of orchards from his mind and cleared his throat since that was not *at all* the direction he wanted to take the conversation. "Well, children for one, I suppose. When you were born you were kind of all of ours, I guess is the best way to look at it. Werewolves raise children as a pack, so that's why Remus is protective of you as well, and why *you* feel the same for Teddy. You've got a big heart, Harry, but this extends beyond that. I know you've struggled because you've gone without family for so long, but you have a family. *We're* family. Family is more than blood."

Harry smiled softly. "I . . . I like that," he said on the end of an exhale as though he had been relieved of a heavy burden. "Wait, did you say my mother was your sister?"

Sirius barked a laugh. "Yeah. It was never sealed, so she wasn't Lily *Black* or anything, but we kind of provoked a Familial Bond," he said, remembering the day when he had given Lily the Potter heirloom bracelet—the same one that he and Harry had given Hermione earlier that night. "I even stepped in as her family when she married your dad."

Harry smiled as though he liked the idea of his mother being connected to Sirius that way. "So, does that make you my uncle then?"

Sirius thought about it for a moment and sighed as he realised that *technically* he was a great many things to Harry. He was practically brothers with James, bonded brother to Lily, and had planned on marrying Mia at one point in time. Had things turned out properly, he actually would have been Harry's uncle. "Let's just keep it at godfather for now. Yeah? It sounds more prestigious."

Harry chuckled. "All right."

"The bond I had with your mum," Sirius began again. "You have that with Hermione. Me giving her that bracelet tonight, and you telling her that she's your sister?"

That pretty much magically *made* her your family, Harry. Not your sister exactly, she would need to be adopted into the Potter family for that to happen. But, she's tied to you forever. Do you understand?"

Harry nodded, his expression holding no regrets over what he had said to Hermione earlier in the evening.

"Some bonds are stronger than others, and some witches and wizards are magically in tune with them. Mia could actually see the bonds when she meditated. Came in pretty handy once or twice," Sirius said with a short laugh. "I can't see them myself, but I can *feel* some of them. Like little tiny strings pulling at you."

Harry took a moment and closed his eyes. "I think I feel it, er . . . *them*. Like something right here." He pointed to his chest. "It's pulling in different directions. What does that mean?"

"Which directions? How many can you feel?"

"Not sure. One for sure goes straight to you."

"That'll be the Familial Bond. It's one of the two you've had sealed. They're stronger that way," Sirius explained.

"So, what does this have to do with . . . ?" Harry began, and Sirius could tell that he was trying to bring the subject back to Hermione.

Sighing softly, Sirius licked his lips and whispered, "Mia and I shared a Soul Bond."

"You were soul mates with my aunt?" Harry asked, eyes widening. "Wow."

"Yes," Sirius confirmed with a slightly jerky nod of his head. "It's very rare."

"What was that like?"

Sirius laughed uncomfortably. "Intense," he said first and then added, "awkward, uncomfortable, horrible, wonderful, awful."

Harry frowned. "I don't understand."

"I didn't want the bond at first," Sirius told him. "I thought it meant that magic would force us together, and that we wouldn't have a choice. I'd gone my whole life being told what to do. I already had my parents ready to force me into an arranged marriage I knew would be terrible, and I didn't want some magical force to do the same thing, and I . . . I loved Mia too much to let her be treated similarly. I thought she deserved better than me. So it was awful. But bonds kind of make you protect the other. You want them

safe and happy more than anything else." He thought of Remus and Mia and *his* insistence that they give it another go. "It got really complicated for a while."

"Did you ever seal it?"

"No," Sirius replied, shaking his head. "That would have meant marriage, and I fucked that up pretty bad."

"So, does your Soul Bond with my aunt mean that you and Hermione aren't . . . ?"

Sirius took a slow, deep breath. Despite Harry being calm and collected for the majority of the conversation, this was a turning point. "Right. So, to prepare any bond, there needs to be emotion. Love. I love you, you love Teddy and Hermione, Remus loves all of us, I loved Mia. To provoke a bond, there needs to be action. James asking me to be your godfather, Remus asking you the same for Teddy. Me giving Hermione that bracelet and you confirming it. Sometimes, bonds are provoked by magic."

"What kind of magic?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"Not dark, just grey . . . ish. Harry, when Hermione brought me back from the veil, she used Blood Magic. An old ritual that uses an uncollected life debt. When she called me from the veil, she provoked a bond between us." Sirius looked down at the table, worried about making eye contact with Harry and seeing his reaction as all the pieces began to fit together.

With his eyes downcast, a distinct *lack* of movement on the page of the book in front of him drew his attention.

"So, does that make Hermione your—?"

"Oh, shit," Sirius mumbled, cutting Harry off. His breath quickened at the sight of the Potter family tree where Mia's faded name no longer hovered but was unmoving and solid. There, below her name, an invisible hand had written her date of birth. Her *actual* date of birth:

*Mia Potter*  
*Born 19 September 1979*

Unable to tear his eyes away from her name, Sirius felt more than saw Harry lean over to look at the book with him. "I don't understand."

"I'm sorry, Harry," Sirius said as he realised what had happened. Mia was alive. Alive and here in this timeline. Whatever Remus did had worked, and the book recognised it, recognised that she was finally Mia again and back in the world where she belonged.

"Sirius?"

He looked up at his godson, hoping he did not appear as vulnerable and panicked as he felt in that moment. "Please remember I would never do anything to hurt you or my family."

Harry's eyes widened. "Sirius, what the hell is going on?"

Just then, there was the whooshing sound of the Floo in the other room being activated.

"Sirius!"

The shrill, feminine scream sent a shiver down his spine. She was angry. Hermione had been angry with him plenty of times, but that tone . . . *Hermione* had never taken that tone with him before.

Rushing into the hallway with Harry on his heels, Sirius stopped dead at the sight of her.

His lips parted, and his breath hitched in his chest. His gaze raked over her body, which was so much more perfect than he remembered. Bare feet and pink painted toes, long slender legs barely covered in a pair of green hotpants. The Quidditch jersey hung off of her body loosely, but he could still see her curves, see how her long, soft curls flowed over her shoulder and breasts. His hands twitched as the need to bury his fingers in those curls became overwhelming. Her shoulder was bared, and he could see the scar—the Pack Mark.

"Sirius," she whispered, breathing heavily.

He met her gaze, and his heart leapt.

She had amber eyes.

*Firewhisky.*

From behind him, Harry confusedly asked, "Hermione? How'd you—? What're you wearing?"

She slowly stepped forward, not taking her eyes off of Sirius.

Terrified that it was not real despite all of the evidence, Sirius's voice broke as he whispered questioningly, "Hermione?"

He had not realised until she was close that there was no softness in those amber eyes.

They were *blazing*.

Two things happened very quickly, much too quickly for him to properly respond. First, her eyes narrowed, and second, she hit him across the face hard enough to turn his head, the sound of the loud smack echoing in the hallway.

Sirius winced at the sudden pain, gripping his jaw as he turned back to look at the witch, hair sparking wildly as she glared viciously at him.

He grinned at her.

"Mia."

## Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Seven

### *Sirius's Choice*

---

*I have died everyday waiting for you  
Darling, don't be afraid I have loved you  
For a thousand years  
I'll love you for a thousand more  
And all along I believed I would find you  
Time has brought your heart to me  
I have loved you for a thousand years  
I'll love you for a thousand more*  
(A Thousand Years - Christina Perri)

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**September 19th, 1998**

"You selfish prick!"

The fireplace behind Mia made a loud *whoosh* as Remus came in. Sirius steeled himself for another smack that did not come, and he took a chance to look at Remus, gesturing toward Harry. Visibly sighing, Remus made his way to Harry's side, flicking his wand at the doorway. Walburga's screams—prompted by Mia's shouting—were silenced.

Sirius stepped closer to Mia as though she had not just hit him in the face and called him a prick. He cupped her cheeks in his hands as he stared into her eyes, grinning wildly. "Mia."

"Don't you dare 'Mia' me, you absolute arse!" She growled viciously and hit him on the shoulder as hard as she could, which, considering her small frame, was surprisingly hard.

Sirius, still in awe of her presence, caressed her honey-brown locks.

"Oh, no you don't!" She pulled away from his grip. "Keep your filthy paws to yourself, Sirius Black! I am furious with you!" she screamed, her bottled rage exploding as she slapped her hand across his face again.

This snapped Sirius out of his stupor. He stumbled back from the force, growling at the sharp sting of pain in his cheek. "What the fuck? Why're you hitting me?"

She stormed toward him again and smacked his chest repeatedly. "I'm hitting you because you deserve it! You *left* me!" she shouted, her voice breaking at the end as a sob escaped.

Sirius's eyes widened in disbelief. "I didn't leave you; *you* left *me*!"

"I didn't do it on purpose, you prat! I didn't have a choice! And I was trying to tell you, but you got your knickers in a fucking twist and flew out the bloody fucking door!"

Harry stood still in the corner, feeling confounded by the scene that was unfolding before him. All he knew was that Hermione had been wearing a simple modest Muggle dress when she left them earlier, and now she was now wearing . . . He purposely moved his gaze away from her legs, instead, squinting at her hair, which looked bizarrely longer. An irrational thought crossed his mind as he questioned whether he had finally gone barmy in the head. "Remus?" he whispered uncertainly as the man came to stand by his side.

"It's best to just let it ride out," Remus advised.

"Remus, Hermione just said 'fuck.'"

"Yes, she did."

"And a large number of other swears that I've never heard her say before." Harry hesitated. "Hermione never swears."

Remus snorted. "She does now."

"Ow!" Sirius shouted as Mia descended upon him again, hitting any body part that became available to her. "Bloody woman, stop fucking hitting me!" he protested, lightly swatting at her flailing fists.

She paused, her brow raised as she dared him, "Give me one good reason why I should *ever* stop hitting you!"

Sirius grinned at the wild look in her eyes. "So I can do this." He grabbed the back of her head, fingers entangling into her hair, and tugged her to him roughly. She growled at the manoeuvre, and he would surely get smacked again for it later, but he crushed his lips against hers before she had the chance to start yelling again. *Merlin, the taste of her.*

His fingers relaxed in her hair, though he held her tightly against him with one hand, the other roaming down to her waist. He pulled her hard against his body, so she could feel *just* how much he had missed her.

Mia whimpered in response before opening her mouth to him, pressing her lips hard against his. When he groaned as her tongue swept into his mouth, she hitched her legs around his waist with minimal effort. Sirius responded immediately, backing her into the nearest wall and pinning her against it, making the paintings around them shake. He continued to devour her, gripping her arse with both hands.

Separated for so long, it was as though their bodies were magnetically drawn to one another, yearning to be united and to never part again.

This was not the sweet, soft goodbye kiss that he had given Hermione earlier in the library, nor was it the passionate embrace they had share mid-battle only months ago; this was *Mia*. Where Hermione was warmth, Mia was fire. Where Hermione was soft, yielding, and pliant, Mia was firm, demanding, and forceful. Where Hermione was shy, Mia was currently biting his lower lip.

He tasted blood, tears, and the flavour that was distinctly her. Merlin help him.

*She tasted how firewhisky felt.*

A moan that came from Mia was followed by someone that might have been Harry saying, "Oh my God! What the bloody hell is going on here?!"

"Just give them another moment," Remus said. "We'll explain soon, but they . . . need this."

Mia pulled away from Sirius after another full minute. With tears streaming down her face, she sobbed, "I hate you."

Sirius pressed his forehead against hers, trying to catch his breath. "I love you. Baby, I love you so much."

Mia exhaled shakily and kissed him again. "I'm so sorry I never told you."

"I understand now. Remus explained everything after the Shrieking Shack incident."

"Were you angry with me?"

Sirius chuckled softly, trying not to cry as well—she was doing enough of that for the both of them. "Fuck yes. I imagine you and I will scream at each other later on for a number of things. But honestly I've had enough years to get over it, and right now I don't want to fight with you." He brushed his lips over her cheeks, down across her jaw and finally resting them at the place just below her ear, where he buried his face in the mass of honey-brown curls.

"I'm so sorry, Sirius. I love you," she whispered as she threaded her fingers through his long black hair, sending a long-awaited shiver down his spine. "I'll never leave you again."

Sirius grinned against her skin, nuzzling the spot below her ear before whispering, "It's cute that you think you have a choice, kitten."

"Ahem!" Remus cleared his throat loudly, smiling with amusement when they both turned to look at him in surprise.

Mia smiled sheepishly at Remus, looking mildly embarrassed about her behaviour, although it was not anything new—at least for Remus. Harry, on the other hand, looked completely thunderstruck. Mia must have turned her focus on Harry as well because she pulled away from Sirius, her eyes lit up with joy.

Sirius smiled, glad to see how happy the sight of his godson made her. His smile faded rapidly, however, when she cried out, "Jamie!"

"Oh no," Remus whispered, looking as panicked as Sirius felt.

She fell into Harry's open arms, and he caught her without hesitation. His eyes were wide as she peppered his cheeks with kisses. Sirius watched in horror as her hands ran over Harry's shoulders, her firm grip loosening as she likely came to the painful realisation that the wizard she was hugging was not her brother.

"Hermione?"

Mia pulled away from Harry and stared into his eyes. "Green eyes," she whispered softly as she reached up to brush the hair off of his forehead. Her gaze immediately darted to the slightly faded lightning bolt scar, and she jumped away from him as though she had been burnt. Her hands shook as she wrapped her arms around herself, staring at him with tears pricking at her eyes.

"Harry," she choked out.

Harry looked at her with gentle concern. "Hermione, what's going on?"

Her bottom lip trembled. Bringing her hands to cover her mouth, she closed her eyes, letting a few stray tears fall. "Remus . . ." She gasped, reaching out for him. "I . . . I can't."

With a troubled frown etched on his face, Remus squeezed her hand in support. "It's all right, love."

Mia shook her head and took one last look at Harry before she turned and ran up the stairs.

"Should I?" Remus muttered, vaguely gesturing to the staircase. "Or do you . . . ?" He looked at Sirius, who was being angrily glared at by Harry.

"Let her have some time to herself," Sirius suggested. "I'm sure Harry has a lot of questions, and I don't think he would appreciate *me* going after her, considering what just happened."

"That would be accurate," Harry replied sharply.

"And I've seen the lad destroy a Dark Lord, so frankly I'd rather not be left alone with him, Moony." Sirius tugged on Remus's robes, forcing his friend to follow him into the other room where he poured a glass of bourbon for himself and two tumblers of firewhisky.

"Come on, Harry." Remus pushed the crystal tumbler toward him. "Let's have a drink."

"Send a Patronus to Tonks first to let her know what's happened, then close the Floo and put up anti-Apparition wards," Sirius instructed Remus. "I don't want anyone coming in unannounced. The last thing she needs is to be overwhelmed."

"She's already overwhelmed, Pads."

"Well then, *I* don't want to be overwhelmed."

Remus silently assented and walked into the other room to close the Floo as Sirius requested. While he was gone, Sirius and Harry sat down, both not touching the drinks in front of them. When Remus returned, he took a seat at the table, smiling at the genealogy book in front of him.

"One of you going to explain now?" Harry snapped impatiently. "I have a lot of bloody questions."

"Drink first," Sirius gestured, finally knocking back a healthy swig.

After taking a deep breath, Remus began, "As you know, when Sirius and I were children, we had the pleasure of befriending your father." He took a pause, "What we never told you is that we were both introduced to James by his sister."

"Oh, we've already covered that," Sirius told Remus with a nod. "Got all the way to teaching him about bonds."

"And Mia?"

"Not . . . entirely there yet. Harry, I didn't get a chance to tell you that your father's sister was actually adopted. We didn't know it until years later, but she was a Muggle-born witch that lost her family. Dumbledore brought her to the Potters—brought her there because she was wearing a Potter heirloom," Sirius said, giving Harry a meaningful look.

Harry's mouth fell open. "No."

"Mia was—" Remus began, but was quickly interrupted.

"Mia," Harry whispered. "But you called Hermione . . ." He fell silent, his brow crinkled.

"During our seventh year at Hogwarts," Remus started again, "we saw a scar on Mia's arm. Cut into her flesh. A word."

"Mudblood," Harry breathed.

Remus and Sirius nodded gravely.

Harry shook his head in disbelief. "But that's not possible"

"Mia told me everything," Remus continued. "Said that she was from the year 1998, and she'd been sent back in time. Dumbledore gave her a De-Ageing Potion, had her adopted into a pureblood family, changed her name, and stuck her in Hogwarts to keep her safe from the Death Eaters. The potion changed her body but made her scars reappear as she aged. When the one on her arm showed up, she didn't have a choice but to tell me the truth. She made me promise that when the time came, I would take a stolen Time-Turner, charm it into a Portkey, and trick Hermione Granger, herself, into going back to 1971."

Harry's eyes flashed at the revelation. "You? *You* did this to her? You sent Hermione into the past?"

"I did."

"How could you do that, Remus?!"

"Because she asked me—no, *begged* me to," he responded, his eyes pleading for Harry to understand. "Hermione was with us for *years*. She built a life with us. She was hysterical at the idea that she might *not* get sent back, might never become James's sister or my friend or Sirius's . . ."

Sirius could feel Remus's gaze fall on him even as he kept his own on his drink, fighting with it in a mental battle as he wondered if it would even touch him.

After a beat, Remus cleared his throat and continued. "Could you ever deny Hermione anything, Harry? If she pleaded with you, begged you, and made you promise? Is there *anything* in this world that you would ever deny her?"

Harry answered without hesitation, "No. She's . . . She's my Hermione."

Sirius looked up to see the sad smile on Remus's face.

"Nineteen years ago, she was *my Mia*. And I gave her my word."

Harry leant forward and ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. "This is so confusing. I don't understand, we just saw Hermione go downstairs. How long has she been gone?"

"She left tonight," Sirius said, his voice quiet as he ran the pad of his thumb around the rim of his glass. "Remus and I walked her to the library where the Time-Turner was waiting."

"How long has it been for *her*?"

"Eight years."

Harry's eyes widened. "She looks the same. Or, well, she looks the same *age*."

"That'll be the work of the De-Ageing Potion."

Harry bobbed his head, looking like he was trying very hard to process everything that they were telling him now, connecting it with what Sirius had told him before about his long-lost aunt. "She grew up with you? How have I not seen any photographs?"

"*She* took them all," Remus said. "And the few that she was in disappeared."

"I have them," Sirius admitted.

Remus turned to him. "*You* kept them?"

"They're locked away in my room. The stuff Dumbledore gave you when I went to Azkaban? There was a box in there I kept all our pictures in. When she vanished, I hid them all."

"The metal box you keep in your room?" Harry asked.

Sirius met Harry's gaze with a small smile. "I'll take them out and show you later. Though, Mia will probably want to show you anyway."

There was a long moment of silence where Harry and Remus each nursed their firewhisky, and Sirius swirled his bourbon around in the glass.

"Care to explain what happened in the hallway?" Harry demanded suddenly.

Sirius snorted. "Does it really need explaining?"

Harry glowered at him. "It really does, Sirius."

Sighing, exhausted, Sirius scrubbed his hand down his face. "I haven't seen that woman—*Mia*, mind you, not Hermione, *Mia*—for nineteen years. Kind of got carried away."

"So you and Hermione . . . were . . . are . . . what?"

"Soul Bonded," Sirius answered.

"When did this happen?" Harry asked.

"From what I can tell, Hermione provoked the Soul Bond on *her* end when she pulled me from the veil. She carried it with her into the past where she met me when I was eleven. I provoked *my* end of the Soul Bond when I kissed her there."

"You've kissed Hermione before?" Harry asked.

"*Mia*," Remus corrected him. "He's kissed *Mia*."

"I kissed Hermione too," Sirius confessed.

"Oh, right, just a while ago in the library. I'd forgotten."

"No, I kissed her before that."

Blinking, Remus stared at him with furrowed brows. "What? When?"

"In the middle of the battle." Sirius smirked when both Harry and Remus gaped at him. "Don't look at me like that. I thought we were going to die. Besides, it's not like this was a one-off thing for me. For fuck's sake, I was going to marry the witch."

"Hermione?" Harry asked, shocked.

"*Mia*," Remus corrected again.

"She's the same woman!" Sirius snapped. "It's just a fucking nickname!"

"Hermione hates nicknames," Harry mumbled.

"Wait, you proposed to *Mia*?" Remus asked, his eyes widening.

Harry's mouth fell open, as though he had not caught on to the seriousness until just that moment. "You and Hermione were engaged?"

"How the hell did I not know this? You proposed to *Mia*, and she didn't tell me?" Remus insisted, looking a little put out by the information. "I'm her best friend. She told me everything!"

"She didn't know, dickhead!" Sirius scowled at his friend. "I hadn't gotten the guts to do it yet, and then she fucking vanished one night before I had the chance to bloody ask her! And you are *not* her best friend—*I'm* her best friend."

Remus rolled his eyes at the declaration. "Did James know? James had to have known. You told each other everything. He owed you detailed letters from his honeymoon with Lily!"

Harry grimaced. "Ugh . . ."

"'Ugh' is right," Sirius agreed. "Your dad was descriptive and not in a good way."

"What the hell is the good way?" Remus asked.

"Don't answer that!" Harry shouted desperately.

Sirius burst into laughter.

"So, you were going to ask Mia to marry you, and James didn't even know?" Remus asked, getting back to the subject at hand.

"Prongs knew." Sirius smiled sadly. "He found the ring for me."

"I can't believe you didn't tell me."

"You would have told her, Moony. Like you said, she told you everything and that went both ways. Besides, at the time I thought it was weird, for obvious reasons."

"What reasons?" Harry inquired.

Sirius cleared his throat and tossed a look at Remus who had gone pale. "I'll tell you when you're older." Before Harry could object—and he looked like he wanted to—Sirius went on saying, "Anyway, I was going to propose but then she goes and fucks it all up by picking a fight with me at the flat, and I left to cool off. By the time I got back, she was missing. Left everything behind except her wand and my Quidditch jersey. I loved that jersey."

"You *loved* her?"

Sirius smiled wryly. "Still do. Love like that doesn't go away. It just sits in your chest and waits for you to die."

Harry frowned. "Did she love you?"

"More than anything in the whole world," Remus answered for him.

Sirius sighed and swallowed, finally pushing his drink away from him. "Harry, I know this is hard to hear but—"

"It's *more* than hard to hear," Harry insisted. "You stole my best friend after kissing her behind my back, shoved her into the past, and made her my . . . What if . . . ? What if this is too much?"

Sirius paled as fear sank into his skin like a sickness. "What do you mean?"

Harry took a moment before speaking. "I mean, I assume you're planning on continuing your relationship with her?"

"I . . ."

"Is she still even Hermione? Is there any bit of my best friend left in there?" Harry asked angrily.

Remus frowned. "Harry, I've been asking myself the exact same question for the last few years."

Harry turned his attention back to Sirius. "What if I'm not okay with this?"

Sirius swallowed hard and clenched his fists together tightly. "Harry, son, please don't—"

"Harry!" Remus scolded.

"No, Remus." The boy turned and narrowed his eyes before looking back at Sirius. "I want to hear it from *him*. What if I said I don't approve of this? What if I asked you to choose? Your . . . whatever it is with Hermione . . . or me?"

"Please don't," Sirius begged, closing his eyes and willing Harry to understand.

"Answer the question."

"It would . . . It would *kill* me to lose you," Sirius confessed, thinking of the first moment that James placed Harry in his arms. The moment he had been forced to hand him over to Hagrid when James and Lily were killed. The moment they had finally been reunited, and again after Sirius had been pulled from the veil. "Harry, you know about the bonds now. You know what you are to me. You're not just . . . You're my s-s—"

"Yeah, I know, and you're the only father I can remember," Harry said. "So answer the question."

Sirius clenched his eyes shut tightly. "Her," he whispered, his heart breaking. "It would kill me, but I would choose *her*. Always *her*. Forever *her*."

"All right then." Harry stood. "That's all I needed to know." He approached Sirius then, wrapping him in a tight hug that forced a panicked breath out of his lungs. "Sirius, I love Hermione. She's been *mine* to protect since I was eleven. I spent far too long standing by watching Ron make her cry and Malfoy call her names. Too involved in my own shit to even bother asking about Krum or *do* anything about McLaggen. And then I dragged her into a war, and she never once left my side. She suffered. She was tortured. She almost died. She lost *everything* for me, Sirius." He stood tall, holding his head high, his eyes hard and dark. "So I'll do *anything* for her, and that means choosing her over you." He exhaled slowly. "So if you want my approval or . . . whatever, you have it. But if you hurt her—"

Sirius's eyes widened. "You approve?"

Harry shrugged, the boyishness in him returning. "Well, you say she's your soul mate. I want you both happy. Don't get me wrong, it's strange, but seven years ago, I didn't

know I was a wizard or how to fly on a broom. I didn't have a godfather that could turn into a dog. I guess I'll adjust like I normally do."

Sirius laughed and stood up, pulling Harry into his arms and patting him on the back. "Your dad would have been so proud of you."

Harry smiled awkwardly when they pulled apart from one another, running his hand through his hair. "Is she going to be okay?"

Remus nodded. "I think seeing you made it all real. She vanished two years before your parents died. The last time she saw them was at their wedding."

"So seeing me . . ." Harry said, looking like he understood. "She thought I was my dad."

Sirius smiled sadly. "And then she realised you weren't."

"Wow."

"I told her as much as I could," Remus offered. "Said that nothing changed. She cried for a while, begged me to send her back a few times."

Sirius winced at the thought.

"Should I . . . ?" Harry began nervously. "I mean, should I leave? Go to the Burrow for a while until she—"

"I think you should go to her," Remus suggested.

"What?" Harry's eyebrows shot up to his hairline in surprise.

"Harry, she told me about you. *Mia*, I mean. She barely mentioned anyone else, sometimes in passing. Ron once, Neville a few times, but she missed you. For *years*, she really missed you."

"Won't it hurt her to look at me?"

"No more than it does the rest of us," Sirius said honestly. "I won't lie to you Harry, you're a reminder of what we lost, but you're also a reminder of what we still have. You're the best of both of your parents and still, somehow, you're yourself as well. Mia loved James and Lily. But Mia is still Hermione. It's just a nickname. She's still Hermione, and Hermione loves you."

Harry slowly nodded and, without another word, turned and left the room.

Sirius collapsed back into his chair and leant forward, resting his head in his arms on the table. "Fuck, that was awful."

"That looked painful. He might be a little more Slytherin than we ever gave him credit for," Remus said with a slight chuckle.

Looking up and narrowing his eyes at his friend, Sirius admitted, "I think I'd rather be stabbed with an antler again."

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The old house offered her few familiar comforts. Despite not having been there in almost a decade, Mia knew which way to find the kitchen, the library, the old drawing room where Sirius kept the tapestry and an old Persian rug hidden away. She knew which room had been hers, so long ago.

It did not feel like hers any longer.

She found herself in Sirius's bed, clinging to the sheets and trying to breathe the smell of him in. She wanted it to sink into her skin and ease her worries and grief, but the smell—while decidedly still Sirius—was different than the smell of her bedsheets back at the flat that she shared with him and Remus. A flat which no longer belonged to them. Her home was gone. Her brother was dead. And her world left behind her.

Mia felt lost—displaced in time more now than she ever had felt during her initial trip back to the past.

She heard Harry's footsteps long before he entered the room. The old house creaked with every movement, so she knew that he had first gone to her old room to see if she was there, only to find her in Sirius's room instead.

He knocked lightly on the door. "Hermione?"

The name sounded foreign. She sniffled and then whispered. "I haven't been called that in a long time."

Harry stepped into the room, shutting the door behind him. "Are you okay?" he asked as he approached the bed, taking a seat on the end of it.

"A little freaked out," she admitted quietly. "The boys explain everything to you?"

"Boys?"

She chuckled softly. "Remus and Sirius."

"You were my dad's sister?" Harry asked. "And Sirius's . . . soul mate?"

Mia widened her eyes as she sat up. "They got out more than I thought they would."

"Are you still Hermione?" he asked quietly, not meeting her stare.

She remembered waking up that first morning in 1971 with James in her bed, thinking he was Harry. Realising that he was not her best friend had been devastating to her in the moment. She assumed Harry was feeling that same worry—that he had lost her forever.

Mia reached out, touching his face affectionately. "Yes. I'm still me. I've just . . . been lost for a very long time." She brushed Harry's hair from his forehead again with a smile, watching as it fell back in his face, covering the scar. "Merlin, you look just like Jamie."

"Jamie?" Harry smirked. "I've never heard anyone call my dad that before."

"That's because I was the only one allowed to." She continued smiling as she looked him over. "I can't *believe* how much you look like him."

"Except for the eyes?" Harry asked with a crooked grin.

Mia smiled and then nodded, pressing her lips tightly together as she fought back the tears that were trying to resurface. "This is going to be hard. I didn't want to have to do this again."

"Again?"

"The first year or so being with Jamie was hard because he looked like you, and I missed you so much, Harry. It was just . . . shit without you," she said, letting out a single sob before laughing.

"You swear a lot now," Harry pointed out, chuckling.

"Blame Sirius."

"Speaking of Sirius . . ." Harry began, clearing his throat. Even in the dark, she could see the colour rising in his cheeks.

"Can it wait? I don't think I can do this right now."

"Do you want me to go?"

She shook her head and pulled him down on the bed with her. Wrapping her arms around him, she rested her head on his shoulder. "Please don't."

## Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Eight

### *Indulge Me*

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*When I see your smile  
Tears roll down my face I can't replace  
And now that I'm strong I have figured out  
How this world turns cold and it breaks through my soul  
And I know I'll find deep inside me I can be the one*  
(Your Guardian Angel - The Red Jumpsuit Apparatus)

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**September 20th, 1998**

Just as the sun was peeking in through the windows of Sirius's bedroom, Mia opened her eyes. The memories of the last day were fresh in her thoughts as she breathed in the familiar scent on her pillow. Grass, parchment, and leather. It helped settle her nerves as she fought through the onslaught of emotion when she had to remind herself that James and Lily were gone. She took another deep breath before turning to the warm body beside her, smiling sadly.

*Gone . . . but not forgotten.*

She affectionately ran her fingers through Harry's hair before hovering over him to inspect his features. She knew that people had always told Harry that he looked exactly like James, except for the eyes, of course. But now looking at him, he was actually a perfect blend of his parents.

Mia desperately wanted to find old pictures from the years she missed. Lily's pregnancy, Harry's birth, and any photo of the boy when he was little. He was still *her* Harry—her best friend who she had missed dearly—but he was also James's son. He was her nephew, he was *family*, and she missed the first eleven years of his life. Years she had been looking forward to seeing before the Time-Turner went haywire and started a countdown.

Feeling bittersweet, she sighed and kissed Harry's forehead.

"Hermione?" Harry mumbled sleepily.

"Mmm?"

"This is weird."

"Indulge me," she said with a quiet laugh. "I had a rough night. Besides, I was really looking forward to watching you grow up."

Mia had to suppress the urge to cry as Harry opened his eyes to reveal achingly familiar emerald depths.

"You *did* watch me grow up. You grew up *with* me."

She frowned and continued to rake her fingers through his hair. "You know what I mean."

"You're . . . a lot more affectionate than you were yesterday," Harry observed.

"Kind of had to be," she said, shrugging. "I was always one for hugs, of course, but Jamie had issues with getting into people's personal space, and Sirius was no better."

"I think he really missed you."

Mia smiled. "I really missed him too."

Harry raised an eyebrow in confusion. "What? I thought—I mean weren't you just with him? *Younger* him . . . yesterday?"

"Yes, but I missed the older Sirius," she tried to explain. "Harry, did they tell you what happened when I pulled Sirius from the veil?"

He nodded. "Provoked your Soul Bond."

Her eyes widened slightly. "So you know how I feel about Sirius?"

"You love him?"

"More than anything," she admitted quietly, her bottom lip quivering. "And, yesterday, or at least yesterday to you . . . I loved him then, too." She remembered how an older Sirius Black kissed her sweetly in the library and pleaded with her to be happy, leaving promises for explanations about their bond for the following morning.

*Today.* Today was the day after her nineteenth birthday, though she hardly needed any explanations about bonds *now*.

"Really?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Mhmm. And then I got sent back in time and had to deal with a bratty, arrogant, and *incredibly* needy eleven-year-old, who took up all the space on the sofa in the common room, made me buy him Cauldron Cakes on the train, and picked fights with Slytherins that got us all into trouble." She laughed, making Harry grin. "*Constantly* in trouble, that boy. I very much missed the older Sirius for a long time."

Harry started to shift awkwardly lying next to her. He sat up and ran a hand through his hair as though he were attempting to fix it, which of course, accomplished nothing. "We should go down to breakfast. I doubt he slept well after last night."

"Good," Mia said biting. "Miserable son of a bitch left me." She shrugged when Harry turned to stare at her incredulously. "What? I can love him and still be incredibly pissed off, which I am. If we owned a dog house, he'd be sleeping in it. In *human* form."

A teasing grin tugged at Harry's lips. "Are you sure you're still Hermione?"

"Yes. It's just . . . now I don't hold back as much. The more you live, the fewer fucks you give, and I've lived an additional eight years, you know. Don't I look good for my age?" she asked with a wink.

Harry's face turned red as he looked her over, but then he grimaced. "Well, if you weren't gross before because you were like my sister, you're definitely gross now because you're my—Merlin, Hermione, you're my *aunt*."

They both burst into loud laughter.

"I *did* mother you quite a bit at Hogwarts," she said in between giggles.

"Fair enough." Harry smiled before sobering. "I think you should go and see Sirius."

"You're all right with it?"

He nudged her side gently and shrugged. "I'll live."

Mia sighed and reached out to brush the hair from his forehead again, whispering, "Boy Who Lived."

"*Man-Who-Lived-Despite-His-Godfather-Snogging-His-Best-Mate*," Harry corrected her cheekily.

Mia snorted and shook her head, figuring that it was best to leave him thinking that it was *just* snogging for the time being. If she remembered correctly, Harry was never the one to be comfortable with public displays of affection, something he would certainly need to get over very soon.

"I love you, Harry Potter."

"I love you, Hermione Gr—Wait. You're a *Potter* now, aren't you?"

"Yes," she replied, looking down at the duplicate Potter bracelet she wore on her wrist; the original bracelet, of course, had been left to Lily.

"If we were at Hogwarts, and I pulled out the map, what would it say your name is?"

"Mia Potter," she answered easily. "That's what it legally is. When Mum and Dad, er, your grandparents legally adopted me, I became Mia Potter. I might change it to *Hermione* Potter, though. Technically speaking, Mia has always been just a nickname. I don't expect you to call me it."

Harry looked visibly relieved at the news. She knew that her "rebirth" as Mia Potter would be difficult for a lot of people, herself included, and she aimed to make the transition as smooth as possible.

"Really, the only people who would be probably Sirius and Remus."

"So you're okay with being a Potter?" Harry asked her. "You don't want to stay a Granger?"

Mia frowned, thinking of her Muggle parents. "Harry, my *Muggle* parents died years ago. I know, to you, it was just a few months ago that I was sobbing in the other room because I couldn't retrieve their memories. But I've mourned them. And I was given a gift. A second chance, a second family, and I loved them dearly. Charlus and Dorea Potter were my parents just as much as Richard and Helen Granger. But Richard and Helen Granger were Muggles who raised a Muggle-born witch and couldn't understand our world. Charlus and Dorea Potter were my . . . my *magical* parents. My blood belongs to the Grangers, but my magic, my *bond*, belongs with the Potters. I am a Potter and very proud to be one."

Harry nodded in acceptance and grinned. "I love you, *Hermione Potter*."

When they walked down into the kitchen to find Remus sitting at the small table reading the *Prophet*, Mia rushed forward and hugged him from behind, wrapping her arms around his neck.

He laughed, craning his neck to look up at her. "Good morning, love."

"Remus, is that food?" Mia asked, glancing down at a bowl that was sitting in front of an empty chair.

He grinned. "Tea and porridge with berries, just the way you like it."

"*You* made it?" With suspicion and disbelief, she sat down in the chair and poked at the food with a spoon as though she were waiting for something to crawl out of it.

Remus briefly scowled. "Had to learn sometime. Andromeda's been teaching me."

Mia nodded and took a bite of her breakfast, chewing slowly before finally letting a pleasant smile spread across her face. "This is so good. I'm impressed." She grinned proudly at him and took a long sip of her tea. "Oh, you beautiful man, I could kiss you!"

"His wife might have a problem with that." Harry snorted as he attached a letter to his new owl's leg by the open window. The bird took flight, and Harry turned around to catch Mia's mischievous smile as she snatched a piece of bacon off of Remus's plate which, for anyone else, would have garnered at the very least a growl from the man.

Remus pushed the plate closer to her, silently offering another helping as he said, "Unlikely. Dora's been looking forward to meeting Mia for years."

"Really?" She looked up anxiously. "I'm nervous to see her. Is it weird that I'm nervous?"

"It'll be fine," he reached out and patted her arm.

She nodded, still slightly worried, and finished off the tea in her cup. "When will Tonks come?" A thought occurred to her. "And Teddy! Oh Merlin, I get to see Teddy! Where's my little godson?"

"*Your* godson?" Harry narrowed his eyes playfully.

Remus eyed Mia with a grin. "And what on earth makes you think you are my son's godmother?"

She laughed and rolled her eyes as she stood up to deposit the now empty bowl into the sink. "Oh please, I am *so* that boy's godmother."

Cracking a small smile, Remus said, "We wanted to wait to ask you until you were, well, Mia again."

She held in her excitement for as long as she could, but a celebratory squeal escaped from her throat as she rushed into Remus's arms. "Oh, thank you, Remus! I cannot wait to see him!" she gushed, completely overjoyed.

Then she pulled out of Remus's arms and promptly smacked him hard on the chest.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"For every time in the past eight . . . or I guess *thirty* years when you said you'd *never* have children. Do you know how hard it was for me to refrain from throttling you back then? You'd go on a tangent about your lycanthropy, and all I could see was a sweet blue-haired baby. Thank *Merlin* Sirius punched you that day," she said, reminding Remus of the day he discovered Tonks's pregnancy.

Shaking his head in amusement, he smiled gratefully as he leant forward and kissed her cheek. "Thank you for putting up with me for all these years."

"Remus, you look . . . different," Harry commented. "Younger? Healthier?"

Mia smiled brightly. "It's the Pack Bond. I suppose me being back has strengthened it. The magic gets stronger when there's more of us around Remus. It's healing."

Harry inclined his head thoughtfully. "Sirius was telling me about that last night. How did you become a pack?"

Remus smiled, leaning against the counter. "In our fifth year at Hogwarts, Fenrir Greyback infiltrated the school in order to kidnap me. He was nearly successful, but Mia, Sirius, and your dad found out and came to my rescue. They attacked Greyback, and I was able to break free of his hold over me."

"Well, Padfoot and I *tried*," Mia said, shrugging her shoulders. "Prongs really did a number on him, though. And he wouldn't let anyone forget it for months afterward."

Harry's eyes widened. "Greyback? The one who originally bit you?" he asked Remus. "The werewolf that Malfoy killed in the war?"

"I'd almost forgotten about that," Mia muttered. "Remind me to send a thank you letter to Draco later."

Harry startled. "For *killing* someone?"

"For killing *Fenrir Greyback*," she emphasised. "I would have skinned that wolf alive if he'd survived to meet me this time around."

Harry stared at her, looking taken aback. "Wait, you said Padfoot and Prongs. Do you mean that they were in Animagus form when they fought Greyback?"

"Yes," Mia confirmed. "*We* were."

Harry's eyes widened, and he grinned. "You're a—Bloody hell, Hermione! You're an Animagus? What are you?"

"I'll show you later," she promised with a chuckle, turning around and flicking her wand to summon a quill and parchment. She leant on the counter as she began making a list. "Right now there are things that need to be taken care of. I need to get with someone about, well, bringing myself back from the dead, I suppose. Somehow we need to figure out how to legally merge Hermione Granger and Mia Potter into one person, one life. I'll need to go shopping at some point, and I need someone to go to an Apothecary and buy stewed aconite sprigs. I'd do it myself, but there's not enough time if I'm going to get your Wolfsbane Potion ready for the next full moo—" She was cut off by Remus who had taken her into his arms tightly, kissing her head and spinning her around. "Ack! Moony!"

"You are the best friend I've ever had, and I have missed you so much!" he declared as he set her back down on her feet.

"Good." She grinned at him. "Then you can go and do the shopping for me. I don't think I'm ready to go outside yet," she admitted, her smile breaking a touch. "If I run into someone I know, I . . . I don't know how I'll react. I know we'll need to tell people, but I don't even know where to start."

"Ron and Ginny would be a good place," Harry suggested.

Mia blinked a few times, almost as though the thought had not even occurred to her. "I suppose. I'd thought to get the whole Weasley family out of the way at the same time considering they'll all have about a thousand questions, but Ron will be quite put out if he isn't told separately, won't he?"

Harry agreed. "You know how he is."

"Yes," Mia said, feeling bad that she had actually forgotten. Being around Arthur so much had all but recalibrated Weasley tempers in her mind. Arthur was on one far end of the spectrum with Ron at the other. "And while I tolerated it before . . . Maybe after Ron and Ginny, we could just call an Order meeting? I'd like Andromeda, Narcissa, and Draco to be there as well."

Harry furrowed his brows. "Why? I mean, I get Andromeda, but the Malfoys?"

"They're family," Mia said firmly. "Harry, you know that Narcissa was a Black before she married Lucius."

"But she *did* marry Lucius, and he was a Death Eater," he reminded her. "You want to invite the *Malfoys* to an *Order* meeting? I know technically Malfoy was a spy, but they weren't entirely on our side . . . not like—"

"There are no longer sides, Harry," Mia said, cutting him off. "The war is over, the Malfoys are family, and my word is final. Is that clear?"

Harry was left speechless. He briefly looked to Remus for help but was offered none. Mia knew that she had reprimanded him over the years, but there had always been a softness behind it. Ever since the Firebolt incident in their third year, she had often worried that if she pushed him too far, he would stop being her friend. Now, however, he was not just her best friend, he was family, and Harry could stomp his feet all he liked, but he would never be rid of her now. Because of that—and due to years of thinning patience, thanks to James and Sirius—Mia's tone brokered no argument.

"Is that clear?" she repeated.

Harry looked shamefaced. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I . . . old habits."

And then, very unlike Hermione, who would continue to drive the point home long after it had clicked, Mia dropped the subject and smiled at him. She leant forward, kissed his cheek, and said, "Good. I'm proud of you," before turning back to her list.

Harry blushed at the affectionate gesture, looking relieved. "I sent an owl this morning to Kingsley telling him I'm taking a short leave from work."

Mia frowned in concern. "Harry, you don't have to do that. Your training is very important right now."

"I want to," he said firmly. "I know you're still Hermione, but you're my dad's sister now, too, and I kind of feel like I owe it to him to get to know you for, well, for being Mia Potter."

She beamed at him with tears welling in her eyes and hugged him tightly. "You're wonderful, Harry. Just like your dad." Pulling away, she wiped at her eyes. "You didn't tell Kingsley—"

"I told him I'd tell him the details later," Harry assured her.

"And he was okay with that?" Remus asked.

Harry shrugged. "I'm the Chosen One. It comes with perks someti—"

Mia clenched her fists, and the teacups on the counter shattered. The broken shards were still vibrating on the counter when she felt Remus's calming hand on her shoulder.

Tentatively, Harry said, "Er, Hermione?"

She swallowed, her throat feeling dry as magic burned beneath her skin. "I'm sorry, Harry."

Remus stepped closer behind her, kissing the top of her head. "I'll leave you two to talk; I apparently have some shopping to take care of," he said and snatched the list from the counter before leaving.

"Hermione?" Harry stepped forward and placed a hand on her shoulder. "What's going on?"

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. "You grew up without them, and I did nothing to stop that from happening."

Harry frowned. "Can I ask . . . why?"

She sighed. "A lot of reasons. At first, I was terrified of making the future worse if I tried to change something. You know how sensitive Time Magic can be, and I had the fear of it driven into me during our third year." She turned around to face him but refused to make eye contact. "My mum, er, Dorea Potter, she knew where I came from. She knew about the time travel, and she had a feeling about Jamie's future. She told me that if I'd tried to change something, stop him from dying . . . Death would just take someone else, or maybe it would *still* take Jamie and the next time he would suffer. I did the calculations, even spoke to a Seer—"

"*You?*" Harry likely would have laughed had they been talking about any other subject. "*You* spoke to a Seer?"

She rolled her eyes. "I was desperate. Every calculation of a potential future made things worse. We would lose the war. Jamie was a pure Gryffindor. If I'd done something, and things turned out worse because of it . . . If he found out that it was because of him, Merlin, I don't even want to think of what—"

"In the Forbidden Forest," Harry interrupted her. "When I died, I had the Resurrection Stone with me, and . . . I saw my parents."

Mia, of course, knew this. Harry had told her what had happened in the forest after the war, though then she had only been Hermione Granger, who had no connection to the Potters save for Harry himself.

"They were okay. I mean . . . they were peaceful, you know? All smiles and support for what I was doing. I'm not angry with you for not saving them, Hermione."

She did not burst into tears like she had done the night before, but when her eyes prickled, she quietly wiped away the signs of sadness with the back of her hand.

"I couldn't lose you," she said, finally looking up to meet his worried stare. "I'm not like you, Harry. I didn't do it to save the world. I did it because there wasn't any way to guarantee that you'd survive. And I . . . Harry, I loved Jamie, but you were—" She nervously bit her bottom lip. "It's because of *you* that he even became my brother to begin with. Because you were there in my heart, first."

Harry moved forward and hugged her close to him. "It's okay," he promised her. "I wish they'd been around, but honestly, I don't remember having them, so sometimes when I miss them, I guess I'm just missing what I feel like I should have had. But if there was any chance that something could have gone worse—even the *slightest* chance—I'm glad you

did what you did. I don't blame you. What if you'd saved them and then accidentally erased yourself from history? From my life?"

"You would have had your parents," she answered as she pulled away from him.

"But not you. Hermione, *you* are my family," Harry insisted. "Apparently, literally," he added with a grin that grew when she laughed. "You are my best friend and my sister, and you are the most important person in my life. But please don't tell Ron or Ginny that."

They both laughed at that, and Mia hugged him again.

"I love you, Harry. I feel the same way about you."

"No, you don't. You love Sirius more. He loves you, too. I kind of . . . made him choose between you and me last night," he confessed, looking embarrassed.

Her smile faded immediately. "You did what? Harry James Potter!"

"He chose *you*," he said quickly, putting his hands up as though preparing for an attack. "Which was what he was supposed to do. If he'd have chosen me, I would have hexed him and then told him to leave you alone."

Instead of frowning, she smiled wryly and shook her head. "That's cruel. He would have rather you hexed him."

Harry grinned, looking far too pleased with himself. "What did my dad think?" he asked. "About you and Sirius?"

Mia hesitated as the memory of her drunk brother came into her mind, the images of Sirius and Remus bleeding on the opposite side of their dorm room were still very vivid. "In the beginning, he was furious. Ask Sirius about the scar he's got on his shoulder."

Harry paled. "What?"

She shrugged. "Jamie was very protective of me, and Sirius had a reputation."

"Yeah, I know about Sirius's reputation. You were okay with that?"

She shook her head. "No, not entirely, but . . . Sirius had a rough life back then. And I wasn't going to play Mind Healer to him when I had my own issues, in addition to trying to keep your dad out of trouble and handle Remus's werewolf problems. I don't hold Sirius's past against him, though. I would never. His experiences have made him into the man he is, good and bad. I love him completely."

"So my dad eventually approved?"

She smiled remembering Lily's intervention. "He practically forced us together in the end. Sirius and I . . . the Soul Bond pretty much means we're fated, and Sirius—"

"Yeah, he told me he didn't like that," Harry interrupted.

"He *really* didn't," she emphasised with wide eyes. "By the beginning of seventh year, James, Lily, and Remus were sick of us, and your mum tricked us into confessing our feelings for one another. Once that happened, he was it for me. We joined the Order together and then moved into a flat together with Remus."

"Where were my parents?"

She laughed. "In their own home being disgustingly in love with each other."

Harry smiled and then appeared nervous before he asked, "Can you . . . tell me something real about them? All Sirius and Remus tell me is how amazing they both were, and then Snape's memories showed them in, well, a really bad light. I feel like I don't know who they really were because everyone I've ever met that's known them is exaggerating or . . . I don't know, biased."

Mia smiled brightly, remembering that when she had first arrived in 1971 and met James and Lily, this was what she was hoping she eventually would be able to do. A Pensieve could be used later for the important moments she wanted Harry to see, but she was thrilled to be able to tell her best friend the truth about his parents. "Your mother used to collect werewolf romance novels."

Harry's mouth fell open. "You're kidding."

Mia grinned so widely that her cheeks hurt. She could just imagine the look on Lily's face having Harry find out about her little secret. "I'm really not. I teased her about it mercilessly."

Harry laughed. "What about my dad?"

"He didn't like werewolf romances," she answered while holding back a laugh at her own personal inside joke. "He did, however, steal Mum's jewellery and sent it to Lily over school breaks. Lily would send it back, and Mum would take away his broom."

Looking happier than she could remember, Harry said, "Sirius says he has a bunch of pictures locked in his room that we can look at later."

Mia nodded. "I'd love to. I'd like to find him first."

It had not taken long for Harry and Mia to track down Sirius. With his bed occupied by the pair of them during the night, he had relocated himself to the library, where he had shifted into Padfoot and curled up on the rug in front of the fireplace.

Mia smiled affectionately at the still-sleeping dog. She looked to a nearby table where her birthday presents were still stacked from the night before and, next to them, lay her original wand. She grinned at the sight of it and reached out, placing her second wand beside it, noting the similarities between the two as well as the slight difference in length.

She turned and winked mischievously at Harry before stretching her arms in front of her and shifting into her Animagus form. The little fox looked up at Harry, her ears twitching slightly as she wove in between his feet, her long bushy tail curling around his leg.

Harry's eyes were wide, and he grinned at the sight of her, covering his mouth to quiet a laugh as the dog on the rug in the corner snored softly. Mia crept over beside Padfoot, turning once before curling up beside him, resting her narrow muzzle on his large black paws.

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Hours later, Remus and Harry sat at the entrance of the library, peering inside at Sirius and Mia who were cuddled together on the sofa; Sirius with his head in her lap, looking up into her face as though she hung the very stars in the sky. Mia was running her fingers through Sirius's hair like it was the finest silk, smiling down at him with complete love and adoration.

"I don't think I've ever seen Sirius so happy," Harry commented thoughtfully as they left the library and began walking back to the kitchen to put away the items Remus had purchased earlier from the apothecary for Mia, as well as the few things he had snagged from the sweet shop. "I don't think Hermione's ever been so relaxed either."

Remus smiled, inwardly reflecting on the perpetual tension in his shoulders that seemed to have eased overnight. "This is how they always used to be. He was crawling in her lap like that on our very first train ride to Hogwarts." Noticing the way Harry's gaze lingered back toward the other room, Remus asked, "How are *you* doing?"

Harry shrugged, sticking his hands in his pockets. "I think I'm okay. She's still Hermione. I was worried she wouldn't be. Don't get me wrong, she's different. A little scarier, but . . . she seems happier. I think growing up with you, Sirius, and my parents was good for her. Was her life good?"

Remus nodded immediately. "It was very good. Of course, we had our issues, but it wasn't anything like what you had to go through," he told the boy as he put the stewed aconite sprigs in the potions cupboard, locking it with a personal spell just in case. After not having Wolfsbane for over a year now, he was not going to risk the chance of not having it again during the next full moon because someone in the house mistook it for something else. "Things weren't that bad until the war really began, but even then we had each other, and we were never really at the heart of it like you were forced to be, not until we joined the Order. I'm sorry you had to go through that, Harry."

Harry shook off the sympathy. "It's okay, Remus. I'm okay. I'm actually . . . actually really glad that she got a second chance. I always felt like being my friend had taken away so much of her life. But look at her now. She's beautiful. She always was before, but now . . . I'm kind of happy she's with Sirius or else I might feel the need to lock her up somewhere."

Remus laughed along with Harry. "She'd hex you for thinking it."

"Thank you."

"What for?"

"You did this. You sent her back." Harry smiled and turned to look as Sirius and Mia came walking toward the kitchen. "Look at them, Remus. They really are happy. Or . . . they *were* happy a few minutes ago?" he said uncertainly as Mia stormed past them all with a deep scowl on her face, amber eyes flashing dangerously in the light.

"Hey, what's going on?" Remus asked, stepping in front of Sirius.

"Nothing, Moony," Sirius growled.

"It is *not* nothing!" Mia snapped from over Remus's shoulder.

"It was nineteen years ago, witch!"

"It was last night to me, you arse!"

"You seriously want to finish an argument we started almost two decades ago?" Sirius waved his hands dramatically. "You're *that* controlling and obsessive?"

Mia growled viciously and pointed to the door that led out into the back garden. "Get outside!"

Realising his position, Remus ducked out from between them before he became collateral damage. He and Harry watched the couple as they stormed out the door, pausing only to decide who got to go through the door first, which appeared to be a battle in itself

before Sirius finally relented and, with a dramatically sarcastic bow, allowed her through. Before either could even get a word out, Remus waved his wand, casting a Silencing Charm at the open door so that neither he nor Harry had to listen to whatever was about to happen.

"Is everything okay?" Harry inquired, worriedly.

"They'll be fine," Remus assured him.

Sirius and Mia faced off against one another as though they were preparing to duel. He pointed at her repeatedly, and she yelled back at him, the ends of her hair sparking. He rolled his eyes and turned away from her, folding his arms across his chest, which was the wrong thing to do as she stormed toward him, spun him around and then shoved him in the chest. He stumbled, growled and then grabbed her by the shoulders, pulling her toward him, and kissing her hard on the lips. She reacted immediately, returning the kiss until she apparently realised that he had done it to distract her. She pulled away from him and slapped him across the face, though not nearly as hard as she had done the night before.

"I feel like I've been confunded," Harry said. "Are you sure they're in love? I mean, twenty minutes ago, I'd have said yes, but—"

"Oh, they're in love." Remus laughed at the sight of his friends arguing. "I've never known two people more so, other than maybe your parents."

When curiosity got the better of him, Remus pulled down the Silencing Charm.

"—not *my* fault you were babbling like a crazy person! I had half a mind to drop you at St Mungo's, woman!"

"Half a mind?" Mia scoffed. "Let's not go exaggerating now!"

Remus winced and threw the Silencing Charm back up.

"My mum and dad weren't like this, were they?" Harry asked anxiously.

Remus laughed. "Merlin, no. James worshipped the very ground Lily walked on. If she ever slapped him in the face, he'd thank her and ask for another." Something that had happened on occasion. "James went out of his way to shower Lily with affection, while Sirius purposely provoked Mia because he said she was uninhibited when she was angry. Mia fought back because Sirius was the only one of us who didn't treat her like glass. Don't misunderstand what they're doing right now, Harry. They're both *enjoying* this."

Harry looked unconvinced.

"Trust me, you'll know when they're really fighting." He glanced around the room and winced at the various photographs on the walls, the vases on the mantel, and the glass shelves in the corner that housed Sirius's crystal whisky decanter. "There's a lot of glass in this house."

Just then, at the same time, Sirius and Mia drew their wands on one another.

Harry took a step forward. "Remus, should we—?"

"No," Remus insisted, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder. "It'll be over quick."

Though they still remained unheard, Remus could easily see Sirius mouth a Disarming Charm; predictably, Mia's wand flew into his hand. Mia grinned deviously and drew a second wand from her pocket, aiming it at Sirius's chest. Sirius growled at her and, this time without even saying the word, disarmed her again, collecting a second vine wood wand.

Sirius said something that Remus could not make out, but the look on his face told him that he was bragging, which was the wrong thing to do. Mia held out her palm toward Sirius and then flicked one finger at him, wandlessly casting a hex that knocked him to the ground, and then they both started laughing.

Remus turned to Harry. "Have you heard back from Kingsley about taking time off from training?" he asked, as though the scene outside was no longer happening.

Harry stuttered for a moment, looking unsure of what to say. Before he had a chance to speak, Sirius was bursting back through the door, quickly moving past Remus and Harry, both of Mia's wands still in his hand.

"Give me back my wands, Sirius Black!" she screamed after him, darting through the door, pushing Remus and Harry aside.

Sirius turned and pointed at her "No! You've had enough of enjoying *two* of *ev-er-y-thing*," he enunciated and grinned when her face turned red. Behind her, Remus rolled his eyes. "I draw the line at two wands!"

Mia chased after Sirius, both yelling at one another once again until their shouts were silenced by the slam of the front door. Slowly, Remus and Harry followed them, taking their time to allow the couple a chance to cool off.

"How did you and Hermione, er, Mia meet?" Harry asked.

"On the train to Hogwarts," Remus replied. "She recognised me because of my scars and just walked right into my compartment, insisting that we were going to be friends."

I was terrified," he said with a laugh, remembering how he thought he would infect her upon contact until she lured him out of his compartment. "I wasn't sure what it was going to be like to be around so many people in my condition. I just wanted her to leave."

Harry grinned. "How'd she change your mind?"

"Bribed me with sweets, of course," Remus said with a smirk as he opened the front door of Grimmauld Place to find Sirius and Mia sitting on the steps, Sirius's arm draped over her shoulders. "See? I told you they—"

Harry interrupted him. "Hold on for one minute!" he shouted and stormed out the front door and down the steps where he turned to face Mia and Sirius. "Hermione! You're smoking?"

Mia was leaning against Sirius's chest, two wands sticking out of her pocket and a slender cigarette between her fingers. Sirius, meanwhile, was lighting his own.

"Only when I'm stressed out."

"So . . . often," Sirius teased.

"Shut up." She turned and glared at him. "You got me into the habit."

"Merlin." Harry ran a hand through his hair. "Sirius, what other bad habits did you teach her?"

Sirius grinned slyly and opened his mouth. Before he had a chance to speak, however, Mia had her hand over his lips. "Don't you dare!"

He chuckled and pulled at her wrist until she let him go. He leant in, grinning, and kissed her. "Merlin, I missed you."

"So, you two are okay?" Harry asked.

Remus smiled as he sat down beside Mia. "I told you, this is normal behaviour."

"Actually," Sirius said with a mischievous grin, "*this* is more like normal behaviour." He flicked his cigarette away—disposing of Mia's as well, tossing it into the street—before he turned and wrapped his arms around her, practically pulling her onto his lap where he kissed her deeply, not even trying to hide it when he slipped his tongue into her mouth.

Harry grimaced at the sight. Remus chuckled and shook his head at the pair.

"What the bloody hell is this?!"

Sirius and Mia broke apart at the shout.

Ron and Ginny stood down the footpath a ways, staring wide-eyed at the sight of Mia in Sirius's lap, his hands tightly gripping her arse.



## Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Nine

### *Photographs and Revelations*

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*We never talk about the future  
We never talk about the past anymore  
We never ask ourselves the questions to the answers  
That nobody even wants to know  
I guess the honeymoon is over  
So much for the afterglow  
(Afterglow - Everclear)*

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**September 20th, 1998**

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked.

Ron was staring at Sirius and Mia with his mouth hanging open and his eyebrows furrowed.

Ginny had a crooked grin on her face and something in her eyes that appeared to worry Harry as he walked down the steps to greet her with a kiss.

"What am *I* doing here?" Ron asked incredulously, still staring at Mia and Sirius. "I thought I *lived* here. The twins stopped by the Burrow, and we thought we'd play some Quidditch. I tried Flooing home to fetch you, but the fireplace was locked, so Gin and I decided to Apparate around the corner and walk here."

Mia stood staring at the two redheads in shock. She briefly glanced down at Sirius, who offered a nod of acceptance, before she turned and rushed forward, attacking the siblings by wrapping her arms around their necks.

"Whoa! Umm, hello to you, too, Hermione," Ginny said with a laugh.

Ron lightly patted her on the back, clearing his throat.

"Let's go inside," Remus suggested as he stood up, patting Sirius on the back to get his attention. "Ron, Ginny, you might want to send an owl home so that no one else comes over for a day or so. Tell your family that everything is fine, but . . . Well, tell them something and make it believable."

They all sat around the large dining room table. Mia and Sirius close together on one side with Remus to her left; Ron and Ginny sat on the other side, with Harry to Ginny's right, his fingers interlaced with hers. It was an odd feeling for Mia, who felt like she was

on this strange divide between the generations. She felt closer to Remus and Sirius because yesterday they had been her flatmates, her friends, and even lovers for years. But a part of her still connected with the other three, though more Harry than the Weasleys—something she attributed to the Familial Bond.

They had let Remus do all the explaining since he was essentially the catalyst that put the series of events into motion. Ron, like Harry, had initially been upset at him, but with Harry there to calm him down, the rest of the story was told with a bit more ease.

"So, let me get this straight," Ron said, scratching his head, obviously confused about at least one or two things that he had been told. "You—" He pointed at Remus. "—sent Hermione back in time because Hermione *from* back in time told you to?"

Remus dipped his head. "Essentially."

Ron then turned to Mia, whom he was having a hard time looking directly in the eye, possibly because she looked so very different; she was certain it did not help that Sirius was hovering over her possessively like he was.

"And you," Ron said to her, "went back in time where a not-dead-Dumbledore turned you eleven, stuck you back in Hogwarts, and made you Harry's aunt?"

Remus and Sirius chuckled.

Mia smiled at Ron. "If you're going for the basics, then yes."

"Then you shagged Sirius?" Ginny blurted out.

"Ginny!" Harry turned to his girlfriend and stared at her, horrified.

"What? Never mind when we walked up she had her tongue in his mouth," Ginny said with a smirk. "But look at them. Merlin's pants, you can practically feel the sexual tension from over here."

"I don't feel anything, thank you," Harry said firmly.

"Don't be such a prude," Ginny scolded him. "It's perfectly fine. They grew up together, and even if they hadn't, and Remus hadn't sent her back in time, *this* was inevitable."

"Why do you say that?" Mia asked curiously.

"Because you've been eye-fucking him for years," Ginny stated crassly and then waited an extra long moment. Mia suspected she was waiting to be scolded for her language. When she said nothing to the redhead but instead raised a challenging brow at her, Ginny's eyes sparkled with delight like a niffler that struck gold. "Plus, you used to talk

in your sleep before you had nightmares," Ginny informed her and then in a mocking tone, murmured, "Oh, Sirius . . . the Shrieking Shack? But what if we get caught?"

Sirius burst into hysterical laughter while Mia covered her mouth with her hand, feeling a genuine blush spreading over her cheeks. Remus was quietly chuckling to himself while both Harry and Ron stared at Ginny, completely horrified.

"Well," Mia said, clearing her throat. "I have missed you, Ginny Weasley."

"And I am pleased to *meet* you, Mia Potter," Ginny said with a wink.

Mia beamed at the girl, feeling a strange mixture of grief and elation, as though somehow she had been given back the gift of Mary and Lily in the form of one sassy red-headed witch. When she looked at Harry, he was suddenly avoiding her gaze. She scoffed. "Oh, come on, Harry. Considering the two of you were shagging the night of the final battle loud enough for the whole castle to hear, you have hardly any right to look like a blushing maiden."

Harry's cheeks turned redder. "You . . . *heard* us?!"

"Potter men have a poor history with Silencing Charms. Your dad was the same," Mia teased.

"It was disgusting," Remus pointed out.

"I'm still not sure what exactly he and Lily were attempting back then, but wands might have been involved, and I personally—"

"Stop talking!" Harry pleaded loudly.

"I'm sorry, but . . ." Ron stuttered. "Hermione, you *actually* shagged Sirius Black?"

"I'm torn over whether to be proud or incredibly offended," Sirius commented thoughtfully to Remus.

"No offence, mate. It's just . . . Fred and George weren't exactly secretive about stories you told them from your days at Hogwarts," Ron said, looking down, the tips of his ears turning bright red. "And you were *okay* with that, Hermione?"

Mia smiled softly, staring at her childhood friend, giving him the benefit of the doubt that the pieces would click into place without her needing to help him. Unfortunately, Ginny got there first.

"Mother of Merlin!" Ginny shouted excitedly, slamming her hands on the table and making Harry jump. "He did those things with *you*!"

"Proud," Sirius said with a bright grin, looking to Remus. "I've decided to be proud."

"We weren't always exclusive," Mia said to Ginny. "So I'm not entirely certain what stories Fred and George are aware of. But there is a chance I wasn't a part of them. And yes, Ronald, I'm okay with Sirius's past, just as he is with mine."

Harry and Ron both bobbed their heads.

Ginny did not miss Mia's words, offering a conspiratorial smirk.

"I still . . ." Ron began to say, clearly overwhelmed by the situation.

"Ron, it's okay," Harry jumped in. "They love each other."

Ron looked up at Mia and Sirius in shock as though the thought had not even occurred to him. "You're in love?"

Sirius reached for Mia's hand, bringing it up to his mouth, where he kissed her open palm and then placed it over the tattooed name on his chest. Mia grinned at him. "Yes," she said proudly. "Have been for years."

Ginny cooed and leant her head on Harry's shoulder as she stared across the table. "Aww, that's so romantic."

"But," Ron began, still clearly not understanding everything.

Mia felt bad for him, really. He'd had trouble contemplating all of the details in regards to Time-Turners the first time she had used one during her original third year. It was one of the reasons she was pleased that he had been too injured to come along at the time, leaving herself and Harry to rescue Buckbeak and Sirius.

"He's . . ." Ron said looking between Mia and Sirius. "You're—Sirius, you're *forty*!"

Sirius gasped, dropping Mia's hand so he could clutch his own to his chest. "I am *not* forty! I'm only thirty-eight!"

"You're almost thirty-nine," Remus commented.

Sirius glared at him. "I'm *technically* thirty-seven if we take off the year I was dead," he proclaimed. "Which I do. I'm thirty-seven now, thank you."

"Whatever you say, Pads. I've always thought it was ridiculous that you were older than me anyway. You never acted it."

"You were just jealous because I could use magic legally before you." Sirius rolled his eyes. "I'm only thirty-seven," he whispered to Mia who smirked at him.

"Very good, darling," she said, placating him with a pat on the head before turning back to Ron. "He wasn't forty when I started dating him. We were the same age. Not that it would have mattered. He could be one-hundred and seven and I'd love him the same."

"Not one-hundred and eight?" Sirius suggested as one corner of his mouth lifted.

"Merlin, no." Mia chuckled at him. "That's just indecent."

"I didn't mean anything by it," Ron muttered. "Just . . . shocking is all."

A strange silence fell over the table, and Mia had no idea how to repair it. It had been slightly easier talking to Harry, to whom she still felt connected, and Ginny had made herself comfortable with the situation merely by being blunt about it, but Ron was difficult. She recalled the feeling of pulling away from him during the Horcrux hunt when he had turned bitter and angry and abandoned them. After he left, she had spent time thinking about her friendship with Ron and how he had treated her over the years. Most of the problems she blamed on situations and a lack of maturity, but for being a Gryffindor, he was, at times, awfully cowardly, resorting to cruelty and envy as shields with which to defend himself. And now . . . now he reminded her far too much of another Gryffindor she had known who was envious of his friends and broke under the pressure of fear and change.

"Would—" Mia cleared her throat. "Would you go and get the photographs, Sirius?"

Sirius acquiesced with a smile, and Harry looked up excitedly.

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"Hermione, you look beautiful." Ginny smiled brightly as she stared at the photograph in her hands. A young Mia, James, and Remus were posing for the camera. The two boys were wearing dress robes, and Mia was wearing a lovely lilac gown. "Where's Sirius in this?"

Mia laughed at the memory. "He had detention."

"I still sneaked a dance in, if you remember!" Sirius called over his shoulder at the witches from his seat on the sofa where he, Remus, Ron, and Harry were looking over old Quidditch photographs so that Harry could see Sirius and James flying.

"You sneaked out of detention; why am I not surprised?" Ginny mocked. "What about you, Hermione? Ever sneak out of detention?"

"No. I did my crimes and served my time."

"You *actually* got put in detention?"

"Don't let her fool you, Ginny," Remus declared. "She was just as bad as the rest of us. Sometimes worse."

Ginny snorted. "I find that hard to believe."

Mia grinned slyly. "I'll keep that in mind," she said in a soft, innocent tone.

"Harry, come look at this one!" Ginny said. Harry jumped over the back of the sofa to kneel beside her on the floor where photographs were splayed out.

Mia stood and took Harry's place on the sofa beside Sirius, throwing her feet into his lap with a smile. He looked at her, his eyes filled with longing and relief and something that she could easily identify as fear. The corners of her mouth turned down, and she moved closer to him, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing his cheek sweetly.

"I'm here," she whispered in assurance.

Sirius closed his eyes and nodded, swallowing as he digested her words, letting them sink into his skin. He pressed his forehead against hers and sighed. "You're perfect."

"I'm okay," Mia simpered teasingly at him and kissed him quickly on the lips. She would have deepened it, company be damned, but Ginny's full belly laugh pulled her attention back to the floor where the redhead threw her head back and giggled while Harry grinned widely at her. "You know, I used to look at Jamie and Lily and think of those two. It made me miss Harry less."

"Does looking at them now make you miss James and Lily less?"

"Does it for *you*?" she asked him.

"Sometimes," he admitted, bowing his head. "Especially in moments like this. When he's happy, it makes it a little easier to forget the shit life he had."

"We're going to fix it, you know," Mia said firmly.

Sirius raised a brow at her. "What are you planning?"

"What's so funny over there?" Mia asked, ignoring Sirius's question.

Ginny held up a photograph. "Why do Harry's father and Sirius have blue hair?"

Remus immediately started laughing, and Mia just smiled brightly.

"Who has blue hair?"

Breath stuck in her throat, and her eyes widened at the voice coming from the door, Mia froze.

Remus grinned over his shoulder as Tonks entered the room. "Hello, love."

Mia stood quickly, nervously facing the woman she had been anxious to see again for many, many years. The two witches faced one another, only Remus and Sirius aware of the potential awkwardness of the situation. Harry, Ginny, and Ron looked on innocently, completely in the dark, of course, about the parts of Mia's life that they had not yet been privy to.

"Tonks," Mia whispered.

"Mia Potter," Tonks said and then rushed forward, embracing her tightly. "I have been waiting years to meet you!"

Mia laughed, relief washing over her to the point that tears fell from her eyes. "You've met me before, Tonks," she said softly as she returned the hug.

"Well, yeah, but never before with *both* of us all grown up and knowing who the other is!" Tonks said as she pulled away. "Love the hair, by the way. Very sexy. Oh, I've heard so many stories, and Remus told me all about—"

"Maybe . . ." Mia interrupted, biting her bottom lip. "Maybe we could talk privately?"

Both witches then turned and looked down at Remus, almost as though they were asking for permission, or at the very least his blessing. He gave them each an appraising look and then glanced to Sirius who was smiling. Remus finally assented with a smile, a look of pride filling up his face. Before either woman had a chance to leave, however, he decided to reassert his feelings on the matter by gripping Tonks's hand and pulling her down into his lap where he kissed her hard and deep.

Ron and Harry each shared a look and turned away from the scene, so as not to intrude on the moment, but Ginny was smiling with interest at the sight. When Remus finally released his wife, his eyes were gold.

"Have you made your point?" Tonks asked with an impish grin.

"You tell me."

"You worry too much." Tonks rolled her eyes and kissed his forehead before reaching out for Mia's hand, dragging her out of the room.

They did not say another word until they had gone up the stairs, passing by Sirius's bedroom and the one that Mia knew formerly belonged to her. When Tonks led them into the room she shared with Remus when they stayed there, Mia froze at the smells she was

picking up and pulled an emotionless mask across her face at the sound of the shutting door.

"Interesting," Tonks said with a grin.

"What's that?" Mia asked.

"They weren't kidding, you really are . . . Wow. You think I'm going to go on the offensive, so you've taken a defensive stance. I can see your hand twitching by your wand holster. But you're not in a position where you're likely to grab it, which means you're definitely only going to use it to defend yourself," Tonks said thoughtfully as she continued to observe Mia. "Your back isn't to the door, and you haven't left me any room behind you to throw you into the wall, which gives you the advantage of space. Also, your face. You look like Aunt Cissa."

Mia grimaced, not sure if she should be offended or not.

"Wow, you really are a Black."

"Of course I am," Mia said. "Er, I mean. Tonks, I—"

"You're not going to apologise, are you?" Tonks asked.

"Don't you think I *should*? Remus . . . Didn't he—?"

"Oh, he told me *everything*," Tonks said with a wink. "Room of Requirement, library, Shrieking Shack, Muggle concerts, and the orchards."

Mia stiffened and breathed in sharply. "I mean, I knew he would. I didn't want him to keep secrets from you, but I don't think I like being talked about like . . . like that."

"If it makes you feel any better, I'll tell you all the details about places *I've* shagged him."

Mia thought for a moment and then shrugged. "Couldn't hurt."

Tonks laughed loudly.

"You're *really* not upset? I slept with your husband."

"He wasn't married to me at the time. And he told me that he never touched or even looked at another woman the same way once he knew who I was. Besides—" Tonks's teasing smirk faded into something more genuine. "—you and I know more than anyone what he's like, how he thinks of himself. I, for one, am very happy that he didn't have to wait until he found me to know that he was loved—to *feel* loved."

Mia visibly relaxed and let out a deep sigh, laughing when Tonks hugged her again. "You have no idea how relieved I am to hear you say that."

"Plus," Tonks leered, "sex keeps the wolf at bay. It would be selfish of me to have preferred him remain all virginal just for me. Moony could have very well hurt himself to the point of fatal injury while at Hogwarts. Either that or he'd fail his N.E.W.T.s."

Mia laughed loudly. "Merlin forbid."

"You saved him from Greyback, you saved him from the other wolf pack, and you brought my cousin back to life and risked your own to save them both when Voldemort was torturing them," Tonks said, reminding Mia of the final battle which, for her, had been years ago. "As far as we're concerned, Mia, I owe you a great debt."

Mia laughed. "Be careful. I like to collect life debts."

"Well, apparently you've got a stack of them. Aunt Cissa has been asking about you for months now."

"Narcissa?" Mia's brows furrowed. "What does she want with *me*? For all she knows, Mia Potter is dead."

Tonks shook her head. "Nope. She recognised you when you were at Bill and Fleur's."

"How is that possible? Remus told me that Minerva placed a Notice-Me-Not on me so people wouldn't recognise me as Mia Potter."

"Well, if it's the spell I think it is, McGonagall would have had to renew it yearly, probably whenever you went back to Hogwarts. Last I checked, Hermione Granger skipped her seventh year."

Mia's eyes widened. "Merlin . . . I'm lucky it was just Narcissa that recognised me, then. I saw Lucius, Bellatrix, and Pettigrew that same day." She shook her head, thrilled that things turned out the way they had. Sure, she had been snatched and tortured, her skin carved into, but knowing how she had threatened Bellatrix, struck Lucius, and terrified Peter, she could have had it much worse at Malfoy Manor had they known who she was.

"Mum recognised you as well," Tonks informed her. "Granted, Aunt Cissa had to spell it all out for her. It seems like people only figure it out when it's either really obvious or they're told."

"That would explain why Arthur never caught on then," Mia said thoughtfully. "Or Kingsley. I want to meet with your mother and Narcissa. I . . . I told Harry that I really want the family to—" Her eyes widened as she realised something. "Teddy."

Tonks grinned. "Remus told me he asked you to be godmother."

Mia nodded quickly.

"You want me to go fetch him, don't you?"

Mia continued to nod, not trusting her voice.

"All right, let's go back and show the boys that we're both friendly, and then I'll dash off to pick him up. Teddy loved Hermione," she said as they left the room. "But once the bond settles, he'll be *enamoured* with Mia. Which means you're on permanent babysitting duty."

"Gladly," Mia said with a grin.

When they walked back into the drawing room, all of the photographs had been put away. Remus looked annoyed, Sirius and Ginny looked amused, and Ron and Harry looked horror-struck.

Mia placed a hand on Sirius's shoulder before perching herself on his thigh. Somehow, the action caused both Ron and Harry to turn red. "What am I missing? What happened in here? Where are all the photographs?"

Sirius snorted.

"It's *not* funny," Harry groaned.

"Remus?" Mia turned and looked at her best friend.

"Well, love." Remus cleared his throat. "It seems that when Sirius collected all of your photographs after you went missing, he didn't think to organise them. And . . . we may have stumbled upon some that are rather . . . revealing."

Her eyes widened, and she glared down at Sirius. "Which ones?!"

"You were fully covered at all times, kitten, I promise," Sirius said. "I, on the other hand . . ."

Mia flushed and turned to look at Harry, who had his face buried in his hands. She smiled at the sight, remembering an equally mortified Jamie who was consistently disgusted at any visual reminders that his best friend was sleeping with his sister. "Oh, Harry," she said consolingly, though there was obvious mirth to her voice.

Tonks was giggling next to Remus. "Not that I wouldn't love to sit around and talk about my cousin's bare bits, but I'm going to run by Mum's. Someone's eager to see Teddy."

Remus smiled proudly as though Mia had never met the boy before and he was finally being given a chance to present his son to her. He kissed his wife and watched as she walked to the front door where she Disapparated away.

"It couldn't have been *that* bad," Mia said, looking at Ron and Harry.

"It wasn't," Ginny said lightly.

Harry narrowed his eyes at her.

"You're being dramatic," Ginny insisted. "It was just a picture of the two of you in Sirius's bed at Hogwarts. You were fully covered, Sirius . . . wasn't. *Toujours Pur.*"

Mia rolled her eyes in understanding. "Oh please, I thought it was going to be so much worse. Harry, everyone who went to school with Sirius has seen that tattoo. He was too proud *not* to show it off. I'm fairly certain McGonagall has seen it."

Everyone turned to look at Sirius, who simply shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't believe you were in his *bed*," Ron muttered, "at *Hogwarts.*"

Ginny stared at her brother incredulously. "You never had Lavender in *your* bed?"

Ron's ears turned bright red.

"Sorry," he said. "I just . . . It's hard to look at you, 'Mione, and see . . . a different you. I'll always see you as my bookworm best friend who lectured me about indecency and homework. It's a little weird to find out that the girl who yelled at me about snogging Lavender in the Great Hall, turned out to lose her virginity to Sirius Black."

Remus cleared his throat anxiously and immediately stood up. "Anyone want tea? I'm going to go make us some tea."

Sirius narrowed his eyes. "Oh, I don't think so, Moony! I'm not taking the bloody blame for your broken hymen!"

Mia's eyes widened, and she slapped Sirius's chest. "Sirius!"

"Sorry, kitten, *your* broken hymen," he amended.

Harry and Ron stared at Remus with their eyes wide and mouths agape.

When silence filled the room completely, Ginny let out a satisfied sigh. "This is the best night of my life," she announced before erupting into a fit of laughter.

## Chapter One Hundred Thirty

### *Different*

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*How dare you say that my behaviour is unacceptable  
So condescending unnecessarily critical  
I have the tendency of getting very physical  
So watch your step 'cause if I do you'll need a miracle  
(Harder to Breathe - Maroon 5)*

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**September 20th, 1998**

"You lost your virginity to Remus?!"

The look on Harry's face told Mia that he had not meant to ask that out loud.

Not certain whether she felt more embarrassed for Remus—who was bright red—or Harry, who looked aghast, Mia offered, "It was the seventies?"

Sirius chuckled.

"If I blame it on the wolf," Remus suggested, "can we avoid this conversation completely?"

The look on Harry's face said that, no, no, they could not.

Eight years ago, *Hermione Granger* would have thrown a fit had Harry and Ron inserted their opinions into her romantic life, let alone her sexual life. Mia briefly thought of Viktor Krum, and the memory of the Yule Ball sparked a bit of irritation in her when she noticed the way Ron was gaping at her like a fish. She did, however, remember that she was no longer *just* Hermione Granger. Hermione, perhaps—she *had* told Harry she still was fine being called by her original first name—but, foremost, she was Mia Potter, daughter of Dorea Black, and shame was something Blacks did not feel in the face of accusations, if ever.

"You shagged your *professor*!?" Ron finally blurted out.

Mia smiled coyly. "He was *hardly* my professor back then," she stated calmly, half-tempted to add, "though he did teach me a thing or two." In the end, she decided a lack of information would serve her better. Her relaxed demeanour appeared to bother Ron, which she found amusing.

Sirius and Remus looked at her and rolled their eyes. They had seen that smile on her face many times before, though not in many, many years. They called it her *Daughter of Dorea Black* smile. Her *Slytherin* smile. Her *Serpent Playing with a Mouse* smile.

"But you did know that he'd grow up to be your professor, right?" Harry asked. "I mean, you didn't lose your memory, did you?"

She rolled her eyes. "No, I did not lose my memory. I knew exactly how they'd *both* turn out," she said, gesturing to Sirius and Remus.

Sirius looked at her accusingly. "What the hell does *that* mean?"

"It means I knew that Remus would grow up to be a brilliant professor, and you'd grow up to be a giant pain in my fucking arse," she snapped at him, her eyes hard but her mouth turned up slightly, not wanting to give away too easily that she was enjoying the moment.

Ginny was still giggling.

Mia thought Harry and Ron were long overdue for a lesson in minding their business and perhaps a change in the conservative, double-standard thoughts that they carried when it came to her. She knew that her past with Remus did not bother Sirius one bit, but the man in question was standing by uncomfortably.

"Oh, sit your arse down," she said to Remus with a smile. "Show the boys how nice you two play."

Sirius laughed as Remus retook the seat beside him.

A quiet fell over the room again, and everyone turned to look at Harry, gauging his reaction. After a while, he glanced at Ginny who was staring at him incredulously, and Mia smiled as though she could hear the silent conversation that the young couple were having where Harry was being scolded for his behaviour and very likely threatened with abstinence if he failed to get over himself. After a few more seconds, he broke eye contact with Ginny, looked up at Remus, and offered an apologetic smile.

"Hermione swears a lot now," Ron commented quietly to break the silence.

"Smokes, swears, shags." Harry laughed awkwardly. "What else should we know?"

"She has a tattoo of my name on her thigh," Sirius offered.

Mia hit him again on the chest.

Harry paled. "What?"

Ron raised a brow. "Really?"

Ginny said nothing but tilted her head as though she could peek up Mia's skirt and see it.

"Really." Remus rolled his eyes and scrubbed his hands down his face, uncomfortable in regard to the conversation, but clearly had given up trying to have any semblance of dignity, so he was leaping into the deep end of impropriety, likely in the hope that when he drowned, it would be quick and painless. "It's incredibly off-putting."

"Oh, like you complained," Mia teased him, glad that they were at least forcibly removing the awkward tension from the room. Had Harry reacted more harshly, she might have been sore with Sirius for his constant provocation, but the prideful look on her wizard's face told her that he had the same plan as she did, to break the others of their discomfort.

"So wait," Ginny chimed in, "Remus took your virginity . . . when?"

"Fifth year, Halloween Ball," Remus and Mia said together, though he had his face in his hands as he spoke.

Sirius grimaced. "Ugh, I hate when they talk in unison. Creepy."

"You be quiet," Ginny said, pointing at Sirius. "Now, when did you first sleep with Sirius?"

"The end of fifth year," Mia replied.

"When did you get the tattoo?" Ginny asked.

"My seventeenth birthday," Mia answered clearly, already knowing where this was going.

"Which means that . . ." Ginny prompted, staring at Remus.

"It's private," he said tersely as he met her stare.

"I dated Remus, we broke up. Sirius and I were . . . Sirius and I," Mia said, knowing that their first time was, in fact, a mere one night stand before he had shoved her back into Remus's arms. "Then Remus and I got back together for a while before I *settled* for Sirius," she concluded with a smirk. Sirius just smiled at her, ignoring her teasing entirely.

She had decided not to mention the orchards.

"When did you stop being a swotty prude, Hermione?" Ginny asked with a grin.

Mia briefly narrowed her eyes teasingly. "I dislike where this conversation has gone."

"Me, too," Ron and Harry said at the same time.

"So, who's a better shag?" Ginny asked.

Harry's eyes widened. "Ginny!"

She threw her hands up, feigning innocence. "What? I'm curious!"

Ron grimaced. "You're disgusting."

"You're also barking up the wrong tree," Sirius informed her. "I've asked her for years, and she swears she'll never tell."

"I told Lily."

Sirius's grey eyes widened and he tossed her off his lap and onto the sofa. "You liar!"

"Nope." Mia grinned smugly, trying to contain her laughter. "*Lily* knew which one of you was better."

Remus shook his head. "That's so weird. Then again, she *did* collect a lot of those werewolf romance novels," he said thoughtfully to himself.

"Ooo, which ones?" Ginny asked. Harry just stared at her.

"Tell me!" Sirius insisted, glaring down at Mia.

"Absolutely not. Your ego couldn't take the deflation *or* the stroking."

Remus shrugged. "Mine could always use a little boost."

"You don't need *me* to brag about you, Remus." Mia beamed over at him. "I'm sure you get enough of that from your mate."

"That brings up another point," Harry blurted out. "How does Tonks feel about all of this?"

"How do I feel about what?" Tonks walked in, carrying Teddy in her arms.

Mia crawled under Sirius and over Remus, kicking one of them—she was not sure which—in the ribs, before she slipped off the end of the sofa in order to get to Tonks and the baby. She beamed at the boy, who looked at her with bright blue eyes that shifted amber the moment they glanced her way. His hair, as it always did at the sight of her, turned to honey-brown curls, and he eagerly reached for her.

"May I?" Mia asked.

Tonks smiled and handed her the baby. "When have you ever asked before?"

The moment the boy was placed in her arms, Mia felt the Familial Bond seal itself between the pair of them. She grinned down and kissed the top of his head lovingly. "Sweet

boy, I think I missed *you* the most," she whispered, smiling when all four men in the room looked mildly put out by the declaration.

"So, how do I feel about what?" Tonks asked again as she took a seat on Remus's lap, wrapping her arms around his neck and grinning when he nuzzled against the Pack Mark on her shoulder.

"She knows already," Sirius told Harry. "A werewolf can't keep secrets from his mate. Tonks has been helping Remus and I get Mia back for a long while now."

"Oh, are we talking about the two of you?" Tonks asked, gesturing between Mia and Remus. When her husband silently acknowledged they *were*, she looked at Harry, Ron, and Ginny and smiled. "Why would that bother me? He's mine now, and she's got Sirius."

"You don't care at all that they've had, well, *sex*?" Ginny asked.

Tonks actually seemed to let the question roll over in her mind for a moment before she shrugged and said, "Not really. Unless . . ." She turned and looked up at Mia, who was completely devoted to her godson in her arms. "Did you teach him to do that thing with his tongue where he—?"

Remus covered her mouth. "Not everyone in this room is a Black. Some people think shame is a healthy feeling."

Sirius chuckled as he pointed out, "Technically everyone in this room actually *is* related to the Blacks except for you, Moony."

Mia grinned leeringly. "No," she answered Tonks's interrupted question. "That's *all* him."

Tonks smiled and, with her mouth still covered by her husband's hand, winked at him.

"I need to be drinking!" Harry declared and stood up, making his way into the other room.

Ginny was smiling at Tonks. "I think that's very mature of you, Tonks. I think if Harry had any ex-girlfriends, I'd probably Bat-Bogey them until they forgot they'd ever snogged him."

"I kind of dated Cho Chang," Harry reminded her as he walked back into the room carrying a bottle of firewhisky, a tray of glasses levitating behind him.

Ginny snorted, rolling her eyes. "Cho Chang likes to *think* that she dated you."

"It's nothing about maturity," Tonks told Ginny, smiling. "I know that I'm his mate and nothing will change that. Despite their past, he and Mia are just best friends."

"Hey, I thought *I* was your best friend," Sirius pouted, looking at Remus.

Remus shook his head. "Nope. Always been her," he said, smirking.

Mia grinned at him. "You're my best friend too, Remus."

"Hey!" Ginny, Ron, and Harry all pouted.

Mia rolled her eyes dramatically. "Oh Merlin, I need firewhisky for this," she said, nodding to Harry to pour her a glass. "I lived two lives, I had different best friends. Harry, you *and* Ron *and* Ginny are my best friends. Remus, you are *also* my best friend."

"Where the fuck does that leave me?" Sirius rose a brow, staring up at her.

"In her bed?" Ginny suggested, handing Sirius a glass of firewhisky as Harry continued to pour.

Sirius smiled broadly at her. "*You* have my blessing to marry my godson."

"And *you* have my blessing to shag my best friend," she declared with a grin, and the two shared a toast, clinking glasses.

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They drank and shared memories and stories until the sun set and Tonks declared that it was time for Teddy to go to bed. She and Remus left, taking a moment to pry the infant away from Mia and Harry, who had taken turns learning how to share their godson. Sirius sat on the sofa with an arm wrapped possessively around Mia's waist while he simultaneously played wizard's chess with Ginny, who was sitting on Harry's lap, staring at the board with concentration, the tip of her tongue tucked against the corner of her mouth as she directed her knight to attack.

The soft light in the room reflected off of Ginny's wrist where a gold, goblin-made bracelet sat gently on her skin. Mia smiled at the sight.

"*Didn't Sirius give this to you yesterday?*" Ginny asked Mia when she clasped it around her wrist. "*Er, eight years ago?*"

"*Yes, he did, and it changed my life forever. I eventually gave it to Sirius, who then gave it to Lily, who insisted I take it back. I refused, of course, and made an identical copy instead. Now,*" Mia said, "*I'm giving that copy to you.*"

"Why?"

"Because you are my friend, and I missed you. Because Harry loves you and that makes you family. *Courage and Craft, Ginny*," she said proudly. "That's what it means to be a Potter. I know you were looking forward to me going back to Hogwarts with you this year, but—"

"It's okay, Hermione. I get it. You already went back, and I don't think even you should be in school for that long."

"You're a part of this family now. My sister." Mia said the words softly. "Harry's mate. And even when you're away from us, you're a part of us."

Ginny hugged Mia, and when the pair returned to the drawing room, Remus sat up, apparently aware that something had changed. Mia chuckled knowingly and waited until Sirius and Remus saw the bracelet for themselves. When they did, they each eyed Mia and smiled in approval.

Sirius growled as another of his pieces was destroyed in the onslaught, and everyone laughed. Mia turned to look at Ron, who should have been more interested than anyone in the game if her memory served her well, but he sat on the opposite side of the room, looking down into the empty glass in his hands.

"You all right?"

"What? Yeah, m'fine, 'Mione. I should probably head back to the Burrow, though. Told Mum I'd stay for a few days," Ron said and stood up. "You comin', Gin?"

"I'll go back once I finish this game."

"I'll walk you out," Mia said to Ron as she slipped out of Sirius's grip. She turned back and smiled reassuringly at him since he appeared to stress just a bit anytime she left his sight. It would take time to cure him of the anxiety issues regarding her.

She and Ron walked silently toward the front door, and once it was shut behind them and they stood on the porch she turned and sighed. "I know things are different."

"It's weird," Ron agreed. "I just saw you last night, and you were—"

"Different."

He frowned. "Different. Not a *bad* different, you're still *you* just . . . I'm not sure what's changed."

"A lot."

He hesitated, worrying the toes of his shoes against the steps. "Are . . . Are we still friends?"

Mia thought about the question for a moment. She remembered stumbling upon the Mirror of Erised where she saw herself standing with her family, and Ron had been there. However, over the years she felt a bit guilty for almost putting him in the back of her mind. Until she had been gifted with James, Sirius, and Remus, she had not realised just how poor her friendship with Ron had been on both sides. There was too much give and not enough take on her end, and she knew that Hermione's poor self-esteem had contributed to the lazy way he had treated their friendship. She acted and felt more like a babysitter than a friend to him at times. Still, she had known him since she was eleven, and they had fought a war together. Ron had fought a *troll* for her.

"I'd like to be," she admitted honestly.

"We went through a war together," he said, apparently on a similar train of thought.

She dipped her head in agreement. "I went through two wars. The first one broke me, I think. The second . . . changed me."

"Changed you how?"

She inhaled deep and watched as the cool, damp air of almost-autumn turned the breath of her exhale visible against the setting sun. "Can I ask you something and have you promise me that you'll never speak another word of it? I would ask Harry, but it's too personal for him."

Ron looked excited about the prospect of sharing something with Mia that Harry was not privy to. "Yes, you can ask me anything, Hermione."

She stood for a moment in silence before speaking, choosing her words very carefully when she finally did break the silence. "When we were at Malfoy Manor, and Sirius and I were upstairs with Narcissa and Draco, you and Harry said that Peter Pettigrew died."

"He did."

"That his silver hand choked him to death."

"It did."

"Can I ask . . . ?" She paused and then looked up at him, her eyes now hard and cold as they met his gaze. "Did he suffer?"

Ron looked taken aback by the question, and he stumbled over his words. "I . . . It didn't look pleasant, 'Mione."

"Was he afraid?"

"Yeah," Ron muttered, the memory of the event looked like it left a cold feeling in his gut. "He was bloody terrified."

*Changed you how?* Ron had asked her.

Mia listened to the answer to her question, and she closed her eyes, taking another slow, deep breath. When she exhaled, it felt like relief, peace, and contentment. She remembered seeing Mary's bloodied body after her death, and the confrontation she'd had with Peter prior to her burial. He had been terrified then too.

When Mia opened her eyes, Ron was looking at her with a horrified stare. She realised then that she was smiling.

"He murdered my friend," she told him. "Betrayed my brother and sister-in-law. And he took a blade to Harry's arm. Sirius went to Azkaban because of Peter Pettigrew. I'm fairly positive I had a large hand in pushing him toward the road he chose, but I went to school with *a lot* of people whom I wasn't very pleasant to." She thought of Snape, Regulus, and even Draco. "People who had so much less than Peter. Fewer friends, more pressure, larger threats. I saw the beginning." She could still see that first meeting with Peter and every moment since then that turned him into the eventual Death Eater she knew him to be. "I wanted to know the end."

"We tried to save him," Ron told her. "When it happened. Harry and I . . . We tried to stop it from happening."

"Neither of you are the killing type. You're both Gryffindors," she said with a tender smile.

"Aren't *you*?"

Mia thought about it for a moment and then shrugged her shoulders. "I'll tell you if I ever get a chance to ask the Sorting Hat again."

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An hour or so later, the two older couples sat on the long sofa, curled together. Remus at the end with Tonks lying back against his chest, and Mia leaning her shoulder against Tonks while Sirius rested his head in her lap. Harry sat in the large armchair, looking at old photos that Sirius and Mia had gone through to filter out some of the more risqué pictures—of which Sirius had a shocking amount.

Everyone was laughing and smiling. The joy of the moment was slowly picking apart the pieces of grief that had broken her heart upon arriving in 1998 and began the work of putting them back together.

"Oh, it was amazing, Harry. Lily just walked right up and slapped Jamie across the face."

"Called him a toerag," Sirius said with a chuckle.

"That was always her go-to insult."

"Then, the whole train ride home, he's describing the colour of her eyes," Remus chimed in.

"It was ridiculous. Mum and Dad thought he'd been poisoned or confunded."

"My mum actually *hit* him?" Harry asked, laughing softly to himself as he stared at the Christmas photograph in his hand where eleven- and twelve-year-old James and Sirius stood side by side in front of the large Christmas tree at Potter Manor, the former sporting a lovely bruise on his cheek.

"He told everyone he was going to wear it like a badge of honour," Sirius said.

Mia giggled at the memory of her brother. "Did you know it took me four days to get him to wash his face? He was so in love with her. I had to pin him to the floor."

Upstairs there was a loud cry, and Tonks jumped up immediately.

"You sure you got it?" Remus asked her, and both Harry and Mia looked like they were each eager to offer to take care of Teddy as well.

Tonks smiled at them. "I'm fine. Probably just needs to be changed," she said and then quietly left the room.

In Tonks's absence, Mia tilted back and filled the gap on the sofa, leaning her head against Remus's chest as though it were the most natural and comfortable thing in the world. Remus reacted automatically, wrapping an arm around her shoulder, nuzzling her hair intimately like a lover might, or maybe a tame animal. Mia's fingers still carded through Sirius's hair, tugging at the locks lightly, grinning when he made noises of contentment.

"This is so weird." Harry laughed softly, looking at a photograph in his hand. Mia could read the note written on the back and knew that it was one where the three of them were in nearly the same position on a sofa in the Gryffindor common room, only in the background Jamie could be seen sneaking up with a hovering ball of bluebell flame in one hand and a firecracker in the other.

"What's weird?" Mia asked.

"You." Harry smiled at her. "So—I don't know—relaxed . . . and with *them*."

Mia shrugged. "Never even thought about it."

"She's always been like this," Sirius mumbled.

"Collecting strays," Remus said with a grin.

"It's nice," Harry said with genuine affection. "To see you happy, I mean."

"Are you all right?"

He laughed awkwardly. "Still getting used to it, that's for sure. At least you won't be going around snogging them *both* in the house."

"I don't share," Sirius declared. When both Remus and Mia snorted, he clarified, "Anymore."

"Behave or I'll bite you," Mia threatened.

Harry made a face. "I said I'm *still* getting used to it."

Sirius barked a laugh. "She's not flirting with me."

Harry raised a brow.

"Okay, she's flirting a little. But she's serious about the biting," he said as he held up his forearm, showing tiny little scars on his skin.

"Are all Animagi so . . . violent?" Harry asked.

"Your dad was the worst." Sirius scoffed when Mia flicked his ear. "What? He was. Bloody deranged deer. When he found out Remus and I both were in love with his sister," he said, sparing Harry the thought of picturing Mia shagging either of them again, "he shifted in the middle of the dorm room and charged at us."

Simultaneously, Sirius and Remus pulled at their clothes revealing the puncture-shaped scars: one on Sirius's shoulder, the other on Remus's ribs.

Harry stared at the marks with wide eyes. "Wow, I guess the talk you and I had about Hermione was tame compared to what my dad did."

"At least you didn't say *maidenhead*," Remus mumbled, and Mia and Sirius started laughing all over again.

"What in the name of Merlin is *this*?!"

Mia turned at the high-pitched shriek and looked up.

There in the doorway stood an irate-looking, red-headed woman who was staring at the sight of Mia pressed between two grown wizards, both adjusting their shirts as though they were either putting them back on or taking them off.

Remus and Sirius both froze in place, and Mia squeezed herself out from between them to stand.

"Molly?" She said the witch's name with a smile, not having seen the woman since she had run into her at Sugarplum's Sweet Shop when Bill, Charlie, and Percy were all little boys, and the twins were sleeping infants in a pram.

Molly appeared to not even look at Mia, her eyes glancing over her shoulders to the men on the sofa. "You!" she hissed at them, her eyes narrowed.

Mia took notice of the look in Molly's eyes being directed at Sirius and Remus, and she could feel her own eyes blazing. She had a line that was never to be crossed. Her boys were the line, and Molly was edging a little too close to it for comfort.

Ron and Ginny burst into the room looking out of breath and panicked.

"We tried to stop her," Ginny said apologetically.

Ron winced. "I was just explaining to Mum—"

Ginny scoffed loudly. "She asked how Hermione enjoyed her birthday, and he drunkenly blurted out that Sirius and Remus have been shagging her for years."

Ron turned bright red and looked down shamefully. Mia could see the empty Sober-Up Potion still gripped in his hand.

"Molly," Mia said calmly, trying to get the witch's attention, "if Ron was doing the explaining, then I'm sure you've got the wrong idea about—"

"You filthy *beasts!*" Molly screamed at Sirius and Remus, ignoring Mia entirely except to step protectively in front of her. "How *dare* you put your hands on this poor girl and take advantage of her!"

Sirius held his hands up innocently. "Molly, I promise you, no one here took advantage of—"

"She's just a *girl!* And this has been going on for *years!*?! You had no right! Don't you speak to me, Sirius Black! Not after the horrible things you've done! Taking away this poor girl's innocence!"

Sirius growled under his breath. "Why am I always getting blamed for shit I didn't do?" He turned and briefly glared at Remus, who was standing up slowly.

"Molly," Remus said, holding his hands up in supplication, "I know you're upset, but you don't understand the situation."

The fact that they were not denying the accusations only seemed to enrage Molly further.

"I understand perfectly well, Remus Lupin! She was your *student!* And now you both think you can defile her . . . Remus, you're a married man with a child! And *you,*" she said, looking back at Sirius, unaware of the seething witch behind her whose hair was sparking at the ends. "I always knew you were *no good.*"

"Molly, you need to back away very slowly," Sirius cautioned her, his eyes flickering to Mia. "I say this because you're emotional right now and completely ignorant as to what's happening, but you are in actual, physical danger at the moment."

"Mrs Weasley." Harry stood, looking over Molly's shoulder to where Mia stood, clenching her fists and breathing out her nose, eyes narrowed into slits. "I really think you should listen to Sirius."

"The only ones in danger right now," Molly said, ignoring Harry as well as she pointed at Sirius and Remus, "are these two . . . leches! Hermione, dear, you're coming home with me right this second! Oh," she said, surprised by the close proximity as she turned around to come face to face with Mia. "Are you all right, sweet girl? Ronald told me everything. We'll get you some place safe. Did they hurt you? Nasty wizards!" She spun back on the men, glaring first at Remus. "I expected better from you, Remus Lupin!" Her gaze fell on Sirius again. "*You* on the other hand—"

"Molly," Mia said softly, her tone concealing the primal, protective rage pulsing beneath her skin in time with her heartbeat and her magic. When the redhead turned to look at her once more, Mia reached a hand into her pocket. "Can you swim?"

## Chapter One Hundred Thirty-One

### *Issues With Propriety*

---

*I don't give a damn 'bout my reputation  
You're living in the past, it's a new generation  
A girl can do what she wants to do and that's what I'm gonna do*  
(Reputation - Joan Jett and the Blackhearts)

---

**September 20th, 1998**

With Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Molly looking on in utter confusion, Remus and Sirius jumped toward Mia, the former stepping in between the two witches, while the latter wrapped his arms around the younger and turned her away from the Weasley matriarch, yanking her hand out of her pocket to find her palm empty.

Sirius glared briefly at Mia for the ruse, and she grinned slyly at him and winked.

"What in Circe's name is happening?!" Molly demanded, looking apoplectic as she shook her finger around as though she were unaware to whom she should be directing her ire. With Sirius and Mia distracted, she settled on Remus. "You had better—"

"Molly," Remus said, his voice calm but his eyes intense. "I'm saying this because I respect you, and I understand you are confused and upset, but it would be *astonishingly* unwise of you to insult either myself or Sirius at this moment."

"I am not afraid of *you*," she shot back, likely thinking that he was threatening her.

"It's not *us* you should be afraid of!" Sirius barked, struggling to contain the witch in his arms who was now, in a fury, trying to turn around to face Molly, the mirth gone from her.

"Mrs Weasley," Harry jumped in to try and calm the situation down. "Please sit."

"What the hell is everyone shouting about?" Tonks snapped as she walked into the room carrying a teary-eyed Teddy, who was now sporting black hair. Tonks looked at her husband, who was protectively guarding Sirius, who was tightly gripping a snarling and struggling Mia while Molly stood at the other end of the room, a wand palmed securely in her hand.

"Tonks!" Molly cried, rushing toward her. "Oh, you poor dear! You and Teddy shouldn't have to see this!"

Several things happened very quickly the moment that Molly reached out to touch the baby, her wand still in hand: Sirius released Mia and, in tandem, Remus took hold of Tonks's arm as Mia retrieved Teddy from her hands. The baby was shifted into Harry's arms as he was manoeuvred behind Mia. Somehow, Ginny was pulled into the mix as well, until Molly stood with Ron alone at her side, facing off against a werewolf and two Animagi, protecting their own.

*Pack.*

Remus stood at the front with Sirius and Mia flanking him, almost as though ready for battle; although, unlike their defensive stances, Remus's body language was guarded, and his eyes were soft—ever the peacekeeper. He had one hand held out at either side, a silent plea for Sirius and Mia to rein in their tempers and not act on instinct.

"I'm sorry, Molly," Remus said. "I'm aware that you would not consciously threaten my family, but you have to admit, you have a bad temper. I need to ask you to lower your wand."

Molly's mouth had fallen open in the bustle, and though she was clearly still irate and confused, she glanced in Mia's direction and finally relented, setting her wand very slowly down on the table to the side of her. "What's happened?"

Remus sighed in relief, and Sirius saw the tension drain from Mia's shoulders just as his had done.

Ron watched in evident confusion as he was separated from the group, left there beside his mother who was the triggering threat. He looked at everyone across from him, and his eyes turned to Mia. "It's because I left, isn't it?" he asked, referencing his greatest mistake, abandoning the group on the Horcrux hunt.

"You are family, Ronald," Mia promised him, trying to keep her voice calm and kind all at the same time—something that Molly's stiff posture was making difficult. "But you're not Pack."

"Pack?" Molly asked, her brows furrowed, her eyes drawn immediately to Remus and Tonks at the word. However, as she scanned over the other two at the forefront, her gaze landed on the scar peeking out at the juncture of Mia's neck and shoulder. She gasped loudly and looked like she was about to start screaming again.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" Mia aimed her wand at Molly who immediately froze solid and then tipped backward. With Ron in shock at the entire scene and unable to react fast

enough to catch his mother, Mia cast a Cushioning Charm so Molly did not crack her head on the floor when she fell. "Get her up. Set her on the sofa. No one unfreeze her unless they plan on taking her wand and silencing her. I'm quite done with all the screaming."

"I don't understand," Harry said as he moved to help Ron carry Molly to the sofa. "She seemed to be calming down. What happened?"

Mia moved her shirt to completely reveal the scar on her shoulder. "She saw *this*. And, like every other uninformed idiot in the Wizarding world that doesn't bother learning a bloody thing about lycanthropy, she took it to mean that Remus either claimed me as a mate, which is impossible as he already has one," she said, rolling her eyes, "or that he'd turned me into a werewolf, which offends me on his behalf."

Harry stared at the scar. "Hermione, that's a bite wound."

"I never said it wasn't. I will, however, say that it's no one's business but my own. I'm perfectly fine with answering questions I feel the need to answer," she said, her eyes darting to Ron and Molly who were now sitting side by side, the latter unfrozen but magically silenced, as requested. "I do not owe any explanations, especially to people who jump to their own conclusions."

"It's a Pack Mark," Sirius said, showing his own on his shoulder, informing everyone since Mia was now too angry to do so. "It magically binds us to Remus. We were not attacked, we were completely willing, and Mia's right, the details are no one's fucking business." When Mia smirked at him, he furrowed his brow. "What?"

"You called me Mia," she said, her smug little grin vanishing at the confused expression on Molly's face. "I'm going to get really tired of telling this story repeatedly. Someone else do it while I get some fresh air." She turned to leave the room, stopping when something occurred to her. "Oh, have Ron and Molly make an oath not to say another word about any of this to anyone until I can tell the rest of the world. And then . . . And then someone call an Order meeting. Let's get this mess over and done with."

---

Mia sat on the front porch of Grimmauld Place, wishing like hell that it was her old flat in Diagon Alley or the back gardens of Potter Manor. Grimmauld Place was not home. She brought the cigarette she had stolen from the pack in Sirius's leather jacket to her lips

and inhaled. As she blew the smoke out through her nose, letting the heat warm her a touch, she frowned knowing that she would need to quit. It was one thing to sneak one or two during stressful times, but she knew she did not want Harry or Ron picking up the habit, and she detested being a hypocrite.

"I see you really have changed," Molly muttered quietly as she stepped out onto the porch, wandless, which was smart of whoever had allowed her to leave the room. She eyed the smoke distastefully, and Mia rolled her eyes.

"I plan on quitting. So, are we okay?"

Molly swallowed and began wringing her hands. "It's quite the story. I have a hard time believing it, but seeing that I never had the pleasure of meeting Mia Potter, it's not as though you can offer me much proof, can you?" she asked, sighing irritably. "And while I understand that you might have been the same age when you were in Hogwarts with . . . with *him*, you're still just a young girl now, and he's a grown man."

"He is the love of my life and looks at me the way Arthur looks at you," Mia said firmly, watching as Molly's eyes softened slightly. "I understand you have a habit of mothering the motherless, but I've had two mothers who taught me to stand on my own two feet and make my own decisions. One of those mothers also raised the man inside, whom you are judging, something I should tell you has earned several witches a trip to the Black Lake under my hand."

Molly looked to be struggling with the obvious threats coming from the girl who, as of yesterday, was just a sweet Muggle-born witch whom she thought of as one of her own. "Hermione, he is—"

"Molly, I will only say this once: you do not know Sirius Black; do not pretend that you do. Sirius tries to behave himself in the face of insults because he doesn't want to put Harry in the uncomfortable position of feeling like he has to choose between your family and his own. I, however, will not tolerate any defamation of Sirius's character. That ends tonight."

Molly took the words in slowly, hopefully processing the clear threat and trying to consolidate her memories of Hermione Granger with the stories she had likely heard from her husband all those years ago about Mia Potter.

"Then, may I ask—?" Molly began quietly, her eyes lingering on the scar on Mia's shoulder.

"No," Mia replied, her tone carefully polite. "Werewolf Magic is misunderstood. Remus has proven himself time and time again, and he should not have to continually answer questions of his own honour merely because of prejudice and rumours surrounding his condition. Molly—" Mia sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose. "—speaking ill of Sirius is one thing I will not tolerate, but I have been known to have very little, if any, control over my actions when it comes to those who speak ill of Remus."

Molly did not look surprised, but she certainly seemed curious—proven when she nosily asked, "Why, may I ask, do you defend him more than the man you're supposedly in love with?"

"First, there's no *supposedly*," Mia answered immediately, feeling a bit relieved when Molly looked regretful of her word choice. "As for my defence of Remus . . . While I don't like anyone speaking ill of Sirius, I know that when push comes to shove, he'll push back. Remus won't. He'll take everything you say and compartmentalise it to think about later when he's feeling sorry for himself. He will sacrifice his very life to defend others, but he won't fight back against uncivil words to defend himself. So I do it for him."

Molly only nodded. "I am beginning to understand. I still, however, think it's inappropriate that you're living with—"

"I know that you and Arthur were having sex at Hogwarts without Contraceptive Charms."

Minutes later, Molly and Mia walked back into the house with sweet smiles on their faces, Molly's expression a little tenser than Mia's, and her face a bit redder in hue. Without divulging a single word about their conversation outside, Molly approached Remus and sighed. "I am so very sorry for what I said, Remus. You are a good man, and I hope that you can find it in your heart to forgive me."

Remus stared at her in mild shock. "I—Of course, Molly, of course."

She then turned to Sirius, who raised a challenging eyebrow at her, clearly not expecting the same kind of treatment she just had given Remus. Instead, Molly approached him and kissed his cheek kindly. "And you," she mumbled, swallowing down her pride, which looked to be several mouthfuls. "I am very pleased that you've found a good witch who can keep you in line."

"You're *pleased*?" Sirius asked incredulously.

"Very."

"Pleased that I'm with Hermione?"

Clearing her throat, she said, "I am."

Lifting a brow, he asked, "Pleased that . . . how did you put it? Defiling her?"

Molly bristled, looked back at Mia once as though trying to remind herself of previous threats, and stiffly nodded.

Sirius grinned slyly. "Really? Even though she's only nineteen?"

Molly's nostrils flared at the obvious attempt at provocation.

"And she's living with me? Playing house? Living in sin? Shacking up? You, Molly Weasley, are *pleased* with all of this?"

"Pads," Remus cautioned.

"I am . . . *fine*," Molly said through clenched teeth.

"Did you Imperius her?" Sirius asked, turning around and looking at Mia.

A few people laughed until they realised that neither Remus nor Sirius were even smiling.

When all attention was brought back to Mia, she rolled her eyes. "Come now, love. You know I've never been very good at Unforgivables. My aim is off."

"You didn't drink anything she gave you, did you, Molly?" Remus asked, a look of concern etched onto his face.

Mia let her mouth fall open, an offended gasp escaping her. "I did not poison her, Remus!"

Remus smirked at her. "'The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.'"

Mia glared at him.

"No offence, love," Sirius said with a laugh, "but your reputation precedes you."

She narrowed her eyes at the both of them and then turned, pretending to be offended, and walked out of the room.

When she was certain to be gone and out of hearing range, Sirius turned back to Molly, his attention engaged like a spoilt child. "What did she blackmail you with?"

---

After Molly left, taking Ron and Ginny back to the Burrow with her, Sirius insisted that the Lupins stay the night, knowing that Mia would love to see them in the morning.

Tonks declined because she had to work early, but she insisted that Remus stay at Grimmauld Place because he would be anxious otherwise.

With Remus and Harry sent off to bed, Sirius made his way up the stairs toward his room, nervously stepping through the door to find his witch curled up in the centre of his bed, cuddling with the large, orange kneazle. Crookshanks was rubbing the side of his face against hers, and Mia was smiling at the action, just letting him nuzzle her.

"Looks like someone missed you."

Mia looked up and grinned at him. "It took Crooks a while to warm up to me again," she said, scratching the cat behind his ears. "What happened to Snuffles? I didn't expect him to live long enough to see me again; he was just a regular cat, after all."

"I gave him to Lily," Sirius said as he closed the door behind him and made his way over to the bed, his hands shoved into the front pockets of his jeans. "That thing never liked me, to begin with. I think when—" He stopped, leaving a pregnant pause in the air between them. "He probably escaped and became a great menace to the rest of Godric's Hollow. Infamous stray cat that sneaked into people's houses, scratched them, and then just left."

Mia quirked her lips at him and watched as Crookshanks jumped off the bed, curling up in front of the fireplace in the corner of the room and falling fast asleep. "Is everything set for tomorrow?"

Sirius dipped his head in confirmation. "Order meeting at the Burrow. Molly's making dinner for everyone."

"And the Malfoys?"

"Tonks went back to Dromeda's house to ask them to come."

"How is Narcissa?" Mia questioned curiously. "The last time I saw her, she was . . . less than thrilled to be in my presence."

"St Mungo's, right?" Sirius asked. "The night I was attacked?"

Mia frowned at the mention of that night. "Mum made me leave your room to fetch her some tea. I think she wanted me to get out and walk around a bit. I was . . . distraught."

Sirius nodded uncomfortably. "Obviously," he said, breaking out a smirk for her. "I was unconscious and, therefore, you were reliant on Prongs for decent conversation. As it is, Cissa seems rather excited to see you again, for some fucking reason."

"Does Draco know about me?"

He shook his head. "Not that I'm aware. He knows about us being bonded, though, at least partially. Little shit likes to try and tease me about it any chance he gets."

Mia laughed quietly to herself as she moved to stand, walking to the closet where she browsed through Sirius's clothing until she found an old Sex Pistols t-shirt that was too big for her. "He and I have had conversations about it," she said as she began stripping her clothing off. Sirius turned his back to give her privacy. "It's been years for me, of course, but I remember he said he knew because of the life debt you collected from Narcissa. He put all the pieces together and figured out how I brought you back from the veil."

"Probably learnt about the ritual from his father," Sirius said, glancing over his shoulder as he watched her crawl back into the bed and cover herself with the blankets. "It seems like something a Death Eater would try to learn: using life debts to bind people to them."

She eyed him teasingly. "Comparing me to Death Eaters now?"

Sirius laughed uncomfortably. "Hardly. You're much smarter than any Death Eater I've ever met."

"It's strange, though." She frowned, reaching up to rub at the tension in her shoulders. "I feel like . . . like I'm still preparing for war. Yesterday, it was all just really beginning for us, and today it's all over. I don't think my body realises it can relax now. I don't even know what to do with myself. I don't have a job or a purpose anymore."

Sirius made his way to her side of the bed, sitting behind her and pushing her long curls to the side so he could rub her neck and shoulders. She moaned softly at the touch of his hands, and Sirius winced painfully at the sound. "You can do anything you want to do now. I'm sure you'll figure it out."

"Why didn't you take Kingsley up on his offer to re-join the Aurors? I remember in Hogwarts, you said you wanted to be an Auror, and I was shocked because you'd never told us—Harry and me, I mean. Why is that?"

"I . . . I left the Aurors after you . . ."

Mia turned around to face him, her brows pinched together creating a little line. "Why? You loved your job."

Sirius sighed loudly and rubbed his hands down his face. "Because the Ministry was corrupt, and I couldn't do a thing about it. I tried to investigate your disappearance, and

they put a stop to me at every juncture. Now I know why, but back then I was livid. Moody was on my case constantly about sticking my nose where it didn't belong. One day I snapped and quit." He casually added, "I might have threatened him."

Mia snorted. "How'd he take *that*?"

Sirius shrugged. "I was arrested and put in a holding cell for a few weeks. Remus didn't tell you much about what it was like after you left, did he?"

She shook her head. "No, not much. I didn't really want to hear about it at first. But I do now, if you're willing to share."

He swallowed down his worries. "Ask me anything, and I'll tell you."

"Why Peter?"

Sirius recoiled slightly, feeling as though the breath had been knocked clean out of him. "Fuck. You're just going right for it, aren't you?"

She frowned but then nodded. "I need closure. And I think we both need forgiveness."

Sirius sighed and looked away from her, not willing to meet her eyes. "I didn't trust Remus. Not even after you begged me to, made me promise to," he said shamefully. "We were fighting all the time and Wormtail . . . You were gone and he showed right up, the little shit. He seemed so, well, you remember. Harmless."

"I remember."

"I made a mistake, and I'll regret it for the rest of my life," he very nearly whispered.

Mia looked down at his hands, which had been fidgeting in his lap as he spoke. She reached out and took them into her own, rubbing her thumb over the knuckles slowly as though she were relearning the contours of his fingers and the texture of his palms. Her fingertips grazed the numbered tattoo that had been his prison identity.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't," he muttered and pulled his hands away from her when she went to touch the Azkaban mark again.

"I need to say it."

"I-I can't do this, Mia."

"We can't pretend that it didn't happen," she told him as he stood up and moved away from her. "I need to get it out."

"I don't want to get it all out," he argued. "I want to just . . . just enjoy the fact that you're here and alive, and you know who the fuck I am for the first time in years."

"We can't move on until we do this. Sirius, you need to—"

The rage and grief filled him up inside, making his body feel cold. He hated the cold. It sank into his bones and made everything ache. Furious at the reminder, he spun on her.

"You let me rot in Azkaban for twelve *fucking* years!"

Damn her, she didn't even look surprised.

"I betrayed Remus, Peter betrayed us all, but you betrayed *me*, Mia! You *knew*! You knew everything, and you let it happen!" He turned away from her and ran his fingers through his hair. Breathing hard, he walked to the corner of the room and pressed his forehead against the wall, bracing himself. "Merlin, I . . . Please just yell at me. I need you to be angry at me, too. Tell me what you're thinking."

Mia did not know what she was thinking. Not really. She knew she had no desire to yell at him. He was right. She *had* allowed it all to happen and spent years hating herself for not doing anything to stop it. Trying to redeem her inaction now felt foolish in itself. There was truly nothing she could do to make up for what she had allowed to transpire, and a simple apology would not fix anything. It would be insulting to even *think* it would make up for twelve years in hell. Sirius must have known it, too, which was likely why he pleaded with her to yell at him.

So she did.

"I *begged* you to trust Remus," her voice started out as a whisper but gradually increased in volume. "Told you *specifically* not to trust Wormtail, but you did anyway. If you couldn't make Remus the Secret-Keeper, you should have kept it to yourself! But I'm not even angry about that," she admitted, and Sirius turned around to look at her, confused. "I knew what was going to happen to Jamie. I knew it had to happen because, in any other circumstance, Lily wouldn't have had the chance to protect Harry the way she did. But I *am* angry because instead of taking care of Harry like you were supposed to, you let Dumbledore give him to Petunia and Vernon! He should have been with you and Remus!"

Sirius silently agreed and reached out, pulling her into his arms, kissing her hair. Slowly, they both began to calm down, and he whispered, "I'm sorry," in her ear.

"Me, too," she mumbled against his chest.

"Are we okay?"

She pulled away and looked up into his grey eyes, ignoring the age lines around them that signified not laughter but hardship. "I'm here. I'm not leaving. And I love you."

Sirius sighed with relief at her words.

"Come to bed." She pulled him to the large four-poster where they both crawled beneath the covers, Sirius still in his clothes. He pulled her against his chest, and she settled a hand on his sternum, fiddling with a button on his shirt.

"Was it enough?" she whispered. "Did I love you enough to make up for what you had to endure?"

He closed his eyes and breathed out shakily. "No. But we've got the rest of our lives to fix that."

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### September 21st, 1998

When the sun broke over the horizon and flooded the east-facing windows of Grimmauld Place, Sirius stirred awake to find a witch in his arms: *his* witch. He grinned brightly, savouring the last moments of a night of perfect sleep, something he had not enjoyed in nineteen years.

In the quiet early morning, he could hear the others in the house moving around. Ron had apparently returned, seeking out Harry and food. He could overhear Remus talking about a bakery down the street that made chocolate-covered croissants and eclairs. With a plan set in motion, the three other occupants departed Grimmauld Place through the front door, closing it quietly behind them so as not to awaken Walburga's portrait.

"Sirius?" Mia mumbled upon waking.

He smiled down at her when she rolled over, her sleep-mussed hair wild and carefree. "Good morning, kitten."

"I have a question," she said with a smile.

"I might have an answer."

"Did you . . . ? Did you date anyone after I vanished?"

His smile faded and suddenly he was wishing very much that he had gone to the bakery with Ron, Harry, and Remus.

## Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Two

### *Arrogant Slytherins and Promiscuous Ravenclaws*

---

*It's not like you to say sorry  
I was waiting on a different story  
This time I'm mistaken  
For handing you a heart worth breaking  
And I've been wrong, I've been down,  
Been to the bottom of every bottle  
These five words in my head  
Scream "are we having fun yet?"*

(This is How You Remind Me - Nickelback)

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**September 21st, 1998**

Remus walked several paces behind Harry and Ron as they returned to Grimmauld Place from the bakery, munching on one of the pastries. A selected assortment of baked goods had been wrapped in the boxes that he was carrying—with the exception of the chocolate-covered breakfast items that were being safeguarded in Harry's hands. The croissants they originally had gone for were apparently being reserved for another customer, and Remus was burying his disappointment in other sweets.

He was pulled from his thoughts of stealing the box from Harry when they approached the steps of number twelve to see Sirius sitting there, a glass of amber liquid in hand that could be identified at a distance as Muggle liquor, meaning Sirius was drinking for the intent to actually drink, which was never a good sign so early in the day.

"Morning, Pads," he greeted hesitantly.

Sirius raised his glass in salute. "Moony, Harry, Ron."

"Drinking already?" Remus eyed the glass as Sirius brought it to his lips. "You know it's only half nine."

Sirius nodded, licked his lips, and took another sip. "Nursing a bit of a headache," he said smoothly, giving no further indication as to why Muggle liquor was the new remedy for headaches instead of a Pain Relief Potion. "Mia's redecorating the house a bit."

"Really? She was never very—"

A loud crash inside the house had all three standing wizards nearly jumping out of their skin, wands drawn. Looking down at Sirius's relaxed demeanour, they all put their

wands away, glancing around to make certain no passing Muggle caught sight of them since they stood on the edge of the Muggle-Repelling Charm.

When another loud crash was followed by an angry scream, Harry drew his attention to his godfather. "Redecorating?" he asked sceptically.

Sirius only nodded. "I'm fairly certain that the floor will soon be a lovely mosaic once she's done breaking every priceless glass artefact in the house. Of course, it all belonged to my mother, so I'm not entirely upset about losing any of it. She's been at it for about an hour; I'm honestly surprised there's still stuff left to break."

Remus glared down at his friend. "What did you do?"

Sirius feigned innocence. "Why on earth, Moony, do you think that I've done something?"

"Because there's only a handful of things that get Mia violent, and something tells me that if she's destroying your house while you're sitting on the front porch, you're not in any immediate danger, which is usually her biggest rage-trigger."

"I beg to differ on the danger issue." Sirius stood and reached into the box of treats Harry was holding, drawing out an éclair with a happy smile. "I was forcibly removed from the house," he told them before taking a large bite of the pastry.

Harry gaped in shock. "She hexed you out of your own home?"

Sirius swallowed, shaking his head. "No. She threw an ashtray at my head and said she didn't want to look at my ugly, toerag face for a while. By the way, am I still bleeding?" He turned around to show the back of his skull. "I'm shit at Healing Spells, especially when I have to do them on myself."

"Toerag?" Remus asked as he looked over Sirius's head, pleased to see that whatever wound had been there was repaired by whatever half-arsed spell Sirius used.

"She's in 'angry Lily' mode."

"What's a toerag?" Ron asked.

Sirius barked a laugh. "Twenty-five years, mate, and I still don't actually know. Sometimes, I'm pretty certain that half of the stuff Lily said was shit she made up to make the rest of us look stupid."

"What else is there?" Harry asked.

"What's that?" Sirius looked up at his godson as he retook his seat on the edge of the stairs, scooting aside to let Remus sit to his left.

"Remus said there's only a handful of things that make Hermione violent. What's the list?"

"Oh, umm . . . me putting myself in danger is high up there," Sirius said with a smirk. "But she usually just screams like a banshee while I mend my broken bones. Made the hospital wing at Hogwarts much less comforting. Her bedside manner is shit."

"She was always lovely with me," Remus said with a smirk as Sirius threw him a rude hand gesture. Turning his attention to Harry, he said, "Insulting me falls just under. I have a feeling *that* was the line that Molly crossed last night. She's very protective of what she thinks belongs to her."

"You belong to her?" Ron asked, raising a brow.

Sirius laughed and nodded. "Don't doubt it for a second. She has a habit of collecting strays. She likes broken things she can dote upon and take care of. Pretty sure you were her first," he said, gesturing to Harry with the half-eaten pastry. At the boy's shocked look, he smiled. "You're surprised?"

"No," Harry replied thoughtfully. "I just . . . I thought that was just how Hermione was."

Ron snorted incredulously. "No. That's how Hermione always was with *you*. Sure, she got on my case about my manners and homework, but she didn't—what's the word you used?" he asked Sirius. "Dote. She never doted on me."

"That's because you've not been mistreated. She's a healer," Remus said. "Not in the obvious sense of the word, or well, in my case she was. Hermione and Mia . . . She likes to heal wounds. She likes to make things better. Harry, Sirius, and myself . . . She made things better."

Harry and Sirius shared a nod.

"So, then why is she mad?" Ron asked, bringing their attention back to the sounds of crashing inside of the house.

Remus sat beside Sirius, thoughtful. "Other than protecting those she loves, the only things that get her *this* riled up are arrogant Slytherins or promiscuous Ravencl—" He stopped mid-sentence and turned to look at Sirius. "Pads? What did you do?"

"Nothing!" Sirius insisted. "Mia and I just had a morning chat over how I spent the few years I had without her before Azkaban."

"You cheated on Hermione?" Harry snapped angrily at his godfather, emerald eyes flashing as he jumped to conclusions.

Sirius sighed irritably, opening his mouth for the rest of the pastry but bringing his drink to his lips instead. The glass clinked on his teeth, and Sirius swore under his breath in frustration. "My girlfriend up and vanished into thin air one day, and I was told multiple times, by Albus Dumbledore, that she was dead and *someone*," he said loudly as he turned to glare at Remus, "refused to say otherwise."

Remus shook his head. "You know I couldn't."

"So, I tried to . . . move on."

Rolling his eyes, Remus scoffed.

"What?" Sirius barked.

"If by 'moving on' you mean drinking yourself into a coma that lasted three days, then certainly. Yes, *moving on*."

"You did what?" Harry yelled. "Sirius! You could have died!"

"It's possible to drink yourself into a coma?" Ron asked, looking terrified and strained as though he were frightfully trying to calculate the number of butterbeers and firewhiskies he had consumed over the course of his young life.

"He could have drunk himself to *death*," Remus said, his voice hard as he stared at Sirius. "Pretty sure that's what he had been going for. Do you realise how much a wizard has to drink in order to get alcohol poisoning?" he asked, looking at Harry, thrilled that he no longer had to bear the weight of the disapproval that came from witnessing Sirius's personal rock bottom. "James was furious when Sirius woke up."

Sirius groaned, thankfully looking just as guilty as he had when the original situation had taken place. "I'm not proud of it, thank you very much. If you haven't noticed, I've never been good at coping on my own. But she's not pissed about *that*. The drinking and the girls she understood. She said she figured that I'd go through some sort of grieving period, end up at the bars and blackout only to wake up with . . . well, company. Although she doesn't know about the coma, so I'd appreciate that little bit of knowledge to be kept quiet," he said, looking at Remus. "Just assume you're under an Unbreakable Vow, thanks."

"So, if not the girls, then what happened?" Harry asked.

Sirius winced, purposely bringing the glass to his mouth this time, finishing off his drink and coughing as it apparently went down the wrong way. "She wasn't bothered by

the girls, but she wanted to know their names. See if it was anyone she knew. She claimed that she was glad I had someone to take care of me, and she wanted to feel thankful to whoever it was."

Remus leant forward, putting his head in his hands. If he looked at Sirius right now, he certainly would burst into laughter. "Please tell me that you were smart enough to not fall for that."

"Shut up, Moony."

Remus sat up, holding in the laughter over the position his friend put himself in. "Padfoot, would you care to remind me again what House the hat *tried* to put her in?"

"Shut up, Moony," Sirius growled.

"Wait." Ron paused. "What do you mean House and hat? The *Sorting* Hat?"

Remus silently affirmed Ron's guess. "She told me that when she was sorted in with us, the Hat tried to put her in Slytherin."

Harry and Ron stood with their mouths hanging open.

"That's not possible!" Harry asserted. "Hermione's always been a Gryffindor. She's the bravest witch I know!"

"What could she have done to end up in Slytherin?" Ron asked angrily as though the very thought of his friend ending up in his rival House was a personal offence.

Sirius and Remus both chuckled.

"Well, first, she's not reckless like the rest of Gryffindor House," Remus said. "She's logical and calculating. Always has been. She's smart, but unlike Ravenclaws who obtain knowledge for knowledge's sake, she uses it for her own purposes. She's resourceful and cunning. And those are just the *positive* Slytherin traits she possesses."

"What negative ones could she have?" Harry asked, offended on Mia's behalf.

"She can be cold and cruel when she wants to be," Sirius answered. "And unforgiving. Does the name Marietta Edgecombe ring any bells? How about Rita Skeeter in a jar? Or Dolores Umbridge and some centaurs?"

"She just did all of that stuff in defence of her friends," Ron argued.

"Well, even if all of those things wouldn't have put her in with the snakes," Sirius remarked with a chuckle, "when the Sorting Hat suggested Slytherin to her, she threatened to set it on fire."

Harry and Ron stood silent, likely acknowledging that perhaps, over the years, they had let their friend get a little carried away.

Remus turned his attention back to Sirius. "So you gave her a list of girls, and she called you a man-whore then kicked you out of your house?"

"No, she was strangely genuine about not being upset over the various one night stands. It was the tiny, small, insignificant, inconsequential, *minor* incident I had after she disappeared that put her in this state." He looked down at the ground, picking at his fingernails.

"Oh, no," Remus said as realisation dawned on him.

Sirius cringed. "Oh, yes."

The front door was thrown open, and Mia stood before them all, wearing a too-large Sex Pistols t-shirt and a pair of jeans. She was barefoot, which was surprising considering all the broken glass on the floor of the entryway. Her amber eyes were burning, and her hair was sparking at the ends.

"Marlene *bloody* McKinnon!"

Looking at Sirius, Remus sighed. "You're an idiot."

"We had *one* rule each, Sirius Black!" Mia snarled. "I think I kept to mine quite well over the years! I've only ever slept with you and Remus! Just the two of you! At your request!"

Sirius scratched the back of his head where the ashtray had hit earlier. "To be fair, you also forbade me from sleeping with Gryffindors," he mumbled. "And you did briefly date a Bulgarian Quidditch player—"

"That doesn't count, and you damn well know it!" she shrieked and then looked up, spotting the other three wizards. Her personality switched out of nowhere; the wrathful witch turned suddenly sweet and approachable, not that any of them were stupid enough to actually approach her. "Good morning, Remus, Harry, Ron."

Ron inclined his head to her, eyes wide. "'Mione."

"Morning, Hermione," Harry said cautiously.

Remus, the only one of them clearly unafraid, turned his head and smiled at the witch. "Hello, love. Bad day?"

Mia shrugged her shoulders, looking over her shoulder at the inside of the house. "Just doing a little redecorating. I'm almost done. I'd say let's all sit down to a cuppa, but there's glass all over the floor, and I don't want anyone to get hurt."

"You *could* stop breaking things, then," Sirius quietly suggested.

Just like that, Mia's eyes flared again, and she scowled down at Sirius. She tunnelled her glare into the back of his head furiously before she turned, stepped back inside the house, and slammed the door shut.

Remus sighed. "I can't believe you told her about Marlene."

"That name sounds familiar. Wasn't she an Order member?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Sirius replied.

"But Hermione didn't like her?"

"Tele-Portkeyed her into the Black Lake once, if I remember," Remus said with a proud smile. "Never did like her much."

"McKinnon wasn't too kind in regards to the werewolf population," Sirius told Harry and Ron. "Remember that list we were talking about?"

"What's a Tele-Portkey?" Harry asked.

"Invention of Mia's," Remus said. "Like a Portkey but charmed to another item so instead of setting a random object to a specific location, the objects are charmed to be redirected to one another."

"Like magnets?"

Remus nodded. "Exactly. Mia charmed coins into Tele-Portkeys and always kept some in her pockets. She threatened that she fed one to the giant squid."

Ron gawked. "She really sent a girl into the Black Lake?"

"Did she die?" Harry asked nervously.

"Yeah, but not from *that*," Sirius frowned. "Marlene died months after I last saw her. By then, she was dating one of the Prewetts, can't remember which. Not like it matters, she was killed by Death Eaters about a week after Gideon and Fabian died."

Ron frowned at the mention of his uncles.

"That's horrible," Harry muttered.

"That was war," Sirius said with a sigh. "Merlin, that was *life*."

"Is Hermione really that pissed off over a girl who died twenty years ago?" Ron asked.

"*This* girl?" Sirius scoffed. "Yes."

"Why?"

"Marlene was Sirius's first . . ." Remus winced. "Everything."

"Not my first love," Sirius declared firmly.

Remus conceded to the fact and held up his hands in surrender. "No, but on your first date with Mia, she walked out of Honeydukes to catch you kissing Marlene."

"For the last bloody time, *she* kissed *me!*"

"Which Mia forgave you for, but wasn't that the whole reason she instituted the No Marlene McKinnon Rule for you?"

Sirius groaned. "I was drunk, and I didn't know. How long do you think she's going to be pissed at me for?"

Suddenly, the front door was thrown open again, this time revealing Draco, who was rubbing his nose irritably. He sniffed a few times, glancing down at the fresh blood stains on his robes as he stepped to take a seat next to Sirius, opposite Remus.

"Are you aware that the inside of your house looks like someone set a small pack of nifflers loose?"

"Are you aware that your robes are covered in blood, ferret?" Ron asked, a crooked grin on his face.

"And yet they still appear to be cleaner than yours." Draco glared at the redhead, gesturing to the smeared chocolate and crumbs on his collar. "Can you not afford napkins on an Auror trainee's salary, or are you simply accustomed to eating out of a trough?"

"Got caught up in her wrath, did you?" Sirius asked, interrupting the argument between the two before it got out of hand. He held out his empty glass to the blond, pulling a small bottle out from behind him for a refill.

Draco took it enthusiastically, tossing the liquor down his throat in one gulp. He set the glass down between them and then reached for his wand to clean the blood stains from his clothing. "If you've angered a witch to the point of brutality, the least you could do is close the bloody Floo Network so no one else walks into your mess unsuspectingly. It's called manners, Sirius."

Sirius smirked. "Sorry about that. She break your nose?"

"Wouldn't be the first time," Draco said with a bitter tone. "At least she fixed it for me; in third year I had to wait an hour for Madam Pomfrey to make herself available. Not that it gives Granger the right to sucker punch a man just as he steps out of a fireplace."

"Why'd she hit you?" Harry asked.

"Not that she'd need a reason," Ron mumbled.

Draco narrowed his eyes at Ron and then turned his attention to Harry. "She said something about it being too long since she punched a Slytherin. That, and the fact that I look like my father didn't help me when I allegedly sneaked up behind her. Then she bloody *hugged* me." He spat the word as though it were an indescribable offence. "She told me that I'd done the right thing by killing Lucius. Care to explain what the hell's going on with Granger?"

It took much less time telling the story to Draco since he cared little for the details and did not ask any questions as he was able to put many of the pieces together himself. When Remus finished explaining, everyone turned to the Slytherin, waiting for his reaction.

"Do any of you Gryffindors know how to leave well enough alone, or do you all just enjoy fucking about with things you don't understand?" he jeered, looking at Ron and Harry as though they set the standard for reckless idiocy. "It makes sense that she attacks first and asks questions later at the sight of me. Mother's been telling me more of what *Lucius* was like when they were first together."

Sirius shook his head. "Mia was *not* a fan of him."

"Is that her name now?" Draco inquired.

"Mia Potter."

"Potter?"

"She was adopted by my grandparents," Harry replied.

"Adopted? Well, that makes a lot more sense," Draco remarked with interest, turning his attention to Sirius. "Not that you need it, cousin, but I wholeheartedly approve of your match. Well done. I actually *like* the witch."

Ron turned beet red. "What?!"

"Absolutely." The Slytherin nodded, taking note of Ron's anger and quirking his lips. If taking an exaggerated liking to the witch sparked such outrage in the redhead, Draco looked like he was going to enjoy milking the moment for all it was worth. "Bravo to you

for being able to pull the broomstick out of her arse. In fact, if she didn't look exactly like Granger, I'd be half tempted to consider a union with her myself."

Sirius grinned. "Well, she's definitely taken."

Draco suppressed a laugh. "Strange, I didn't *feel* a ring when I got an up-close look at her fist. Speaking of which, now that the pair of you are clearly no longer avoiding your embarrassing, secretly-bonded relationship, could you do a man a favour and request that she cease striking me?"

"She's only done it twice. Your pretty face is perfectly intact."

"Still, I'd much prefer her company if she was not *threatening* me." He looked up to see Ron still staring at him, mouth open. "What's wrong with your pet weasel, Scarhead? Is he hungry and just waiting for someone to spoon feed him?"

Harry narrowed his eyes.

Ron closed his mouth and fumed before spitting out, "You just said that you'd match yourself to Hermione if she wasn't with Sirius."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Remarkable attention span, Weasley. She's a powerful witch who finally figured out how to brush her hair."

"If all it took was a girl punching you in the face, Malfoy, you should have been besotted with her third year," Harry said. "Even then, she's still a Muggle-born; isn't that against your *standards*?"

Draco glowered back at Harry, clearly offended. "Don't presume to know anything about me, Potter, or about anything in general. Your ignorance of Wizarding customs and traditions is astounding, and I'd rather walk back into that house and have my nose broken again than listen to the grinding sound that your brain is making as it tries to feebly put the pieces together."

Harry glared. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Put *what* pieces together?" Ron asked, confused.

"Are they actually going to let the two of you be Aurors?" Draco asked in an astonished tone. "Was there even an examination, or did Potter have a plus one invitation to the Ministry attached to that shiny Order of Merlin he received? She's no longer a Muggle-born, you half-wits."

When Harry just stared at him, Draco sighed and looked at the man as though he could not quite believe how stupid he was. "I know you were raised by Muggles and—

apparently even worse—*Weasleys*, but did no one ever even *try* to explain Wizarding customs to you?"

"I'm confused," Harry muttered.

"I'm not surprised," Draco replied.

Remus sighed and rubbed his eyes, wishing he had stayed in the bakery where things were quiet and smelled wonderful. He wondered if he ran back quickly, if there would be any of those almond cream tarts left.

"Draco," Sirius said warningly.

"What?" Draco asked, poorly feigning innocence. "I'm not. It's the godfather's job to instruct a magical child in the traditions and customs of our world, and *you've* been otherwise engaged. Granted, I would have assumed that the herd of gingers would have at least attempted to step up and fill in the obvious gap in his proper education," he added, tossing a negligent hand toward Ron, "but judging from the blank expression on Weaselbee's face, I gather that they haven't even informed their *own* offspring, let alone the Muggle-raised castaways they've accumulated over the years."

"Would you stop prattling on and just explain what you meant about Hermione not being Muggle-born?" Harry snapped impatiently.

"She was adopted by a pureblood family, you simpleton," Draco said, speaking very slowly as if talking to a child; Harry bristled at the tone. "That makes her a pureblood."

Ron furrowed his brows. "Adoption doesn't change blood."

"No, but it changes their magical signature. If a Familial Bond was created and sealed between her and her proud Potter parents, then she's not just a Potter by *name*, she might as well have been born to them. Her magical signature was altered to adjust to her family. By all Wizarding laws and rights, she's a pureblood."

Harry frowned. "That still doesn't make sense. Her blood hasn't changed. What the hell did we just fight a war over? If it's about pure magic and not pure blood, then why even bother talking about blood?"

Draco shrugged, clearly never having bothered to worry about such things before. "I suppose because 'Mudblood' sounds less ridiculous than 'Mud*magic*?'"<sup>1</sup> he surmised, his tone indifferent. When Harry and Ron tensed at the word, he rolled his eyes again. "I wasn't calling *her* one. I was just making a point. No need to get your hand-me-down knickers in a twist."

"And this tradition is just accepted that easily?" Harry asked, ignoring the insults. "Even by pureblood families like yours?"

"Yes," Draco affirmed. "In fact, my mother told me that when she was having trouble getting pregnant with me, she'd suggested magical adoption just to be able to provide an heir for my father to fulfil her marital vows. But by then Father was too caught up in the Dark Lord's plans."

"Why would that have mattered?" Harry questioned.

"Because the Dark Lord didn't approve of magical adoption," Draco replied.

Ron frowned. "I still don't get it. If magical adoption would turn any Muggle-born or half-blood into a pureblood, then why was he against it?"

Draco raised an incredulous eyebrow. "Because, unlike the rest of the Wizarding world, the Dark Lord actually *did* see it as a blood status thing and not just magical purity. Neither of which make a difference now, of course."

Harry dipped his head, finally understanding. "It makes sense. Tom Riddle was an orphan."

"And would *you* like to be the person to tell a sociopathic tyrant that all his problems would have been solved if some pureblood family loved him enough to give him their name?"

Harry looked to Remus. "Does this mean anything for Hermione? Being a pureblood now?"

Remus scratched his chin thoughtfully. "I'm not sure," he answered. "We knew that Mia was adopted, of course, but we never really gave much thought to her Muggle-born status or the state of her magical signature. And Hermione has always been a proud Muggle-born; I imagine she'll be very open about both of her parentages. By all laws, she is a Potter, so she'll have access to the vaults and properties."

"Black vaults and properties as well," Sirius chimed in. "Her mother was a Black."

"I didn't even make that connection," Draco grimaced. "I'm related to Hermione Granger. Does she still have the Time-Turner? I'd love to go back to third year and tell my thirteen-year-old self just to see the look on my face."

"It'd probably look just as stupid as it does now," Ron remarked.

"Behave, Ronald."

They all turned up to see Mia walking out, looking much calmer than she had since she last graced them with her presence.

"But, Mione, he—"

"Is family," she said, cutting him off as she walked down the steps.

At her words, Draco turned and sneered up at Ron, obviously delighted by the way he was gawking at the sight of *Hermione Granger* defending a Slytherin. The blond remained smug until the witch reached out, taking his face in her hands. He tried to pull away at first, but she was persistent, ignoring his wishes so she could observe her spellwork on his nose.

"Hello . . . *cousin*," he said with a smug grin on his face as she finally let him go.

Mia nodded thoughtfully. "So you're all caught up, then? How's your face?"

"Still prettier than yours."

She laughed and shrugged her shoulders. "That's debatable. I happen to be dating the most eligible bachelor in Wizarding Britain," she said, reaching out and threading her fingers through Sirius's hair without even looking at him. "And you've got Pansy 'Pug Face' Parkinson to attest to *your* good looks."

"Oh, are we dating again?" Sirius asked. "I wasn't sure because you threw an ashtray at my head."

"I am sorry," she said, her tone genuine. "You're still not off the hook."

"What do you want from me?"

She thought for a moment. "You're no longer allowed to smoke."

Sirius cringed and then growled. "Fine," he conceded with a dramatic sigh. "Are we good now?"

"Yes," she said and turned to look at the man. "I've calmed down."

Remus chuckled. "Because everything in the house is broken?"

"No, because punching Slytherins is apparently like meditation for me," she said, smirking at Draco who had turned narrowed eyes on her. "Keeps me centred. It's been way too long since I've done it. It's been at least a year since I last punched Snape, and your father was a few years before that."

Draco's eyes widened in what Remus assumed was a mixture of delight and horror. "You hit my father?"

"You punched Snape?" Ron asked with a grin on his face.

Harry, who had developed a strange new admiration for the fallen Potions Master, did not look so amused. "Why?"

"Because they threatened Sirius," Mia replied, a hard look in her eyes.

Remus smiled. "Told you. She doesn't like people touching her things."

## Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Three

### *Collected Life Debts*

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*I'm setting fire to the life that I know  
Let's start a fire everywhere that we go  
We starting fires, we starting fires  
'Til our lives are burning gold  
(Burning Gold - Christina Perri)*

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**September 21st, 1998**

The residents of number twelve arrived at the Burrow in small groups. Harry and Ron took Teddy with them through the Floo, while Tonks met up with Draco, Narcissa, and Andromeda to Side-Along-Apparate. Since the Malfoys and Weasleys had never been close even *before* ending up on opposite sides of a war, it seemed like a good idea to *not* have them pop out unannounced from the fireplace.

Mia took a breath before clutching Sirius's arm with one hand and Remus's with the other. They Disappeared away from London, arriving at the Burrow a few moments later.

The sight of the old, crooked house nearly brought tears to her eyes. Mia controlled herself and swallowed down her emotions. The anticipation was almost overwhelming. Not only of seeing her old friends from Hogwarts but Arthur and Kingsley as well, who had been Mia's friends from the Ministry and Order before she'd gone missing. It was the latter two whom she was most worried about seeing again.

They walked toward the Burrow, and she noted that a small marquee had been set up outside, most likely surrounded by a Warming Charm to fight off the biting September chill. As they approached, Mia released her grip on the wizards, the smell of Molly Weasley's cooking pulling her toward the large tent. Even from a distance, she could see them all gathered together inside.

Bill was hovering next to Fleur protectively as she carried trays to the large table alongside her mother-in-law, shooing her husband away with a fierce glare. Charlie, still home from the Dragon Reserve to help with the reconstruction of Hogwarts, was in a corner pouring firewhisky into glasses with Fred and George. Ginny was holding Teddy in her arms with Harry sitting beside her, all smiles, while Ron walked around the tent beside

Neville and Luna, the newest members of the Order of the Phoenix—though without a war to fight, there hardly seemed to be a reason for it.

There were other members of the Order present as well whom Mia recognised: Dedalus Diggle and Hestia Jones, whom she had known from the original Order, as well as Sturgis Podmore. Arthur, Percy, and Kingsley were standing together beside Molly, deep in conversation with one another while the witch tended to the food.

In the back of the tent sat Hagrid with a glass of firewhisky the size of a small barrel in his hand, and sitting close beside him was the small house-elf, Dobby, who was wearing six different pairs of mismatched socks on his feet, and two different scarves.

The only members of the Order that seemed to be missing were Minerva—who was busy at Hogwarts—Elphias Doge, Arabella Figg, Aberforth Dumbledore, and Mundungus Fletcher.

"I'm panicking," Mia muttered softly.

"You'll be fine, love," Sirius promised. "Besides, you're going to have competition for attention." He directed her attention to Tonks, Draco, Narcissa, and Andromeda as they approached.

Mia inhaled sharply, her only indication of nerves, before composing herself to hold her head high as she came face-to-face with Narcissa Malfoy.

The blonde stared at her for several long moments, appraising Mia before she finally allowed the smallest hint of a smile to appear. "Well, well, Potter," she said, her smile turning into a full smirk that rivalled that of her son. "You've held up quite well over the years. What *ever* is your secret?"

"Time-Turner," Mia said without a pause, the smallest hint of an arrogant smile showing at the corner of her mouth. "We can't *all* bathe in the blood of baby nogtails to look as lovely as you do, dear *cousin*."

Narcissa actually laughed at that and then turned to look at Sirius. "The pair of you will either restore our Ancient and Noble House or run it completely into the ground. Either way, it will be a good show, and I'm not one to miss out on free entertainment."

"Oh, Cissa," Mia said softly. "It'll hardly be free."

Narcissa's lips quirked, and Mia grinned.

Draco stared between the two as if he were suddenly concerned about the new friendship obviously brewing.

Mia's attention then turned to the elder Black sister. Her smile softened, and she sighed with relief. "Dromeda."

"Mia Potter." Andromeda grinned and moved to embrace her. "You are as lovely as ever, my dear, and while there were many great things about Hermione Granger, these two," she said, gesturing to Remus and Sirius, "were absolutely pathetic in your long absence."

"I think I did pretty well under the circumstances," Sirius said, offended.

Remus scoffed.

"Shall we?" Narcissa asked.

"Mum and I will take the Malfoys in first," Tonks insisted. "Get that over with quickly before you lot come in."

"No, you two go as well." Mia nudged Sirius and Remus forward. "I . . . I need a moment, I think," she muttered quietly and folded her arms in front of her chest, nervously staring at the tent in front of them all.

Silently, they each nodded and turned to join the largely gathered group, Sirius waiting an extra moment longer to lean in and kiss her cheek in support.

"We'll get everyone ready," he promised before turning and leaving her to her thoughts.

Mia turned away from the tent and breathed in deeply, looking forward into the distant orchards of the Burrow, a part of her wanting to shift into her Animagus form and disappear into the trees where she could hide away forever. She had barely heard the sound of footsteps before someone called out to her.

"Hello, Mia Potter."

Mia turned around to come face-to-face with Luna Lovegood.

"Luna? I—How did you—?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," the blonde said, her ethereal voice soft and sweet. "Are we not calling you that yet?" Her large eyes looked around Mia as though she were examining her aura or a gathering of wrackspurts.

"You know who I am?"

"Oh, yes. I've always known. But then again, you haven't, have you?"

Mia smiled, nearly choking on a sob that was trying to escape her throat.

"You were friends with my mother, and she told me stories," Luna explained. "One of my favourites was about a special shape-shifter. It was a phoenix that was really a fox who could turn into a witch," she said with the hint of a smile. "But the witch could also turn into a snake or a lion, depending on her mood. Quite fascinating, shape-shifters, don't you agree?"

"Yes," Mia said, pulling Luna into a hug. "Quite fascinating."

Luna eventually pulled away from Mia with a brighter smile, her eyes twinkling in the soft light of the setting sun. "Shall we go in now?"

Mia inclined her head and followed her friend into the tent where someone had magicked the floor to be hardwood—more than likely the twins, who were probably planning on dancing like they had done during Bill and Fleur's wedding, the last time the marquee had been set up.

As serene and calm as Luna was, the rest of the large group was the exact opposite. Fred, George, and Charlie were in a debate with Harry, Ginny, and Sirius over the presence of the Malfoys, who stood near Tonks and Andromeda looking bored as they waited for their company to be approved.

"This was supposed to be an Order meeting, so I want to know why there are bloody *Malfoys* here!" Charlie snapped.

"Because I asked them to be," Mia said, inserting herself into the conversation and bringing attention to her presence.

All eyes turned toward her.

The shattering of plates broke through the sudden silence, and when Mia looked toward the sound, she saw Bill and Fleur staring at her with wide eyes and open mouths. Fleur was looking her up and down as though searching for something. Bill had turned his attention to Remus as if waiting for directions.

Mia simply smiled at them both, figuring that the pair of them—both a little more creature than the others—had scented out the difference in her immediately, and Bill, a part of the pack, had deferred to their Alpha for assistance.

"Hey, 'Mione." Charlie briefly glanced at her before turning his attention back to the argument. "I'm just saying—" he said but then stopped and turned to look back at her, this time with focused attention and a grin. "'Mione, did you do something with your hair? You are looking . . . good."

Mia rolled her eyes when she noticed Sirius bristle in response to the complement.

"The Malfoys are here at my request. This isn't my home, but they are my guests, and I would expect everyone—as grown witches and wizards, the lot of you—to treat them with the respect that I insist upon," she said firmly. "It's not a request."

The majority of the large group lowered their heads shamefully, but the three instigating redheads looked as though they had been challenged and were now, more than ever, amused by the witch who dared to throw down the gauntlet.

"Is that so?" Fred asked with a smirk as he approached her.

"And how are we to be punished when we break your rules?" George said with a smug grin. "Charlie's right, though. You look—"

"Lovely," Fred chimed in.

"Gorgeous," George added.

Fred adjusted his tie. "Fancy a drink?"

"A nightcap, perhaps?" George waggled his eyebrows.

Mia sighed in irritation. "I don't have time for this. Go sit down, and I will deal with you later. All right," she said, her voice a bit louder. "We need to get some security questions out of the way."

"What for?" Charlie asked. "War's over, love."

"I'm serious. Ask me as many questions as you need to," she insisted, noting that her words had put several of the members into a visibly worried state. "Go on."

Arthur was the first to step forward. "Umm, right then. Hermione, what form does your Patronus take?"

Mia winced, hoping that no one requested to *see* the thing as proof. "An otter," she answered, slightly annoyed that Arthur's questions had not improved. Anyone at the final battle could have known what her Patronus was. Only Remus and Sirius stared at her when she replied, likely knowing the current form her Patronus took.

"What was the name of my hippogriff?" Hagrid asked from the back. "The one you tried to save for me."

"Buckbeak," Mia said. "And I *did* save him."

"What?" Draco asked loudly, turning to glare at her. "That was you?"

"Focus," she hissed at him, and then looked back to the group. "Anyone else?"

Kingsley took the bait. "When you and I helped retrieve Harry from his aunt and uncle's house last year, how did we fly away?"

Mia grinned, happy that someone was taking this seriously. "We rode a thestral." When he looked pleased with her answer, she decided to stick with him. "Now, Minister Shackbolt, at any point during that night or any night that preceded or followed it, did I save your life?"

Kingsley frowned, his brows pulled together in curiosity. "No."

"To clarify: you do *not* owe me, Hermione Granger, a life debt?"

"I know my life debts, Hermione," he said very seriously. "I keep a running list in my head. Used to be helpful when I was an Auror. Is there a reason you ask?"

"Could you recite that list from memory, Minister? I assure you, I have a point."

"Well, umm, Alastor Moody," he began, and everyone took a brief moment of silence to acknowledge their fallen comrade. "Robards once saved me from a cursed object. Tonks here saved me from a Death Eater. Frank Longbottom took a hex in the back for me once that landed him in St Mungo's for a week." The mention of the hospital seemed to trigger a memory because his eyes lit up. "Oh! And then there was—" He paused before speaking again, his eyes falling over Mia in sudden recognition and shock. His normally loud, deep timbre lowered to a soft whisper. "That's . . . That's not—"

Mia smiled apprehensively. "Hello, Kings."

He slowly drew his wand, shock fading into swift suspicion. "Who are you?"

As smoothly as his surprised expression shifted to wariness, Mia's smile turned into a teasing smirk. "Am I not Hermione Granger? I thought we'd just covered that."

"Anyone could have learnt enough about Hermione Granger, but what you're saying is—" His eyes flickering to Remus and Sirius, who were slowly gravitating toward Mia, hands hovering over where they had their wands holstered. "It's not possible."

"Remus, Sirius, please do back up. I'd greatly prefer it if Harry, Ron, and Tonks didn't have to arrest you for attacking the Minister for Magic," Mia said with a smile before turning her attention back to Kingsley. "I can prove it."

"How?"

"Who here owes a life debt to Hermione Granger?"

Slowly, hands rose in the air. The first had been Sirius followed by Harry and Ron. Ginny rose her hand next followed by Fred, much to the surprise of George who eyed his twin with curiosity. Fred only grinned in response, clearly keen on keeping the secret.

"When a life debt is invoked, even without fulfilling it, there is a pressure felt by the debtor depending on the weight of the life debt. My name is Hermione Granger," she said loudly. "*Invocato Vita Debitum!*"

Almost instantly, those who owed her a life debt seemed to feel the impact. Magic crackled in the air. Sirius was leaning on Remus for support while Fred leant on George. The power of Mia's spell had knocked Ginny back into her seat. Harry and Ron, however, were taken to their knees by the force of the magic, such was the weight of the life debts they owed her.

Mia turned to Kingsley. "Am I Hermione Granger?"

"Clearly. But you're not just claiming to be Hermione Granger, are you?"

She breathed in deeply, closing her eyes as she spoke, "My name is Mia Potter." At the declaration, several people gasped. "*Invocato Vita Debitum!*"

Kingsley fell to his knees before her.

As Harry and Ron had previously done, Remus and Sirius collapsed behind her.

At the sight of the Minister for Magic kneeling before a nineteen-year-old witch, most rose to their feet, at the very least to get a good look, though those who knew the name 'Mia Potter' were pushing their way to the front.

"It's not possible," Dedalus whispered. "Y-You died. Dumbledore said you died."

"And Albus Dumbledore always spoke the truth?" she asked with a stern glance to the older wizard, who gaped at her openly. She turned her attention back to Kingsley and smiled. "You can get up now, Kings. I'm not calling in your debt. Not tonight, at least."

"Mia?"

She turned as Arthur slowly approach her, his eyes wide and his steps cautious.

"You . . . You're really Mia?"

"Hello, Arthur. You owe me five Galleons," she said with a joyful smile. "I told you it would be a boy."

Arthur laughed loudly and moved forward, wrapping her in a hug.

She grinned and returned the affection to her old friend. Soon there was a line of older Order members coming to see if it was, in fact, the long-lost Mia Potter. Hagrid was

sobbing hysterically into a tablecloth-sized handkerchief. When he hugged her, Mia thought one of her lungs would collapse at any moment.

"Not to interrupt what will surely be an interesting story," Fred chimed in. "But is anyone going to help out those poor lads?" He gestured to the side of the tent where Harry, Neville, and Draco were on the ground, flat on their chests and struggling against some invisible weight that was pressing them down.

Mia stared, wide-eyed at the sight of the boys. "Well, that's unexpected. I, umm, I'm not calling in your debts?" Immediately her words released them. "That's strange. The weight of the debt must have been exponential. I shouldn't have had to verbally release you."

Draco was first to his feet. "What the fuck, Potter?"

Harry was second to follow, and he turned and glared at Draco. "I didn't do anything, Malfoy!"

"Not *you*, Scarhead. *Granger* Potter," Draco said, gesturing to Mia. "What the hell was that?"

"Hermione?" Neville asked as Luna helped him to his feet. "While I wouldn't be as insulting as some," he said, eyeing Draco, "that wasn't exactly pleasant and, well, if I owe you something, I'd like to pay it off quickly so maybe that doesn't have to happen again."

"I don't . . . I don't know what that was," Mia mumbled.

Remus cleared his throat and leant in to whisper, "Contraceptive Potion."

Mia's eyes widened and she covered her mouth in understanding. "Oh, Merlin. I, uh, okay, umm . . . Short version, then, for those who are clearly still confused. My name is Hermione Granger, and I was sent back into the past thanks to a Time-Turner—specifically to 1971 where Dumbledore had me adopted by Charlus and Dorea Potter. I was raised as the sister of James Potter, Harry's father, who called me Mia."

No one said a word, causing her to clear her throat. "Hi, I'm Mia."

She turned awkwardly to Sirius and Remus, who both looked amused at the Cliff's Notes version of the tale they'd had to repeat several times over the last day.

"I grew up with Sirius and Remus here, as well as Harry's mum, and—" She turned her attention to Neville. "And Frank and Alice Longbottom."

"Did you save my parents lives? Is that why I owe you a life debt?" Harry asked while the rest of the Order processed all of the new information.

Mia shook her head. "No. Or, well, yes. I did save their lives once or twice." She briefly thought of healing James's open Sectumsempra wound and breathing life back into a recently drowned Lily. "But that's not . . . why."

"You don't owe her a life *debt*," Narcissa chimed in. "You boys owe that witch your *lives*."

Draco stared up at his mother. "Excuse me?"

"You owe your very existence to Miss Potter, Draco," Narcissa told her son and then turned her eyes back to Mia. "I remember the last time I saw you. Remembered every single detail. I had to, of course, seeing that you'd given me a potion recipe that required very specific instructions. Rose thorns and red clover brewed in the spring and drank under a full moon."

"You took my advice?"

Narcissa turned her focus to Draco and smiled, this time soft and genuine. "Obviously."

Mia smiled. "He was still spoilt."

"Which you knew would happen," Narcissa said, waving her words off. "I did, however, take your advice and kept him out of the control of his father."

"Something that has benefitted the entire Wizarding world, Narcissa."

"Rose thorns and . . ." Draco muttered under his breath and turned his grey eyes on Mia for a long moment and then looked back to his mother. "Are you honestly telling me—?"

"You were always talented at Potions, Draco," Narcissa said. "Surely you can understand."

The uncomfortable look in his eyes said that he understood completely.

"So you gave my mother the recipe for a Fertility Potion," he said to Mia, matter-of-factly.

It was clear that, until he had said it, many in the room were confused. The moment he had spoken the words, there was a loud echo of "Oooh" around the room.

"But if that created a life debt, then shouldn't that mean a parent is owed a life debt by a child?"

"It *should*," both Narcissa and Molly said aloud at the same time. There was a quiet bout of laughter that filled the room, and each witch looked mildly abashed, refusing to make eye contact with the other and acknowledge their shared viewpoint.

"I didn't do it to make sure Narcissa had *any* child," Mia said pointedly. "I needed to make sure she had you, specifically you, Draco." Her eyes turned to Neville and Harry, neither of which had completely figured it out. "I dropped a shrivelfig in the Contraceptive Potion that Lily was brewing for herself and Alice. I couldn't risk the two of you not being born."

Neville processed the information faster than Harry and stepped forward slowly to stand beside Draco. He hesitated but then smiled softly and did his best to hold his head a little higher. "I owe you a life debt, Hermione Gra—er—Mia . . . Potter?"

The way his nose crinkled in embarrassment the same way Frank's did plucked at her heartstrings, causing her to smile. "Call me whatever you'd like, Neville."

Sirius turned to Harry and patted him on the shoulder.

Slowly, Harry stepped forward to stand next to Neville and smiled at Mia. "Hermione, it's no secret that I owe you plenty of life debts. You've saved me more times than I can even count. But this . . . I owe you a life debt, Mia Potter," he said her name and smiled at her the same way his father would have.

Mia smiled back, doing her best not to cry.

All eyes in the room fell on Draco.

The Slytherin pursed his lips stubbornly and looked back to meet the gaze of his mother once more before turning to face Mia. He narrowed his eyes over the fact that she suddenly looked much less humble to receive him than she had been for Harry and Neville. Still, he was a proper pureblood and had been raised knowing all the appropriate customs that needed to be observed.

"Mia Potter," he said reaching out and taking her right hand in his, a hawthorn wand gripped in his palm. His voice and words were formal, likely a way to prove that the other two had not done this correctly. "I, Draco Malfoy, owe you a life debt and am, therefore, in your service." He bowed his head ever so slightly to her. When he raised it again and released her hand, he smirked. "And I would be very grateful if you released me of my debt in exchange for the one that *he* owes me," he said, gesturing toward Harry.

As Harry clearly realised that Draco was essentially holding *his* life debt hostage in exchange for his own, he looked up at Mia with a pleading stare.

Mia smirked at them both. "Not a chance."

"If I may," Percy said as he cleared his throat and stepped forward to stand beside Kingsley. "I don't mean to cause a problem, but according to Ministerial Decree Forty-two of 1899, unapproved use of Time-Turners is expressly forbidden."

"I didn't send myself into the past," Mia said innocently.

"Then how did you get there?" Kingsley asked.

"Is this a formal inquisition, Minister?"

"Well, no." Kingsley sighed, scratching his head. "But, Percy's right. This isn't just a personal matter or an Order matter, Time-Turners are supposed to be monitored by the Department of Mysteries. It falls under Ministry law, and we'll need to look into it."

"There's no need," Mia said simply. "I can tell you exactly what happened. A Death Eater named Antonin Dolohov stole a Time-Turner from the Department of Mysteries, presumably when we were all attacked there at the end of fifth year. He's the Death Eater that tried to kill me then. I suppose he had a grudge against me for surviving."

All eyes were on her with rapt attention as she told the tale. Those who knew the truth, Remus especially, were staring at her with intensity.

"How did he do it?" Kingsley asked curiously.

"He had the Time-Turner planted among my belongings, though I'm not certain *how* he did it or how long the Time-Turner had been there," she answered simply, showing no emotion on her face. "He left a letter; that's how I know it was him. Unfortunately, the letter was destroyed in 1971 upon my arrival, and the Time-Turner was broken when I returned here to the present."

"Shame," Kingsley noted. "We could have potentially tracked the magical signatures on it."

Mia nodded in agreement. "Shame."

"Dolohov. He's one of the ones that died, isn't that right?"

"I killed him," Sirius spoke up. "Godric's Hollow, last year at Christmas."

"Convenient," Kingsley said with a sly glance, his attention turning back to Mia.

Mia smiled politely. "I thought so. If there's any question about my testimony, I'd be happy to undergo Legilimency and Veritaserum."

Caught off guard by the words, Kingsley's mouth fell open.

Her story was, of course, false, but offering to take Veritaserum and undergo Legilimency, however, was a bold move, and one that few would question.

"I seem to remember Albus telling me that you were quite the Occlumens," Kingsley commented with a grin.

"Am I?" Mia feigned ignorance. "What a lovely talent. I hope it will one day come in handy."

"And the Veritaserum?"

Mia only smiled sweetly.

Kingsley let out a deep laugh. "Oh, you, Mia Potter, have been missed," he said with a wide grin and looked over her shoulder where Sirius stood gathered together with Narcissa, Draco, Andromeda, Tonks, Remus, and Harry. His deep-set eyes turned back to the Mia, and he shook his head in amusement. "Should I be worried that the Black family is regrouping?"

"I'll let you know when I decide," Mia answered.

Kingsley laughed again and turned around, shaking his head. He put a hand on Percy's shoulder, directing him away from her, muttering something about writing up a report on the "official inquisition" that just occurred and filing it away with his approval.

"Hermione?" Harry approached her. "I don't understand. How could you have offered to take Veritaserum?"

"I've been using Occlumency for years to build up a resistance to Legilimency, Truth Spells, and Veritaserum. Truth Serum was something one needed to learn to overcome at Hogwarts," she said, side-eyeing Remus and Sirius.

"Since when?" Harry asked, shocked.

"Remus's sixteenth birthday party."

"How'd you get Veritaserum while still in Hogwarts?" Harry asked curiously, a grin building at the corners of his mouth.

"I brewed it," Mia answered smugly.

"I bought it," Remus chimed in.

Sirius grinned. "I nicked it."

## Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Four

### *Twin Troubles*

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*Hello again, friend of a friend  
I knew you when  
Our common goal was waiting for the world to end  
Now that the truth is just a rule that you can bend  
You crack the whip  
Shape-shift and trick  
The past again  
(Black Sheep - Metric)*

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**September 21st, 1998**

The commotion died down after a while, though each and every person came forward to either reacquaint themselves with Mia or meet her for the second first time. Old friends from the original Order excitedly shared their joy over her being alive before eventually departing. Poor Hagrid had to have time travel explained to him several times as he kept repeatedly asking Mia how come Hermione had not remembered him from when she went to Hogwarts in the seventies.

The only person that stayed away from her, for the most part, was not exactly a person at all. Dobby hovered in the corner of the room, staring at her with big eyes, worrying his floppy ears in his hands with an anxious look on his face. Eventually, Harry had gone over to see if he was all right. Dobby joyfully hugged Harry and then Disapparated away without a word. Mia took no offence, assuming that the house-elf's reluctance to approach her had been for the fact that she was sitting with the Malfoys.

Charlie spoke to Mia away from the table; being Tonks's ex-boyfriend, he kept his distance since her marriage to Remus a year earlier out of a deep understanding of creatures. Remus had assured everyone that he was perfectly fine and had no problem with Charlie, but Bill, effectively the omega wolf of their strange little pack, insisted that his brother remain away from his Alpha's mate, as a matter of respect, if not for anything else.

Bill approached Mia with Fleur at his side almost nervously. "You smell different."

"What Bill *means* to say is he can tell there is something different," Fleur said sweetly, patting her husband on the arm. "I can sense that too."

"I'm Pack," Mia said kindly to Bill. "It's likely you're sensing that. Or, because I'm an Animagus." Several other eyes shot up around the table in surprise. "What? It won't be a secret for long," she said as she took a sip of her butterbeer. "And no, I'm not going to show you my form."

Sirius chuckled beside her.

"Can't believe our little Hermione grew up with the actual Marauders," Fred said as he took a seat across the table from Mia, grinning at her. When their eyes met, he winked, and she laughed.

"Believe it, boys," Sirius said proudly, throwing an arm around her shoulders. "She was an unofficial Marauder herself."

"So, what's your name, then?" George asked.

"Mia." At a shared look from the twins with raised eyebrows, she sighed. "I didn't have one of their silly little Marauder nicknames," she insisted, subtly glaring at Sirius, just daring him to speak.

Fred grinned. "What was that?"

"I think she's playing coy," George said.

Fred leant forward and whispered, "Tell us your secrets."

"I called her Vixen," Sirius said smugly.

Mia swatted at him. "Sirius!"

George laughed. "And how did the lovely *Mia Potter* get *that* nickname?"

Sirius winked. "She's very foxy."

Mia rolled her eyes and turned her attention back to the twins. "I was not in their little boys club, thank you very much," she said emphatically, recalling the early days of the Animagi romps on their way to the Shrieking Shack when Sirius had insisted upon giving her a name like the rest of them.

"Too rule-abiding to mix with the mischief-making Marauders, were you?" Fred asked with a playful grin.

"Hardly. I was *above* them," she said with genuine confidence.

Neither Remus nor Sirius corrected her.

Fred and George gasped. "Lies!"

"Blasphemy!"

"Sacrilege!"

"She's not far off, boys," Remus interrupted them. "Sirius and James caused the most trouble and destruction, but Mia had a talent for producing mass hysteria at Hogwarts."

Sirius chuckled fondly. "Remember the popcorn incident?"

"And Peeves with the butter!"

"Lads," Sirius said, looking back at the twins, "this little witch would give you both a run for your money."

Fred snorted incredulously. "This is Hermione Granger we're talking about?"

"No." Sirius shook his head. "This is *Mia Potter*."

"No offence, love," George said, reaching out and patting Mia's hand consolingly, "but I'll believe that when I see it." Both twins then stood, grinning as they made their way back across the room to presumably tell the hilarious tale to Charlie, who was discussing mating rituals of the Catalonian Fireball dragon with Bill.

"Ginny?" Mia looked down the table to her friend, who had spent the better part of the evening trying to teach Teddy how to say Quaffle while Harry spoon fed him mashed potatoes.

Ginny looked up. "Yeah?"

"Do Fred and George still keep a running batch of Polyjuice Potion at their shop?" Mia asked curiously, instantly drawing the attention of both Remus and Sirius.

"I think so. Keep it around in case of emergencies," Ginny replied. "Sometimes George likes to use it so they can be identical again."

"Do me a favour? Apparate over there and snag me a phial of it."

Despite not knowing what exactly Mia had planned, Ginny grinned and eagerly stood up from the long table, making a subtle yet hasty exit.

"What are you doing?" Remus whispered.

"Making a point." Mia stared across the floor at the twin Marauder wannabes. "My talent was called into question, Remus, and I have to defend myself, don't I?"

Sirius grinned, visibly shivering with anticipation. "Are you doing what I think you're doing?"

"That depends. Tonks, care to help me have a go at Fred and George?"

Green eyes sparkled blue like a shiny aquamarine stone, alight with mischief. "What can I do?"

"Hold still." Mia leant across both Sirius and Remus and pulled two hairs from Tonks's head.

An hour later, the meal was wrapping up, and Mia had excused herself only once, dragging Ginny to the loo where she prepared the potion and left it in her friend's more than capable hands for proper distribution. Once back at the table, she was the perfect picture of calm innocence as she discussed the future with old and new friends.

"Do you have plans now that you've returned, Miss Potter?" Narcissa asked.

"Call me Mia, please, Cissa. We are family, after all."

"Mia, then." The blonde smiled. "I assume you'll not be returning to Hogwarts?"

"No, I plan on merging my two lives into one, and I've requested that Minerva retrieve my previous N.E.W.T.s scores. I have no desire to return to Hogwarts," Mia admitted, much to the shock of several eavesdroppers, including Neville who dropped his fork in surprise at the announcement. She frowned thinking not only of the war and the final battle but of her father, Charlus, who had died on the grounds of Hogwarts. "Many good memories, but plenty of bad ones as well."

"And you're going to continue staying at Black Manor?"

"Grimmauld Place?" Mia nodded. "Yes, until something more suitable presents itself." She made a mental note to find out what happened to Potter Manor after Jamie died. "While I'd like to stay in a family home, I'd rather not have to deal with Walburga's portrait. She was horrible enough in person."

Narcissa smirked knowingly. "I understand the feeling. Malfoy Manor has many unpleasant memories; however, it's still Draco's birth right," she insisted, her eyes casting across the room where the Minister for Magic was speaking with Bill and Percy. "I'd like to reacquire it from the Ministry if only to burn it to the ground and rebuild from scratch. The land, after all, can be easily cleansed."

Mia nodded thoughtfully, turning her body so she could speak easier with Narcissa without shouting. "I'd forgotten that Malfoy Manor was seized," she said, ignoring the way that several people at the table stared at her as though they were waiting for her to break down at the mere mention of the place where she had once been tortured. For Mia, of course, that had been eight years ago. Confronting Bellatrix Lestrange in the past had helped to rid her of the nightmare. "And your vaults?"

"We're currently living off of my personal inheritance from the Black vaults," Narcissa replied, turning her attention to Sirius and smiling softly. "Sirius has been very generous to us."

"I take care of my family," Sirius said firmly, bringing his glass of firewhisky to his mouth as though to end the point right there.

Mia smiled affectionately at him, brushing her fingers against his bearded cheek. "You always have. Still, regardless of what Lucius did with his money and reputation, Narcissa and Draco have a right to what's theirs." She shook her head, adding this to the list of things that was wrong with the Ministry—things she fully intended on bringing up with Kingsley very soon. "Don't worry about a thing, Cissa. Sirius isn't the only one who takes care of his family."

Likely because her words sounded far too much like charity, thus wounding his pride, Draco snapped, "We're just fine, Granger."

"Draco, don't be rude," Narcissa quietly scolded her son.

Whether it was out of respect for his mother or perhaps genuine remorse, Draco gave a reluctant silent nod of apology to Mia.

Mia smiled wryly at them both. "Don't worry about it, Cissa. His petulance has surely become habit by now. I'm afraid there's nothing to be done."

Draco returned her smirk, and Narcissa rolled her eyes, muttering, "We shall see" under her breath.

"Do you plan on returning to Hogwarts, Draco?" Mia asked curiously.

"What on earth for? Once my vaults are returned to me, I plan on taking the Malfoy family seat in the Wizengamot," he insisted, speaking loud enough that perhaps the Minister could overhear, but not so loud as to draw unwanted attention from the rest of the group. "Buildings and castles aren't the only things in need of reconstruction."

"I agree," Mia said, ignoring the choking sound that Ron was making at the end of the table. "I wonder if you'd be willing to help me with a few projects before you become too involved in boring politics."

Draco raised a pale eyebrow with mild interest. "Projects? Calling in that life debt already?"

"Hardly. I plan on saving *that* for a special occasion. No, this project would be mutually beneficial, I assure you," she said, her eyes briefly glancing toward his left forearm

that was currently covered by a well-pressed dress shirt and robes. To drive the point home, she casually scratched at the Mudblood scar on her own left forearm.

Draco's permanent sneer briefly fell away. "You think you can?" he asked quietly.

"It won't be pleasant."

"It wasn't when I received it."

"Several sessions at least—daily."

The blond let out a controlled breath and dipped his head once. "We can start tomorrow if you're available."

"Speaking of scheduling," Narcissa interrupted before Draco got too emotional. "We must do lunch sometime soon. Oh, and shopping. I doubt you had a chance to bring your wardrobe with you from the 1970's."

Mia pouted. "Shame too, I'll miss my bell-bottoms."

Draco scrunched up his nose. "What are bell-bottoms?"

"The greatest Muggle creation since lace knickers," Sirius said with a happy grin on his face. "Trousers that cup a witch's arse almost as good as your own hands." He demonstrated by cupping his hands out in mid-air and squeezing.

Mia shook her head in exasperation, slightly hiding her amused smile. Tonks outright laughed, while Andromeda rolled her eyes. All the wizards at the table appeared to be suddenly very interested in Muggle attire, Draco included.

Narcissa sighed irritably and looked at Mia with great sympathy. "You'll have to make sure he doesn't speak in public much, dear. No interviews, photographs only."

"He does have a very pretty face," Mia said with a smile in her voice before turning back to Narcissa. "I will, of course, take you up on your offer of shopping. I need a lot of new things. I have clothes from before I was sent into the past, of course, but they're not exactly my style any longer. That, and I'd like to get several sets of proper robes. Sirius, I need you to key me into the Gringotts vaults so I can get some things taken care of."

"Anything you want, kitten."

Ron, overhearing the conversation, cleared his throat. "Umm . . . Hermione?"

She turned and looked at her friend. "Hmm?"

"You're going to spend Sirius's money? No offence, but . . . well, you always used to say how much you hated when people relied on money like that," he said, eyeing Draco at the opposite end of the table. "Galleons they didn't earn themselves."

Before either Draco, Harry, or Sirius—all independently wealthy due to being born into money—had a chance to say a word, Mia spoke up. "I went through puberty twice. I *have* earned this," she said with a laugh, and most of the table joined her, though some more than others. "Besides, I'm going to convert my original, or well, *Hermione's* Gringotts vault into a base for charities I plan on starting, and the money I had as Mia Potter was all transferred to Remus upon my 'death'."

Remus winced, and Sirius scratched the back of his head nervously. "Actually . . ."

Mia eyed them both. "What?"

"Well, since you were never *technically* declared dead," Sirius said the word, his jaw twitching, "the Wizengamot put up a fuss when we went to get your estate settled. James wanted to figure everything out before Harry was born. They cut off access to your personal vault to anyone who tried to get in, saying that you could easily be in hiding somewhere."

Her eyes widened. "That doesn't make a difference, I had Remus added to the vault regardless of whether or not I died. It only would become *all* his upon my death. He still should have been granted access to it." When Remus averted her gaze, she glared at him. "Don't even start with me Remus Lupin, it's not bloody charity."

"I know, kitten," Sirius reached out and put a hand on her arm to settle her, "but the Ministry pulled the 'werewolf' card on him."

She sucked in a sharp breath of air. "They did what?"

Before she had a chance to get into the details on how the Ministry was responsible for Remus's poverty despite the insurance she tried to set up for him, Harry shouted, "What the hell?" pointing across the room where Fred and George were now standing, looking at one another with wide grins.

"Forge, your hair is purple!" George said, pointing a finger at his twin.

"Your hair is pink, Gred!"

At the same time, they each turned their fancy-coloured heads and eyed Mia.

"Granger!" George called out.

"Potter!" Fred shouted over to her as they approached the table once again.

"You changed our hair colour? That's hardly impressive. I can do that with a Colovaria Charm."

"So did I," Mia said, casually taking a sip from Sirius's firewhisky. "Granted, it took me a longer time to achieve it the *first* time I came up with it, but I've simplified the potion over the years, casting the Colovaria over the entire brew instead of the individual pieces. All that was left was my secret ingredient," she said, purposely not looking in Tonks's direction.

"Your hair's turning green, Fred!" George said, looking at his brother.

"So's yours, George!"

Mia smiled satisfactorily. "I do love green. On you boys, it looks positively envious. I've always thought it made *me* look rather brilliant."

"Much better than red," Draco chimed in, ignoring Ron, who was glaring at him.

"What's the secret?" George demanded to know.

Mia shrugged her shoulder and stared down at her hands, seemingly to examine her nails. "What do I get for it?"

Fred grinned brightly. "You hear that, brother mine?"

"I think she wants to bargain with us."

She looked up at them, folding her arms down in front of her. "I own the entire patent and collect fifty percent of the profits from all sales of Mood Juice," she said, smiling at the name that the boys had given it decades earlier. "*Then* you can have my recipe."

"Mood Juice?" Fred asked, interested.

"It changes according to us?" George inquired.

Mia smiled in confirmation.

"She used to slip it in the pumpkin juice at breakfast," Remus said with a quiet chuckle. "The whole school would be affected by it for at least an hour. Slytherins were furious."

"Go have a wank and see what happens," Sirius suggested.

"Sirius Black!" Molly snarled at him from across the room.

It was too late, however. Fred and George grinned at one another and rushed out of the tent as fast as their long legs could carry them, one going left as they exited, the other going right.

Ginny made a disgusted face. "Well, at least they went in separate directions."

"This, I believe, is a good time to leave," Narcissa said as she stood, holding out her arms as Draco gently slipped her cloak on her, an expectation bred into him. She smiled down at Mia and kissed her cheeks in farewell. "Owl me this week."

"Potter," Draco said, nodding to Mia. "I'll stop by tomorrow." He gave a nod of farewell to everyone else, sneering toward Ron at the end of the table before turning and escorting his mother out the opening of the marquee.

When Fred and George re-joined the group—six and eight minutes later respectively—each with matching sky-blue hair, they grinned brightly, much to the disgust of several occupants who learnt in their brief absence the colour wheel portion of the charmed potion. The twins did a celebratory dance before sidling up to the long table to sit opposite the two remaining Marauders and the witch who now held their complete devotion.

Fred spoke first. "Thirty percent."

"Fifty," Mia countered.

George shot back with, "Thirty-five."

"Forty-five, and I'll *consider* giving you my recipe for a *currently legal* alternative to Veritaserum that blemishes the face until the affected speaks the truth," she said, remembering the satisfactory moment of a large room filled with lying witches covered in red splotches, all for attempting to ruin Sirius's reputation.

"Done!"

As the night drew on, Mia wanted to return to Grimmauld Place, but any mention of it was quickly brushed aside by Sirius. Equally brushed aside was her hand anytime it came to rest on his thigh. A fact that was quickly becoming very irritating.

"I can't tell you how happy I am to see you alive and well, Mia," Arthur said as he approached Mia with a tender smile. In that moment, she could see both her friend from long ago as well as the father figure she had grown to love over the years. "Of course, I feel a bit foolish for not recognising you."

"Don't feel too bad, Arthur," Sirius insisted. "Not even Snape knew who she was, and she punched him in the face twice."

"You did what?" Molly gasped as she moved to sit down beside her husband, staring across the table at Mia, who did not even look ashamed of her past actions against the surly Slytherin.

"He deserved it. I apologised later. His portrait and I are on decent speaking terms for now."

"But the two of *you* knew?" Arthur asked, gesturing a hand to Sirius and Remus.

"Minerva spelled Hermione at the beginning of each school year so that those who knew Mia would not be able to recognise her. That spell didn't affect Sirius or myself," Remus said. "We're . . . linked."

Arthur signalled his understanding, looking at Sirius and Mia. "Well, I'd imagine so. Though, I'm not sure how *you'd* be . . ." he began to say, looking at Remus as though trying to put the pieces together. To save him the trouble, Mia pulled her collar down to the side, revealing the Pack Mark. Arthur gasped. "Oh!"

"It's not what you think," Mia assured him quietly.

At the same time, Sirius and Tonks both tugged at their collars, revealing the same scar. Tonks's was shaped just slightly different, as Remus had bitten her directly, unlike Sirius who earned his through the shared bond.

"Mate," Tonks said, pointing to herself, and then she gestured to Sirius and Mia. "Pack."

Arthur slowly nodded. "I see. You really should write a book on werewolves, Remus," he said with furrowed brows, returning his attention to Sirius and Mia. "So the two of you are . . . are okay then? I mean, twenty years apart is a long time."

Mia smiled softly and reached for Sirius's hand, glad when he did not brush her aside. "We're catching up quite well." She sighed in contentment when Sirius brought her hand to his mouth, kissing her knuckles.

Arthur turned to Molly, who looked mildly put out at the sight of the affectionate couple. "Molly, is this what you came home so upset about last night?"

"It's—he's just . . ." she said, gesturing her hand to Sirius and, catching Mia's eye, looked down briefly, ashamed of whatever it had been that she had wanted to say. "I'd always hoped for something different, is all. I always thought that Hermione and Ronald would—"

"Absolutely not," Mia said before Molly had a chance to even finish her thought aloud.

Ron scoffed at his mother. "Where'd you get a dumb idea like that?"

Molly narrowed her eyes at him. "Excuse me, young man?"

"Er . . . I just mean . . . I mean maybe a long time ago, I had a thought but not—"

"*Absolutely* not," Mia repeated herself.

Ron scowled at her, his cheeks turning red. "You don't have to say it so loud, you know!"

"Say what so loud?" Fred asked as he re-joined the table, sitting on one side of his parents, across from the Marauders and Mia.

"Why the red face, Ronniekins?" George teased, looking at his youngest brother as he sat down on the other side of Arthur and Molly.

"Nothing," Ron mumbled. "Mum just thought that Hermione and me would end up together."

Fred smiled at Molly. "Oh, Mum."

"Sweet Mum."

"Naive and lovely Mum."

"If Hermione would have *any* Weasley, it would be me," George insisted.

"Or me," Fred countered.

George chuckled and then winked at Mia. "But most likely me."

"Or neither!" Mia said, laughing. "Ever. I'm quite happy where I am right now, thank you."

"Where's that?" Fred asked.

Sirius grinned and put an arm around her, pulling her tight against his side. "With me."

The twins stared at the couple and slowly grinned, their eyes growing large with amusement before settling entirely on Mia.

"Well done, Granger!" George said.

Fred applauded her. "Good on ya, Potter!"

Mia rolled her eyes and looked at Sirius. "I'm slightly disturbed and a little offended that they seem more enthusiastic about me being with you than you being with me."

"What do you expect?" he asked her innocently. "I'm like a god to these two."

"Speaking of which . . ." Mia grinned as a thought occurred to her. "Boys, I'd love to stop by the shop this next week. Remus and Sirius haven't been there yet."

Fred and George stood tall, putting on their 'businessmen posture' before declaring, "Free merchandise for every Marauder!" followed up with, "For the first time. We're still running a business, after all."

"Don't even give discounts to family," George said with a grin when Ron threw him a rude hand gesture behind Molly's back.

"And speaking of family . . ." Fred leant close to Mia. "We have a question. So you're James Potter's sister?"

"Yes."

"Right," George said and looked at Sirius. "And you're Harry's godfather."

"Yes . . ." Sirius replied suspiciously.

"And Harry's always thought of you as a sister," Fred said, looking back at Mia.

"Technically I *am* his sister as well if you think about it. Harry provoked a Familial Bond with me that carried over to Jamie," she explained clearly.

Sirius narrowed his eyes. "Do you lads have a point?"

The twins shared a look and smiled back at the couple for a long moment before George finally blurted out, "When the two of you start having kids, is Harry going to be their Uncle-Brother-Cousin?"

Harry choked on his drink, though no one was certain whether it was the shock over Sirius and Mia potentially procreating or the not-so-subtly noted broken family tree. Remus had a look in his eye that said he was tempted to tell the twins that on a technicality because of Dorea, Sirius and Mia were also second cousins, but Mia silenced him with a stern look.

Once Ginny had sufficiently made sure Harry was able to breathe and the table quieted, Fred asked, "And can we be godfather?"

## Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Five

### *We All Make Choices*

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*Don't wanna hear your sad songs  
I don't wanna feel your pain  
When you swear it's all my fault  
Cause you know we're not the same  
We're not the same, Oh we're not the same  
Yeah the friends who stuck together  
We wrote our names in blood  
But I guess you can't accept that the change is good  
(Ignorance - Paramore)*

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**October 4th, 1998**

Mia fell into what Remus called her grief stage.

Upon waking each morning, she would find Sirius already gone from their shared bed, a disappointing way to rise every day in her opinion. She would distract herself from memories of James and Lily by avoiding Harry first thing in the morning—or at least until she had an hour to remind herself what year she was living in again. Once she felt adjusted, she would spend as much time with Harry as possible, often involving short outings with him, Ron, and Ginny. Wherever they went, they rarely stayed long. Still less than six months since the final battle and Voldemort's destruction, photographers and reporters followed them everywhere. Mia added her anonymity to the many things that she missed from her life in the past.

When she was not at Grimmauld Place or out with her friends, she found herself sitting at Andromeda's home with the Black sisters and Tonks—the remaining female links to the once Noble and Ancient House. They sipped tea, ate biscuits, discussed charities they would like to be involved with, complained about the Ministry, and bragged about their children or, in Mia's case, Crookshanks.

Usually, by the late afternoon, she would find herself overwhelmed, as though trying to hold everything inside all day was breaking her. She would cry in Sirius's arms only to be passed off to Remus or Harry, who would carry her upstairs and rest with her until she cried herself to sleep, stroking her hair and whispering words of love and comfort.

If Teddy was available, she would choose him as a napping partner over everyone else, something that Tonks took great pleasure in poking fun at her husband over. Remus was only slightly put out over being discarded for his own son.

The one bright spot had been when she and Harry escorted Sirius and Remus to Fred and George's shop in Diagon Alley. Both Marauders stared at the old familiar building before bursting into laughter. They smiled with silent amusement as the twins walked them through the shop, showing them around, and even taking them in the back where they kept their more volatile experiments. Mia took a gander at some of their current brews, making mental notes of suggestions to tell them later, while Sirius was busy offering his own advice on their latest line of charmed cloaking robes. When they stayed around to watch Fred and George close up shop for the night, the twins invited everyone upstairs to their flat for a round of butterbeers.

"Can I show you something?" Mia asked once the door to the flat shut behind them.

Fred and George each nodded while Sirius and Remus grinned from behind them.

She reached for one of her vinewood wands, lifting it to tap on the wall above the front door. With mischief in her voice, she said, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

Slowly, much like the Marauder's Map always had, words began to emerge above the doorframe reading:

*Home of Sirius Black, Mia Potter, and Remus Lupin  
Let All Who Enter Leave Laughing*

The twins, for the first time in recorded history, were struck silent. Fred balanced himself against a nearby wall. George dropped his butterbeer.

Sirius patted the boys on the back and said, "I want that copper clawfoot tub back if it's still here."

Despite the momentary jolt of amusement, seeing her old home brought up unwanted memories, and by the end of the first week since returning to 1998—with no job at the Ministry to distract her from the pain like she'd had when Charlus and Mary died nor Hogwarts classes and N.E.W.T.'s preparation when Dorea had passed—Mia forced herself into as many new projects as possible, the most important of which was removing the Dark Mark from Draco.

"How long did it take to put on?" Mia asked him the first day that he had shown up at Grimmauld Place, looking nervous and yet eager to remove the brand from his arm.

"Hours . . . I think. The pain was too much. I blacked out," he admitted bitterly as she took his arm into her hands to examine the Mark up close. "I woke up six days later."

Other than that brief moment, she offered him no pity or even sympathy, which was good because he did not appear to want it. It was one thing to appreciate admiration or even envy, but Pansy Parkinson cooing at him over every injury at Hogwarts for seven years was enough to put Draco off, and the mere suggestion of commiseration was enough to rankle the prickly Slytherin.

They worked to remove the brand using a combination of spells that Mia had learnt from Bill as a Curse-Breaker, mixed with some Permanent Sticking Charms she had been researching in the hopes of removing Walburga from the wall. It appeared, however, that no matter what was done, pain was involved in trying to erase the Dark Mark from Draco's skin.

"I'm fine, Potter," he insisted, glaring at her through the sweat-soaked blond fringe that had fallen in his face.

Draco said that calling her "Potter" had become his second new favourite thing as it always managed to alert a confused Harry, who was still getting used to not being the only Potter left in the world. Draco's *first* new favourite thing in the world was rubbing his new friendship and family connection to Mia in Ron's face.

The Slytherin had already provoked Ron into drawing a wand on him twice in the past week alone. The last time they had needed Sirius and Harry to separate them. Mia would storm in, usually once the fight was over, and lecture everyone involved. Draco, with an eye on Ron the whole time, would offer his sincerest apologies. Not, of course, for fighting, but for causing a disturbance. Ron, in turn, would snap at her for not taking any side which, in his opinion, meant that she had automatically taken Draco's.

"You're not fine; you need a break," Mia insisted as they sat in the basement of Grimmauld Place, Draco's arm tied down to a large metal table so that he would not move as she worked.

The basement turned out to be the best location for what they needed to do, as it was already set up with Silencing Charms and Protective Wards due to it being Remus's transformation room during full moons. Draco could scream—and he did—during the

pain, and angrily throw things—and he did—afterward when the Mark was still not completely gone.

Bitter, Draco unstrapped his arm and pulled it to his chest, hissing at the pain. He glared at Mia, despite knowing that she did not hurt him on purpose.

She handed him the awaiting Pain Relief Potion, which he swallowed immediately.

"What was he like?" Draco blurted out when the silence was not being filled with shared thoughts on Ministry regulations or arguments over the best way to approach Advanced Arithmancy or rune translations.

Mia looked up at Draco, surprised by the question. If there was any one person she had reconnected with since her return who never asked about the past, it was Draco. Sirius and Remus loved to talk about the good old days. Harry wanted to know every detail about his parents. Even Ron asked about the past, though it was usually in reference to whether or not she had ever met Galvin Gudgeon, the current Seeker for the Chudley Cannons, who had apparently attended Hogwarts three years ahead of her.

But Draco never asked. Not about the past, and certainly not about Lucius. Not until now.

"He was a bastard," she said without filtering any of the truth. "Originally, I thought he was a lot like you'd been the first few years. He picked on the younger years, held his prefect badge as authority to do what he wanted, which meant being cruel to even those in his own House."

She noted the look of distaste on Draco's face. If there was any one redeeming quality about the younger Malfoy in the early days of their Hogwarts attendance it was that, while awful to everyone else, Draco was abundantly loyal to Slytherins.

"It wasn't until he and Narcissa were betrothed that things really took a bad turn. Sirius suspected it for a while and tried to talk her out of marrying him, but with what happened to Andromeda . . . Lucius tried to kill her, you know . . . your mother."

"She told me." Draco nodded angrily, clenching his right fist into a tight ball. "What about Snape?"

Mia quirked her lips. "He was a first-class prat. But he wasn't a monster. He wasn't like Lucius. There were some Death Eaters I went to school with back then . . . you could tell they didn't want to be a part of it," she said thinking of Snape and Regulus and the

obvious looks of horror they each started to wear during the last year she spent in the castle, when the war really took a turn for the worse.

"Who *would?*" he asked, sneering down at his arm that was now a blistering red surrounding the slightly fading Dark Mark. "I only did it because . . . because Snape said that I could . . ."

"You're likely the only Death Eater in the history of time that joined the cause in order to take it down," she said proudly. "Not even Snape could say that, and he was a spy for twenty years. I didn't like Snape growing up. He was mean to my friends, though they were mean to him as well. But despite being as cold as he was, he was good at his core.

"We don't get to choose who we are born to. I was lucky enough to get two sets of parents, and I loved them both equally. I don't think of Charlus and Dorea Potter any less than I do of Richard and Helen Granger. In a way, I got to choose who my parents were. If you want my opinion," she offered, grinning at the way he rolled his eyes at her. "And I know you rarely do . . . You were raised by a wonderful mother, and a very devoted godfather," she said, leaving it at that. "Snape set a good example for you, and I happen to think it was very brave, what you did."

He scowled at her.

"Dare I say . . . very Gryffin—"

"Watch it," Draco warned.

Mia laughed.

The door at the top of the stairs opened, and Ron rushed down the stairs wearing his Auror training robes and carrying a book in his hand. "There you are, 'Mione," he said with relief, his blue eyes looking at Draco and glowering. "Oh, you're here."

"What's wrong?" Mia asked as she stood up, moving in front of Draco to obscure Ron's view of his red and blistered forearm. "Is everything okay?"

"What?" Ron asked. "Yeah, I was just—"

"Because I asked to be left alone with Draco for the next hour," she said, using as polite a tone as she could manage. "So if it can wait—"

"Well, I was just . . . I've got a concealment exam with Savage tomorrow morning, y'see, and just thought that you'd be able to show me how to do a few things. I've got a list here I'm supposed to—"

"I'd be fine with watching what you've learnt and offering any advice, but not until later," she said, cutting him off before he really began to assume that she had the time to teach him things he should be relying on his trainers to do. "I still have a lot to do here with Draco, and I promised to meet with Narcissa about getting the paperwork put together to lift the restrictions on the Malfoy vaults."

Ron's expression immediately turned sour. "So a couple of Malfoys are more important than me now?"

"No," she said clearly though her patience was already being tested. "But since this is your exam for your career, and I'm not even an Auror, what I'm doing is currently more important to me. If you need help why don't you ask Harry?"

"They've got us on different schedules, and since he's taken a temporary leave, he's already behind."

"Then Tonks?"

"She's at work."

"Fine, go and ask Sirius. He was an Auror, and he can help you, I'm sure."

"Sirius was an Auror?" Ron asked. "Okay, but . . . he just left. C'mon, 'Mione, just mess about with the ferret another time. You see him every bloody day."

"No!" Pent-up memories of her first time through Hogwarts came rushing back to her in a flood. "What I'm doing with Draco is more important than playing catch up with your education and work because you're always too lazy to do it on your own the first time!"

Ron's eyes widened. "Oi! I'm not lazy! If Sirius used to be an Auror, I bet you bloody helped *him*!"

"As a matter of fact, I didn't. Because I didn't *have* to. I didn't help him with his homework at Hogwarts, either. Somehow, despite all the wonderful stories about pranking and troublemaking that Sirius and Remus love to regale you and your brothers with, they actually managed to squeeze in revising, writing essays, Quidditch, and getting to the top of our class all without ever once whining for my help or copying my notes!"

Ron's face turned red.

Draco laughed.

The noise drew Ron's attention, and he snarled. "And you. I know what you're down here making her do. If you ask me, I think it's bollocks that she's removing it."

Draco glared back at Ron and stood. "For the record, weasel, I didn't fucking ask her for anything, and my business is none of yours."

"Ron, get out," Mia said, her words final, her tone cold and calm.

"You're really picking him over me?" Ron gaped at her in shock. "After everything he did? I don't care if he was a bloody spy, or so he says, he watched you get tortured in his own house and didn't lift a finger to do a thing until it was his own mother who was threatened!"

Draco reached for his wand, but Mia stayed his hand.

"We can't all be Harry Potter and save everyone," she said quietly. "Do you know what it's like to stand back and watch someone else die, knowing you had to make a choice to do nothing? Draco made a choice. We all make choices."

Draco had chosen to finally break his cover and kill Lucius in defence of Narcissa. It had taken the threat to his own mother for him to finally snap, and Mia did not hold it against him that he did not break for her sake. Just like Draco, Mia knew that she had once made a choice: to stand back and watch, knowing that James and Lily would die if she did nothing to stop it. But Mia had made the choice—she had chosen Harry.

"He's got a history of making some pretty fucked up choices." Ron glared at Draco. "I can't believe you're choosing to be friends with the likes of him."

"I'm not choosing to be *friends* with him, I'm choosing to acknowledge him as family."

"He's a Slytherin!"

"So was my mother!"

"Not your *real* mother . . ." Ron started to say, rolling his eyes, but then he caught up to his words and winced.

Unlike the Hermione he knew, she did not huff and stomp her heel like she always had when he stuck his foot in his mouth. Mia did not yell or storm away from him and cry until he had the opportunity to come and mumble out an apology.

She just looked at him with an expressionless glance as though they were strangers.

He felt like a stranger.

"I grieved you, you know," she said softly. "When I didn't know if I'd ever make it back here, I grieved for the loss of our friendship. I was so sad. But then Sirius would say something funny, and Remus would smile at me, and Jamie would wrap me in a great big

hug. I mourned the loss of you years ago, Ronald. Something tells me that it won't hurt as much this time around."

His face paled. "'Mione, you don't mean—?'"

"Leave. Grow up. Don't speak to me again until you do," she said coolly. "If you never do, I don't believe I'll find it in me to care very much. I've grown to have a strong distaste for prejudice, but more than that, I greatly dislike cowardly Gryffindors who enviously rely on the abilities of their friends and betray and abandon them when it seems fitting."

His eyes widened, and he swallowed hard. "You don't mean . . . I'm nothing like—"

"Goodbye, Ron," she said and then turned to retake her seat at the table, reaching for her notes and wand to get back to work on Draco's Dark Mark.

Slowly, in shock and shame, Ron turned and made his way back up the stairs, quietly closing the door behind him.

"I'm not going to thank you for defending me," Draco insisted after several minutes of silence had gone by.

"I know," she said. "I also appreciate you not interrupting me. I'm sure it took a lot of effort not to be an absolute smartarse to him just now."

Draco shrugged. "It'll be more fun rubbing salt in his wounds later, once he thinks he's gotten over it."

Mia shook her head in exasperation.

"You're really not Granger anymore, are you?" he asked curiously, his eyes focused on her face as though he could see through the Polyjuice Potion if she had taken any.

"I used to be. A part of me still is. That life is like . . . like *déjà vu*. A dream I once had, and now I'm seeing bits and pieces of it in real life."

Draco bobbed his head, and with not another word spoken between them, he put his arm back on the table and stiffened as she strapped it down and raised her wand once more.

It had taken another hour to make headway with Draco's Mark, and she had been too exhausted afterward to meet with Narcissa and cancelled their appointment. Despite emotionally closing herself off to Ron and essentially cutting him out of her personal life until he decided to make changes for the better, she was tired from their encounter. By the

time she and Draco left the basement, all the residents of Grimmauld Place, Ginny and the Lupins included, knew what had transpired between Mia and Ron.

Sirius looked enraged and Remus concerned. Harry simply wrapped his arms around her and hugged her tight like he used to do when they were younger, like his father used to do as well, and suddenly the world was a little brighter.

Still, she called it an early day and crawled into bed, bringing a photo album with her so she could look back at old pictures of herself with the younger versions of Remus and Sirius. She watched a particular photograph, taken of Lily and James in the Gryffindor common room at the end of their seventh year. James held a Quidditch Cup in his hands proudly, kissing it while Lily feigned jealousy over the massive trophy. Mia smiled at the sight and chuckled softly to herself.

There was motion in the photograph and there, in the back, behind the central couple she could see herself and Sirius snogging on the staircase that led to the boys' dormitory. Mia had her fingers threaded through Sirius's hair, kissing him with utter abandon while his hand skimmed its way up the front of her shirt. Meanwhile James and Lily smiled on for the camera, completely unaware of the lecherous act being committed behind them.

Mia narrowed her eyes briefly at the photograph, wondering why this older version of Sirius Black was suddenly so distant from her. The first night she returned, he had been filled with desperate passion, kissing her and rubbing against her, pinning her to the wall with barely a thought of the onlookers behind them. Since then, however, he had pulled away. They kissed, slept in the same bed, and he was never shy about whispering his love and devotion in her ear, but the moment she truly reached for him, aching to touch him and have him touch her, he withdrew.

None of it made sense.

The Sirius she had lived with nineteen years ago could never get enough of her. He was an addict of many things, and she was at the top of his list of vices, just as he was hers. She even remembered her life as Hermione, and her first kiss with the older Sirius in the middle of a battle. He had kissed her with a complete lack of restraint, pulling her into his lap and taking control, tasting her mouth and nibbling at her lips while his hands explored her body.

So what changed?

"Hey, kitten." Sirius smiled at her as he walked into their room, practically jumping onto his side of the bed where he wrapped his arms around his pillow and yawned loudly. "What're you looking at?"

She showed him the picture. It took several moments before he caught sight of the pair of them in the background and barked a laugh. "You were insatiable."

"Still am," she said, testing the waters.

Sirius stared at her for a long second and then smiled, leaning forward and kissing her briefly on the lips before rolling over. "Goodnight, love," he said and closed his eyes to fall asleep.

She glared at his back.

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### **October 5th, 1998**

Remus's Floo erupted in green flames, and an irate Mia Potter stepped into the old Lupin Cottage, her wild mane of long curls flying behind her as she stormed into his kitchen where he was reading the *Daily Prophet*.

Mia rolled through the room, snatching up Remus's mug of tea and taking a drink, then gagging and rushing to the sink to spit it out. "Ugh!"

"Now you know why I eat at your place so often," Remus muttered unapologetically.

"Merlin, I knew you were bad at Potions, Remus, but it's tea." She winced and grabbed the nearby kettle, dumping out the contents before refilling it with water to start a new batch.

"Dora made that," Remus said with a smirk. "I don't have the heart to tell her it's crap."

Mia smiled slyly. "Happy wife, happy life."

Remus nodded and touched his index finger to the tip of his nose. "So, what's wrong with you this morning? Not that I don't enjoy your company, but I wasn't expecting to see you until later tonight for moonrise."

Mia gestured absentmindedly. "I'm still planning on that. You went too many years spending the moon alone, I'm determined to never let that happen again. But I needed to talk to someone, and Harry wouldn't understand, and either Ginny or Tonks would just . . . make things worse, I think."

"What's going on?" he asked with concern, folding up the paper and setting it aside.

"Sirius won't have sex with me."

Remus sighed dramatically and picked the paper back up. "Sometimes I really hate how you and I can talk about anything with each other. Charlus should have instilled boundaries in you to counteract all that open confidence that Dorea taught."

Mia fell into the chair beside him. "I'm serious, Remus! I've been back for two weeks, and he barely touches me. This is a problem!"

He groaned and put down his paper, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Fine, I'll play along. Have you talked about this with him?"

"I've been trying to, but he either changes the subject, ignores me, or shifts into Padfoot and runs out the door."

Remus rolled his eyes. "That's mature of him."

"I don't get it, Remus. Is there something wrong with me? Did he change his opinion of me over the years? Was he more in love with . . . with *Hermione* than he is with me? Does he want her back? Do you think he sees me and sees the age difference . . . like, like I'm a child or something? I miss him. What do I need to do?"

Remus shook his head and sighed, reaching out and patting the top of her head. "Maybe when he wakes up, you should pour him a cup of coffee and say good morning."

Clearly realising when she was being condescended to, Mia's mouth fell open in shock.

Remus sat back in his chair with a smirk. "From what I recall from living with the two of you twenty years ago, that's all it took for the sanctity of a kitchen to be defiled."

## Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Six

### *Happiest Loser*

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*And I'm all mixed up, feeling cornered and rushed  
They say it's my fault but I want her so much  
Wanna fly her away where the sun and rain  
Come in over my face, wash away all the shame  
When they stop and stare - don't worry me  
'Cause I'm feeling for her what she's feeling for me  
I can try to pretend, I can try to forget  
But it's driving me mad, going out of my head  
(All the Things She Said - Tatu)*

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**October 6th, 1998**

The full moon was spent in the basement of number twelve alongside Padfoot and the little fox, who was now being called Vixen. Despite being able to avoid the nickname for years among the Marauders, Ginny and Tonks thought it was adorable, and they were not *nearly* as afraid of Mia as Sirius and Remus had been as teenagers.

With his head between his paws, Moony's attention flickering back and forth across the basement, while Padfoot and Vixen battled for dominance. For as much dancing around one another as the pair had been doing since her return—and, according to Mia, that included in the bedroom—their Animagi sides gave them each a bit of a reprieve from whatever issues Sirius was dealing with. Padfoot, desperate to play, did just that while Vixen, a little more pent-up than usual, bit and scratched and quite viciously attacked him in return.

Moony pretended to be bored, too mature for their antics, but in reality, it was the best full moon he'd had in nineteen years.

When Dora came to collect Remus the following morning, she found him sitting up in the corner of the room, a blanket wrapped around his body. He felt healthier than ever—despite the pain of his transformation the night before—and there was not a single scratch or bruise on his body.

Sirius and Mia, however, were curled around one another on the floor, exhausted from not sleeping a wink during the night; both were covered in bites, scrapes, and other abrasions.

"You all right, love?" Dora whispered, stepping slowly over the sleeping couple to hand her husband a Pain Relief Potion.

Remus nodded. "Oh, *I'm* perfectly fine."

"And *them*?" She curiously eyed the way that Sirius had a possessive arm wrapped around Mia's body—an arm that was covered in a showering of tiny sharp puncture marks. "What the hell did they get up to?"

Remus scoffed. "If we're lucky, last night was foreplay."

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### **October 12th, 1998**

Sirius and Mia went the next week without mentioning the full moon or what their Animagi alter-egos had gotten up to. The pair went around pretending that they did not even recall the events, showing only concern for Remus the following day and then not saying a word more in regards to the night in question.

Mia spent her days testing Sirius's boundaries and trying to purposely provoke him, while he subtly avoided her advances. Shy flirtations had never been something the couple had gone through. Sirius had only been eleven when the physical affection had begun. And despite it being completely innocent, he was only twelve the first time he had slept in her bed. By the time they even acknowledged more than friendly feelings for one another when they were teenagers, it was all harsh and rough and heated.

Sirius and Mia had never been calm little bluebell flames in jars. They were Fiendfyre and nothing less—easily conjured and impossible to control.

Mia would place her palm on his thigh during dinner; Sirius would react by holding her hand within his own. Mia would kiss his neck in the early morning before he woke; Sirius would roll over, kiss her forehead, and then get up for the day. Mia would corner him in any room of the house and get as close as possible; Sirius would find a reason to leave.

Subtlety was no longer an option. When she yelled for him from the bathroom to ask if he could bring her the towel she had purposely left on the bed, Sirius levitated it into the room instead of walking in himself.

Now it was war.

Mia made her way down the stairs to the kitchen and the wonderful smells of breakfast. A grin washed over her face as she saw a large platter filled with delicious treats. Harry and Sirius sat side-by-side around the small circular table with their plates half-empty, sharing the *Daily Prophet* between them. It was such a peaceful sight—the perfect moment of familial domesticity, and she almost hated to break it up.

*Almost.*

"Morning," she said as she walked up behind Sirius, leaning forward and kissing his cheek. "Harry, did you cook *all* of that? It looks wonderful! I'm starving." She walked over to hug him and kiss his cheek in greeting as well, snatching up a piece of streaky bacon before turning and walking to the stove, reaching for the kettle.

Harry grinned, basking in the early morning praise. "Help yourself."

"Mia?" Sirius asked suspiciously.

She smirked as she poured her tea with her back to him. When she turned around, her sly grin was replaced by an innocent smile, something that should have been a large warning sign. "Yes, love?"

His grey eyes were dark as he stared at her, raking his gaze over her body. "Where'd you find those?" he asked, gesturing to the pair of tight-fit denim bell bottoms she was wearing.

"Do you like them? I know they're not in style anymore, but I really missed my old clothes, so I transfigured a pair of jeans." She turned again, dropping the spoon she was using to stir sugar in her tea, and innocently bent over to retrieve it. It was only through her vulpine hearing that she was able to detect the slight whimper that escaped Sirius's throat.

"Did my mum dress like that?" Harry asked innocently, completely unaware of what was actually happening in the kitchen between his best friend and godfather.

Mia stood back upright and smiled at him, purposely ignoring the way that Sirius's breathing had increased. "Absolutely. Lily and I would go into Muggle London all the time and go shopping. Sirius, would you like some *coffee*?" she asked him, her eyes connecting with his stare for a second longer than would be considered normal.

He tossed her a questioning glance and then narrowed his eyes just slightly. "I'm good, kitten, thank you."

"At least have some *tea* then," she insisted, pouring him a cup. "I know it's been years for you since we lived together in Diagon Alley, and many things have changed since then, but I remember how much you just *loved* a good, hot, sweet cup of *tea* every morning," she said, a sly smile crossing her lips as she set the cup down in front of him.

With his eyes still on her, Mia reached for a piece of toast already covered in marmalade and took a bite, chewed, swallowed, and then innocently noticed the leftover sticky substance on her finger and, slowly, sucked it off.

"Do you like your *tea*?" she asked with a challenging tone.

Sirius stared at her suspiciously and then blinked down at the cup of tea, wondering if she had slipped something in it. He knew that Mia detested the thought of Love Potions, but if she *was* playing at something—and she very clearly was—she would be more likely to slip him Mood Juice than Amortentia.

"Thank you," he said sweetly, and she beamed brightly, simpering at him like a besotted idiot, as though his thanks were all she needed to sustain her throughout the day.

She took a seat beside Harry and set out to filling a plate with a variety of food, ignoring Sirius completely when he brought the teacup to his mouth and took a sip. He let the liquid roll across his tongue, picking out the flavours, watching her as she bit into another piece of bacon and reached for the discarded *Daily Prophet*. She was *purposefully* not looking at him, the minx.

"Is your memory all right, love?"

"Perfectly, why?" she asked, still not making eye contact.

"Because you've always known how I take my tea. *Always*. With *sugar*," he pointed out as he raised the cup. "This has *honey* in it."

"I thought it would be a nice surprise." Her smile was wholesome, but her *gaze*, however, was hard and fierce like a determined lion. When she stuck her tongue out to lick at her bottom lip, he could practically see it forked at the end. "Don't you like *honey*, Sirius?"

"It's fine," he said slowly, waiting to see if she really had slipped him a potion. Would his hair fall out? His cock shrink? His skin turn orange?

"Strange." She pursed her lips. "Maybe there *is* something wrong with my memory. I remember you saying, on multiple occasions, how you just *loved* the taste of honey, and you couldn't ever get enough of it."

*"How does she taste, Moony?" Sirius had whispered huskily, in the heat of the moment as the two wizards prepared the little witch for the Pack Marking, each dipping their toes in voyeurism and exhibitionism.*

*Remus had mumbled, "Like honey."*

*Sirius had replied with a dark grin, eyes full of hunger, "I know."*

He felt cold and hot all at once, immediately regretting letting Tonks talk him into buying jeans that were form-fitting. His cock strained painfully against the metal zip, and he mentally kicked himself for not wearing pants that day. If she had any other tricks up her sleeve before lunch, he would end up scratching his knob for certain.

When he swallowed hard, Sirius could swear that her eyes sparkled.

"Thank you for breakfast, Harry." Mia smiled as she stood, finishing off her cup of tea. "It was lovely and just the thing I needed to start my day. I'm going to finish cleaning out my old room and moving stuff into our bedroom. Care to assist me, Sirius?"

He stared at her for a long moment before his eyes defiantly narrowed again. "Actually, I was going to work on my bike today. Remus is coming over to help," he said, grinning as he noticed the sudden tick in her jaw. "Guy things. You understand, don't you, kitten?"

"Of course, *love*," she replied, putting more sweetness on the endearment than was ever necessary. "Maybe I'll invite Tonks and Ginny over. Have some girl time. I'm sure they'd both love to hear some stories about what Hogwarts was like in the seventies."

Though her words were covered in sugar, Sirius caught the obvious threat.

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"Sorry, I'm late!" Ginny said as she rushed out the front door of number twelve to find Tonks and Mia sitting on the steps, mugs of warm tea in their hands as they stared out toward the street. She blinked in confusion and sat down. "I know you're both older than me, but please tell me you've not reached an age where sitting on the porch has become how we spend the afternoon."

Mia and Tonks both grinned and gestured ahead toward the street where Sirius and Remus were each kneeling on one side of Sirius's motorbike.

"They've been at this for almost two hours," Mia said with a smirk.

The men were covered in sweat and motor grease, wearing Muggle jeans and tight white—but now stained—t-shirts. Sirius's long black hair had been pulled back away from his eyes into a knotted ponytail, though a few strands had sprung loose, clinging to his neck. He wiped his forearm across his brow to remove the sweat that beaded there.

Mia grinned. Well-hidden by the Muggle-Repelling Charm on the house, she subtly removed her wand and flicked it toward the wizards.

"What did you do?" Ginny asked curiously.

Tonks giggled. "She's been casting a Warming Charm on them every ten minutes, slowly increasing the temperature. They're so preoccupied with fixing that bike, they haven't even noticed."

"What's wrong with the bike?"

Mia slipped her wand back into her pocket. "They came out to change the oil, but when Sirius went to take it for a ride, it wouldn't start."

"How much longer do you think they'll be?"

"Two wizards playing Muggle mechanic?" Mia chuckled. "They'll be here all day."

Ginny shook her head and laughed, more than likely recalling her father's attempt at fixing Muggle toys and gadgets in the shed. "You'd think that Sirius would have figured out how to fix that thing considering how often he talks about it."

"Oh, he knows how to rebuild the entire engine if he'd ever need to," Mia informed her. "While Remus, Lily, and I were studying Ancient Runes and Arithmancy, Sirius was reading that bike's manual from front to back. He and Jamie rebuilt the engine at least once every six months. Unfortunately for my *sweet* Sirius, he hasn't figured out yet that I cast a Stasis Charm on the engine twenty minutes before they came outside. That bike won't turn on until I aim my wand and say *Finite*."

Ginny outright laughed, throwing her head back and briefly drawing the attention of the irritated men near the motorbike. At the sudden attention from the wizards, Mia and Tonks smiled and waved.

"Need any help, love?" Mia called out.

Sirius scoffed loudly and ignored her.

She grinned in reply and re-cast the Warming Charm once more, increasing the temperature by just a degree or two before pocketing her wand again.

"Not that this isn't brilliant, Hermione, but is there a reason the two of you are torturing your wizards?" Ginny asked.

"Mia thinks that Sirius is purposely trying to not have sex with her," Tonks said.

"It started off as something genuine, and I'm not sure what," Mia said with annoyance. "But after this morning, I can tell he's avoiding me on purpose, trying to get a rise out of me while pretending that I haven't *obviously* gotten one out of him."

Tonks laughed. "He'll have a hard time hiding that in *those* jeans. You're welcome for that, by the way."

"Merlin bless Muggle fashions," Ginny said thoughtfully.

When Sirius stood up in frustration, Mia grinned. "Oh, here we go."

He began cursing under his breath about the "piece of shit bike" and the "Merlin damned heat" followed by an annoyed "it's bloody October for fuck's sake!" before reaching for the hem of his shirt and ripping it over his head, wiping the sweat and grease from his face off on the fabric.

Mia smiled victoriously at the sight of her angry, tattooed wizard, shirtless and sweaty. "He doesn't want to touch me? Fine. I'll get my enjoyment at his expense in other ways. I'll take care of myself with this visual."

Ginny, meanwhile, had stood up and rushed back into the house. With the front door cracked open slightly, both Tonks and Mia could hear her scream, "Harry! Put on your Muggle clothes! Sirius wants to teach you how to fix his bike!"

The two older witches on the porch burst into laughter.

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### **October 13th, 1998**

Sirius stepped out of the fireplace at the Den to find his best friend sitting in an armchair with a book in hand.

Remus quirked a curious eyebrow and set the novel down on the table beside him. "Everything okay, Pads?"

Sirius sighed in frustration and ran a hand through his hair before finally blurting out, "Mia wants me to have sex with her."

Remus looked like he was struggling to not roll his eyes. "I'm pretty sure I've only been able to help you with that once," he said while smirking, "and, granted it was amazing, but I'm quite happily married now. You, most certainly, can handle this one on your own."

Sirius narrowed his eyes. "Shut up, Moony. I don't know what to do!"

"It's been that long, has it? Should I draw you a diagram? Step-by-step checklist? I seem to remember she really liked it when either of us—"

"How long are you going to be an asshole before helping me?" Sirius asked, his nose twitching from impatience.

"Just a few more minutes, I assure you, but I reserve the right to be an asshole if the situation presents itself again." When Sirius whined, Remus laughed and gestured to the sofa for him to take a seat. "So, why do you not know what to do? You've been waiting for her for twenty years, Padfoot. I thought you'd have jumped at the chance to bring her back to your bed the first night she came home."

"Well, I couldn't exactly do that with her crying over Prongs right off, now could I?"

Remus nodded thoughtfully. Dora had forced him to take Dreamless Sleep for the first week following Mia's arrival, as he was having nightmares about his best friend pleading with him to send her back to the past, tears in her eyes. "I suppose not," he said with a frown until something occurred to him. "Wait, didn't the two of you have sex the night you found out *your* brother died?"

Sirius waved the question off. "I tried to. Can't remember if she actually let me. Besides, it's a completely different situation. I thought Regulus was a little prick at the time, and we were also completely pissed."

"Then why not drink yourselves stupid and have at it?" Remus offered. "I'm not one to normally suggest you drink any more than you already do, but if history has taught me anything, it's that the two of you have a habit of falling into old patterns."

Sirius snorted. "Don't think she hasn't tried."

Remus raised a brow in surprise. "*Mia* tried getting *you* drunk?"

"Last night. Firewhisky."

"Is she aware that the task is near impossible?"

"Apparently not," Sirius answered. "My drinking talents—"

"Alcoholism," Remus corrected.

"—weren't fine-tuned until after Mia disappeared."

"So, what happened when she figured out that you can't exactly get drunk on firewhisky anymore?" Remus asked.

Sirius had the grace to look slightly ashamed of himself. "She never figured it out. She was drinking with me and passed out." Before Remus had a chance to scold him, he held his hands up in surrender. "I knew what she was doing, and I had Sober-Up Potions at the ready just in case. After she fell out of her chair, I took her up to her old room and tucked her in bed. She woke up with a hangover and threw a teacup at my head and then called me an asshole," he said with a smile. "She's adorable."

Remus shook his head. "I'll never understand the two of you. When *I* dated her, she was nothing but sweet and romantic. How you're able to bring out the violent and angry side of her and still survive, I'll never know."

Sirius grinned mischievously and waggled his brows. "I happen to *like* that side of her."

"If that's the case, then why is the love of your life trying to *trick you* into having sex with her?"

Sirius's previous grin fell from his face. "Well, at first it was because of Prongs, and then letting her get settled back into this life, and then of course I had to deal with Harry and what he might think," he said, sighing loudly. "Merlin forbid I forget a Silencing Charm, right?"

"And after Harry said he was fine with it?"

"Well . . . Then it became a bit of a game, trying to avoid her advances, see how drastic she gets. Tease her a little, and see if she breaks first. But now *she's* winning the game."

Sirius could never understand how easily Remus was able to convey "You're an idiot" with just a look.

"I'm pretty sure you're *both* losing right now."

Sirius nodded remembering how the day had gone so far. After Mia's angry outburst that morning, she disappeared into her old room for hours. Sirius and Harry had eventually sat down for lunch, talking about old Auror regulations compared to the new system that Kingsley was installing in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Neither had noticed when Mia came down the stairs, making her way to the kitchen.

*"What is it with witches wearing their wizard's Quidditch jerseys?" Harry asked with a laugh.*

*Sirius drew his attention to Mia, who was leaning against the counter wearing his old red and gold Quidditch jersey and a pair of shorts. She answered Harry, but Sirius did not hear any part of their conversation as his attention was drawn to the small carton of strawberry ice cream in her hands.*

*"Ice cream for lunch?" Harry asked her. "Aren't you the one always telling me I need to eat real food and not just sugar for meals?"*

*"Yes, but I had a particular . . . craving," she said, her focus falling on Sirius as she began to walk out of the kitchen.*

*Harry called after her, confused over her strange behaviour. "Not going to put it in a bowl?"*

*"No," Mia called back. "I'll just eat it out of the carton . . . or figure something else out."*

*Sirius's fingers clenched painfully at the edge of the table as a flood of memories assaulted his mind, and along with that, the nostalgic taste of strawberries, cream, and the tangy, honey-flavoured taste of her.*

*He turned his head to spot the witch standing in the doorway, smiling at him innocently, a carton of ice cream in one hand, her wand in the other. His eyes raked over her body, starting at her bare feet and moving up over her legs and the curve of her hips.*

*She was turned slightly so he could see the name 'BLACK' written on the back of the jersey.*

*The feeling of possessiveness was overwhelming and his resolve was beginning to crack; the need to see his name branded on her thigh was becoming almost necessary to his survival. He swallowed hard at the way she was looking at him, ever the picture of innocence, but Sirius knew better. Sirius knew exactly what she was doing.*

*And Sirius Black would not break.*

*"Have fun, kitten," he said, effectively dismissing her.*

*Her amber eyes flashed with ire, and, very briefly, Sirius thought he had won the battle. That is, until she silently tapped her wand on the edge of her shoulders, changing the red and gold of the jersey to green and silver.*

*His eyes widened, and he growled at the sight, causing her to grin, laugh, and leave the room in triumph.*

Remus stared at him after hearing the entire tale before finally saying, "You two are idiots."

"She's nineteen, Moony."

"She was the same age as us growing up," Remus said. "There's nothing wrong with it."

"She was the same age as us growing up, but now she's still nineteen and I'm—"

"Technically, she's lived for twenty-seven years."

"Fine, but she's still got the body of a nineteen-year-old!"

"I'd have thought you would be pleased with that," Remus said with a teasing smile.

"Wait. Is *that* what this is? Are you looking at her and thinking of . . . of *Hermione*? I thought you and Hermione were close . . ."

"No," Sirius answered. "I've never thought about her as Hermione, not like *that*. I mean, not when she was only fourteen. Thankfully, I was never around her much. Plus, she had really big front teeth. Even though it was kind of adorable, it distracted me a bit because Mia never had that. She ever explain the teeth thing to you?"

Remus inclined his head. "Mia had Pomfrey fix her overbite when she took the De-Ageing Potion."

Sirius chuckled. "How superficial. I'm going to tease her later for that."

"I'm sure she'll enjoy you making fun of her childhood insecurities while simultaneously rejecting her sexual advances," Remus said sarcastically. "Good plan. Well done, Padfoot."

Sirius frowned again, reminded of why he had come to Remus for help in the first place. "I'm old. What if she doesn't . . . ? What if I can't . . . ?"

Remus sighed and sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "You're the same age as I am, and I'm perfectly capable of shagging a woman senseless." When Sirius did not react to the humorous bait, he sighed. "My witch is much younger than myself as well. You and I aren't so different, Pads."

Sirius refused to make eye contact, subconsciously scratching at the raised scar in the centre of his chest. "But what Azkaban did to me physically—"

"Was just as devastating as thirty plus years of monthly transformations as a werewolf."

Sirius bowed his head in agreement but then muttered, "Moony, it's been almost eighteen years since I've had sex."

"My dry spell lasted nineteen years. Do you want to keep playing this game? Because I am more than capable and, unlike whatever it is you and Mia are playing at, I'll win this," Remus said confidently.

Sirius looked up in surprise. "You went *nineteen years*? Wait, so before you married my cousin, the last woman you were with was . . ."

"The *only* other woman I've ever been with," Remus replied.

"Holy shit."

"Are you done with your pity party yet?"

Sirius thought about it for a second and then shrugged. "Not entirely. Just taking a moment to celebrate *yours* with you."

"*I'm* not the one pitying myself," Remus insisted with a chuckle. "I have a fit wife due home any minute. In fact, I'm not entirely sure why I'm still lounging around with you instead of waiting for her."

Sirius tugged at the silver chain around his neck.

Remus sighed at the sight and stopped laughing. "Pads . . ."

"The last time I was with her I was almost twenty. I was in prime condition. Not covered in scars and wrinkles and grey hair."

"You don't have grey hair."

"It's likely on its way," Sirius muttered petulantly. "How do you keep the wolf . . ." he tried to speak but the words caught in his throat. "It's been so long, and Azkaban broke me. I'm afraid I'm going to hurt her."

Remus frowned at him. "You're not a monster, Sirius."

"Neither are you."

"So they say."

"The last time I was with her, I was a kid. I was an Auror, well-respected," Sirius said and, at Remus's raised eyebrow, he corrected, "*slightly* respected. I'd only ever killed one person and that was in the middle of a battle. Now . . ." He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I'm tainted and broken, and I'm afraid if I touch her I won't be able to stop, and I'll . . ."

Remus stood up and walked over to sit down beside his friend, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Sirius, Mia loves you. I can see it in her eyes. I saw it in her eyes years ago when she took me down into that Pensieve. She watched the memory of you, *this* you," he said, gesturing to Sirius, "with the same look on her face that she had any time you'd walk into the common room."

Sirius grimaced bitterly, looking away from his friend. "Still, if *I* give in first then *she* wins."

"Then you still get to have sex with her, you bloody idiot! You'll be the happiest fucking loser in Britain. Your whinging is making my cock want to shrivel up. Get out of my house before Dora comes home! One look at your pitiful face, and she's liable to lose an interest in shagging me for a month."

"You're a little moody there Moony, has it been a while?" Sirius asked with a smirk. "Teddy keeping you both up at night instead of keeping each other up?"

"I'll remind you of this moment when you and Mia have kids."

Sirius barked a laugh at Remus's expense and stepped through the Floo, vanishing in a swirl of green flames.

## Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Seven

### *Let Go*

---

*You are my sweetest downfall  
I loved you first, I loved you first  
Beneath the sheets of paper lies my truth  
I have to go, I have to go  
Your hair was long when we first met  
(Samson - Regina Spektor)*

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**October 13th, 1998**

Leaving Remus to the prospect of a hopefully eventful night with Tonks, Sirius stepped out of the fireplace and noticed that number twelve was quiet. Walking through the drawing room, he caught sight of a note left behind in Harry's scratchy handwriting:

*Sirius,*

*Went to the Burrow for dinner. Weasleys are visiting Shell Cottage.  
Don't wait up.*

*Harry*

He chuckled at his godson's lack of subtlety but wished him all the luck and hoped that Molly did not return home early to catch Harry and Ginny shagging under her roof. Potter men were notorious for their unintentional carelessness for Silencing Charms.

Determined not to have another conversation like the one that had just taken place with Remus, Sirius slowly made his way up the stairs toward his room where he could hear the soft sounds of singing. Smiling at the sweet noise, he quietly stepped into his bedroom and saw a light coming from beneath the closed door of the adjoining bathroom.

"*I want you to want me. I need you to need me . . .*" Mia sang from inside, causing him to grin. "*I'd love you to love me. I'm begging you to beg me . . .*"

He sighed in frustration as the lyrics hit a little too close to home. He was a complete idiot. Remembering the years leading up to Mia's return, Sirius had spent nights agonising over the fact that Hermione was so young and did not know whom he really was to her. He had made himself sick on Muggle liquor—though nowhere near what had happened

during his now infamous incident with firewhisky days before Harry was born—all because he longed for *her*.

Nineteen years he had missed the witch, and ever since she came back he had kept her at a distance.

When he reached the bed, he looked down at the nightclothes that she had set out for herself. Not long, cotton robes like Hermione used to wear, but silk shorts and an old t-shirt of his that she had nicked from the dresser. Sirius knew for a fact that Mia had been to Muggle London to go shopping with Ginny, not to mention a few private trips to Twilfitt and Tattling's with Narcissa and Andromeda, and yet she still slept in *his* shirts. The one she had chosen had a Pink Floyd logo on the front, once black, now a dull washed-out grey. He lifted the shirt to his face and inhaled her scent.

"I can hear you, you know," Mia called from beyond the door. "Are you *smelling* my clothes?"

Sirius cringed. "No. I'm smelling *my* clothes."

"You want me to stop borrowing your shirts, is that it?"

*No*, he thought petulantly, but would not give her the satisfaction of saying it out loud.

"Fine," she huffed after a moment of silence. "I'll just start sleeping naked."

"Careful, kitten," he said without thinking, "I might like that."

She opened the bathroom door and gave him a daring look. "Is that so?"

Sirius winced painfully at the sight of her wearing nothing but a towel—just to torture him, he assumed. Her skin was pink, and her hair damp. Water droplets cascaded over her collarbone into the valley between her breasts—sadly covered by the towel.

When she stepped closer, shutting the bathroom door behind her, Sirius could see water clinging to the small indentations of the silvery-pink Pack Mark on her shoulder. He briefly wondered if he could lick them off her without her noticing.

*Unlikely*, he thought, *the bloody witch noticed me smelling her clothes from behind a closed door.*

"Did you have a nice shower?" he asked, trying to fill the silence as she walked to her side of the bed. She placed her wand down on the side table after casting a quick Drying Charm on her hair, which swiftly fell down her back in soft curls.

She scoffed, clearly annoyed. "Small talk? Is *that* what we've been reduced to?"

Sirius sighed loudly. "Mia, give me a break here."

She narrowed her eyes at him and, instead of grabbing her stolen t-shirt and shorts, dropped the towel from around her body, letting it pool at her feet. When he let out a desperate whimper and punched the mattress in frustration, she smirked at him.

"Now you're not playing fair."

"Oh, I'm done playing," she said, ignoring his obvious plight as she stepped over the towel and reached for a bottle of lotion. With a large clip, she twisted her long hair up, pinning it to her head to allow her easy access to rub the moisturiser into her skin.

Sirius stared at her from behind, swallowing as her slender fingers glided over her neck and shoulders, covering the Pack Mark, the splinching scar, and the tattooed words on her opposite shoulder blade. He glanced at the words permanently etched into her skin. *Remus's words*. He had been briefly annoyed over the fact that each of her shoulders was marked by Remus in one way or another, but considering it was *his* name on her thigh and *his* mark on her soul, he had little to complain about.

Except right then.

Her scent and small glimpses of her body sent blood rushing to his cock, causing him to wince from the ache. He reached down to adjust himself but even that small contact had him groaning in pleasure.

She stood, ignoring his entire presence save for the slight lilt to her brow as she lifted a leg and rested it on the edge of the mattress while she ran lotion up and down her skin. From where he was standing, he was blind to some of her lovely attributes, but her breasts were in full view. The first time he had seen those breasts in nineteen years, and the sight could have made him cry had all the water in his body not been diverted to his mouth, forcing him to literally swallow down his growing desire for her.

Her hand reached her thigh, and he finally caught a glimpse of his name, there, inked in black upon her skin. He moaned and bent forward, resting his head on the bed between his forearms. "Voldemort had nothing on you. Fucking evil witch."

"Aww," she cooed mockingly. "Go take a cold shower. That's what I did."

Sirius glared up at her with a smug expression. "I don't think it worked, sweetheart. I can smell you from here."

Raising a challenging brow, she stared across the mattress at him, eyeing the bulge in his trousers. "Is that right? Well, I can *see you* from here. But that doesn't matter, does

it?" She walked to the end of the bed, reaching for her shorts. "Because it's not like you're going to do a bloody thing about—"

He reached a hand out to grab her wrist.

"Do you think I'm a *child* now?" she demanded of him angrily before he had a chance to speak. "Is *that* what you see when you look at me? You see Hermione Granger, poor little Muggle-born virgin?"

"No. I loved you when you called yourself Hermione, just as much as I do now."

"But not as much as you did nineteen years ago."

"Mia—"

"Save it," she said bitterly. "I've always trusted your actions more than your words, Sirius. If you . . ." Her anger faded into apparent guilt. "I understand if you haven't forgiven me for everything and . . . and Azkaban—"

"I have," he promised. "It's not about that."

"Then what is it? Sirius, you used to be able to tell me everything. The only thing you ever kept from me was what happened to you here at Grimmauld Place, and Moody ended up forcing both of our hands there," she said, reminding him of their horrible first attempt at Occlumency training. "You never kept *anything* from me."

"Yeah, well, you kept *everything* from me, so maybe I deserve to have some fucking secrets," he snapped bitterly.

Mia sighed, slowly letting the exhale out between parted lips. "Fine. You're right."

Sirius groaned and scrubbed his hands down his face. "No, I'm not. I'm being an insecure asshole."

"Insecure?" Mia furrowed her brows. "Is *that* what this . . . this avoiding thing has been about?"

Sirius shrugged. "I'm old."

Mia laughed loudly and took his frowning face in her hands. "Are you insane? You're *older*, yes, but that hardly makes you old. Have you looked in a bloody mirror? You're still Sirius Black, for crying out loud." She stared at him incredulously. "*Witch Weekly* sent three owls last week asking for interviews and photographs."

There was a bit of a spark to his ego, but he still sighed. "*Witch Weekly* doesn't want to have sex with me," he said as if to make a point, but Mia snorted. "You know what I mean."

"You think I don't find you attractive? Sirius, I'm staring at you right now. Not pictures of you when you were younger. You." She smiled and reached for his hands, which were both balled into fists at his side. Prying the fingers open, she brought them to her mouth, kissing the centre of each palm. "I want *these* rough, callused hands on me," she whispered to him and then brought his hands to her waist, moving them up her ribs until his thumbs brushed underneath her breasts.

"Fucking hell," Sirius moaned, the last thread of his resolve snapping. He pulled her toward him, pressing his lips against hers. Gentle but solid, he moved slow and sure despite the desperate need that was vibrating between them. He removed one of his hands from her body and cupped her face as he kissed her. He was not rough with her like he had been in his youth. Nor was he smug and demanding.

This was love. This was control. This was Sirius giving her anything she wanted.

He was patient with his own desires but smiled against her lips when her tongue darted out to brush against the seam of his mouth. When he touched it with his own, he moaned at the contact.

Mia wrapped her arms around his neck, her need obvious and palpable as she clung to him, pressing her soft curves against his body with hunger, but Sirius remained focused.

She tugged roughly at his hair while he trailed his hands up and down her sides, his fingers relearning the curve of her waist, the slight dip in her lower back, and soft flesh of her breasts. When she broke the kiss with a gasp, Sirius stared into her deep, amber eyes and smiled. His hands rested on her hips, palming her bare flesh when a thought occurred to him. "You're naked."

"*Nine* O.W.L.s?" she asked with a sceptical tone in her voice. "Really?"

Sirius's chest rumbled, and he breathed deep. "What the fuck is wrong with me?" he asked before turning and lifting her into his arms in one fluid motion, practically throwing her onto the mattress.

She landed with a laugh, grinning when he crawled up from the foot of the bed to hover over her body, staring down at her with awe and hunger. He kept close reins on the desire. Instead of devouring her like he desperately wanted, he savoured her, placing a kiss between her breasts before moving south where he rested his forehead against her abdomen, circling her navel with his tongue to taste her skin.

She tasted like heaven.

He hovered over her for several more seconds, stuck in his own head, and Mia clearly misinterpreted his striving to master his primal urges as hesitation.

"Get off."

Sirius looked up at her in confusion.

"Roll over," she corrected.

Sirius obeyed her and did as she said, rolling onto his back.

She sat up and reached for his shirt, lifting it up and over his head and tossing it over her shoulder. Smiling down at him, she angling forward to brush her lips against a nipple. He shivered, and she grinned. She kissed the tattoo of her name on his chest, there above his heart.

He tasted like sin.

Exploring him, Mia took note of each new tattoo and scar that she did not remember. On every new mark, she placed a kiss; on each familiar one, she nipped lightly and then tongued over the bite. Sliding slowly down his body, she knelt between his legs and reached for the buckle of his jeans.

Sirius had ceased all movement and noises, and when she looked up she noticed that he had stopped breathing as well. Mia quickened her pace in an attempt to make sure he did not pass out from lack of oxygen, opening the trousers to reveal his mouth-watering, swollen length. Her heart beat inside her chest at the sight, and she grinned smugly when she saw his fingers gripping the bedsheets in needy anticipation. She bent her head forward and circled the tip of his cock with her tongue in movements she had long ago perfected and he had clearly since forgotten. By the relieved sound of his loud exhale, she could tell that the memories were returning to him.

When she parted her lips and took him completely into her mouth, sliding down his length until he reached the back of her throat, Sirius moaned and cried and whimpered in a way that made her realise how she would make it all up to him—the secrets, the lies, and Azkaban. He would never have reason to doubt her again, to doubt that she loved and desired him despite everything they had been through.

When she sucked particularly hard on an upstroke, Sirius let out a long, drawn-out "Fuuuck," followed up by blaspheming the names of Merlin, Circe, Godric, and every other famous witch and wizard all the way down to the Wizard of Oz. A very small part of her wanted to smugly remind him that Oz was not a real wizard.

She released him with a wet pop. When he cursed Salazar Slytherin, she threw her head back and laughed.

Sirius grinned down at her, his face flush. "Think that's funny, little witch?"

"What do you think?" she asked, still giggling.

*Nineteen years*, he thought to himself as he reached for her arms, pulling her up his body to straddle his waist. Her warm arousal rubbed against his pelvis, and Sirius moaned at the contact as he struggled to kick off his pants to join her in complete nakedness.

His gaze fell up and down over the gentle slopes of her body. Nineteen years he had been dreaming of this, of her. Dreaming of the soft caress of her fingers, the plush feel of her breasts and hips, the sound of her mewls, the sight of her nibbling her lower lip, the smell of arousal, the warmth of her mouth and cunt, and Merlin, the taste of honey.

Nineteen years gone from his life and now here she was, straddling his waist and looking down at him with mirrored hunger.

Unable to move of his own accord, lest he lose himself completely and drive into her without thought, Sirius forced himself to lie still as she smiled lovingly down at him and raised herself to her knees before slowly, achingly, sinking down on him until he was completely seated within her.

She hissed pleurably as he stretched her, and he moaned at the exquisite heat that threatened to burn him alive. His palms hovered over her thighs, silently pleading her to move before he lost it.

Mia tilted her hips forward and then back, and already it was too much. Sirius sat up quickly and pulled her toward him, burying his face against her breasts, taking a pebbled nipple between his lips and tonguing the peak of it until his mouth had the size, texture, and flavour re-memorised deep in his consciousness.

He bucked his hips roughly and growled, nipping at her flesh as she whimpered and dug her fingers through his hair. She rose and fell, impaling herself on him repeatedly, moaning with each movement and new angle.

His attention was drawn to the neglected mound opposite the one in his mouth. He dragged his lips from one side of her chest to the other, leaving wet, open-mouthed kisses in his wake before running the flat of his tongue over the skin of her breast, all the while thinking that it was not enough. He would never have enough of her. An addict. He knew what he was. She was better than firewhisky, cigarettes, and Muggle liquor combined.

When she thrust down particularly hard, Sirius winced and gripped her hips tight in his hand, clenching his teeth and breathing hot against her sternum.

Mia looked down as his body quaked beneath her. "You're holding back."

Sirius swallowed and exhaled slowly, trying not to pass out. "I . . . I'm not."

*Nineteen years, and he's still a rubbish liar*, she thought as she pulled his head away from her chest to look in his eyes, which were so dilated she could see only a thin line of silver around the black pupils.

"Don't lie to me, Sirius. You're shaking, and it sure as hell isn't because of nerves," she said, watching as his eyes flashed and his jaw tightened. "I know what you're doing. Remus used to act the same way, only *he* was trying to hold back a werewolf. What're you trying not to unleash?"

He took a moment and then frowned. "Me."

"I *want* you."

Sirius shook his head. "I'm different," he said, his body still shaking. "I'm changed. I'm broken and damaged and dark and I—"

"Sirius," Mia whispered lovingly, reverently. "The first time you saw me, I was an eleven-year-old girl with a skinned knee in Diagon Alley. I was your best friend's sister, who bought you Cauldron Cakes and played with your hair." She threaded her fingers through the thick strands, and he tilted his head into her touch. "The first time I saw *you* . . . was in the Shrieking Shack when I was fourteen. I knew what you'd been through in Azkaban. I saw your scars and your . . . your sanity."

Sirius scoffed. "Or lack thereof."

Mia did not correct him, but she did continue speaking. "I watched you break Ron's leg, kick Kreacher, pin Mundungus Fletcher to the ground, and argue non-stop with Snape and Molly. You were unstable and violent and reckless, and I *still* brought you back from the veil. Then I watched you kill Death Eaters to protect Harry and me." She ran the pad of her thumb over his bottom lip and smiled when he caught it between his teeth.

"You ripped out the throat of Bellatrix Lestrange for hurting me," she reminded him, noting the growl that escaped his throat, vibrating against the thumb still caught in his mouth. "I saw you in prison robes long before I ever saw you in a Hogwarts tie. I saw you blood-soaked and furious long before I ever saw you innocent and young."

He released her from his teeth and pulled slightly away. "I was better for you when I was innocent and young."

"You don't know what's better for me, Sirius. And it doesn't matter because I loved *you* first. I loved *you*, wanted *you*—wanted the *man*, Sirius Black, long before I ever stared into the eyes of an eleven-year-old boy in Diagon Alley. I craved you at this age for years while I waited for your younger self to grow up. While falling in love with you back then, I dreamt of you as you are now.

"Don't hold back with me." She thrust herself down upon him again, eliciting a dangerous groan. "I love all of you, I *want* all of you. I can take all of you," she whispered, her lips hovering over his as they shared one last breath before he crushed his mouth against hers and gripped her against him, hard and rough.

No longer shaking, Sirius wrapped an arm around her waist and flipped them both until she was pressed into the mattress beneath him, fisting the sheets, their positions completely reversed from minutes earlier.

In one fluid movement, he withdrew and then thrust back into her, deep and hard, pulling a sharp, pleasurable cry from her that split the air, likely feeding both his cock and his ego. Rocking in and out of her body, she bit her lower lip thinking that he had never been so rough with her before, and Merlin, was he setting the bar high now.

She raked her nails down his chest and, he pushed forward again, growling against her skin as he fucked her, slamming into her body with inhuman strength and desire. Loving would be reserved for later when they would tenderly rub sore muscles, lick scrapes and scratches, and kiss bruises, but nineteen years had clearly been too long.

He was too far gone to be entirely human, and, by the slight tinge of blood that her scratches were bringing to the surface, so was she.

When Sirius adjusted his angle to hit a particularly sweet spot, Mia cried out loudly and arched her back, reaching out for purchase on his shoulders where she dug her nails in deep.

"Ow." Sirius winced but kept thrusting. When he was unable to shake her grip, he leant down and bit the skin between her jaw and ear until she released him. When her hands let go, he caught her wrists and pinned them above her head, holding her there tightly with one hand, slapping his other against her thigh which he hiked over his hip.

She began laughing joyously, and Sirius joined her as he slowed his movements just slightly so he could lean forward and kiss her deep.

Mia groaned at the intrusion of his tongue in her mouth, drinking in the taste of him. There were no longer hints of tobacco since he had quit smoking at her request, nor were there leftover touches of firewhisky lingering on his tongue. Instead, she was left with the overwhelming scents of parchment, grass, and leather, and a taste in her mouth that was distinctly him.

"Fuck . . ." Sirius groaned as he continued stroking inside her, her body clenching down on him. "Have . . . Have you always been so fucking . . . tight?"

Mia smirked and squeezed her muscles around him to watch his eyes roll into the back of his head. "Maybe you're just bigger now."

Sirius laughed, and she dared him to call her a liar.

"Never stop," she begged as he picked up speed, her eyes closed, head tilted back as her fingers twitched in his grip.

"Never," he echoed as he deepened his thrusts until she was whimpering, and he was grunting, and the fire between them was all-consuming.

A deep burn built and coiled within her until she was the one who was shaking in his arms, shivering with need and begging her body to just let go because it felt so good that it was starting to hurt. She was absolutely certain she would stop breathing any moment unless she was released from it all.

As though sensing the steep cliff that she was pushing against, Sirius brushed his lips against the shell of her ear and whispered in a dark, husky voice, "Let go, baby. I've been dreaming about you coming around my cock for two decades."

Mia gulped in a deep breath of air as her body lost control, contracting tightly around him, even tighter than he obviously remembered as he stilled above her, hissing as his own climax was ripped violently from him.

They rested in the aftermath, gasping and shivering, clinging to one another as their vision refocused and all their other senses slowly came back from the high they had been transported to.

Sirius lifted himself onto his elbows and, without a word spoken, began placing soft lingering kisses up her body. First dipping between them once he pulled himself out of her, running his tongue along the tattoo against her thigh. Then he moved north, peppering

kisses up the purple scar that covered her ribs, ascending toward the Pack Mark on her shoulder and the splinching scar behind it.

"You're perfect," he whispered.

"All of me?"

Sirius reached for her arm and kissed the skin marred by Bellatrix's dagger. "All of you."

"You're perfect, too."

"A lot more scars than you, kitten. Ones you've never seen."

Mia ran a finger down the length of his chest. "I've got the rest of my life to learn them all," she said with a tender smile. "Don't you ever make me wait that long again, Sirius Black."

"I think it was more painful for me than you, love." He chuckled and settled down beside her, wrapping an arm around her waist, and tugging her close against him so that every inch of their skin that could touch was connected to the other. "Besides, it's been a long time, and I think I held up pretty well."

"I'd say so," she agreed. "But since it *has* been a long time, did you remember to cast the Contraceptive Charm?"

"No."

Mia yawned and moved to reach for her wand. "I'll do it."

Sirius stilled her hand. "Don't."

## Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Eight

*All Things Are Difficult Before They Are Easy*

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*My broken pieces  
You pick them up  
Don't leave me hanging, hanging  
Come give me some  
When I'm without ya  
I'm so insecure  
You are the one thing, one thing  
I'm living for  
(Sugar - Maroon 5)*

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**October 13th, 1998**

Sirius stared awkwardly at Mia, whose gaze was so intense that he briefly forgot what he had just said. It was not until she cleared her throat and blinked rapidly in mild shock that he remembered.

*Contraceptive Charm, right.*

"What do you mean?" she asked hesitantly.

He ran an anxious hand through his hair and sighed. "I mean don't . . . don't . . . cast it."

"Sirius—"

"Look," he said, interrupting her. "I know that to you everything was different just a few weeks ago, and we were in the middle of a war, and everything was insane, but . . . but you left, and Lily got pregnant and . . ."

He frowned, remembering the morning that she had woken them all up after a night of binge drinking to scold them for their behaviour and to tell James that she was pregnant. Sirius had felt torn in that moment of celebration. Thrilled for his friends, his family, but the absence of Mia and the plans and dreams they had shared left him with a missing piece of his soul that made any potential future without her unbearable to even think about.

"Sirius, look at me," Mia whispered.

He brought his gaze back to her face and tilted his head into her palm, turning to kiss her fingers. "I thought you were dead and any dream of the future died with you."

She smiled sweetly. "You dreamt of having a litter of little Potters?"

"Blacks," he corrected.

Mia sat back, looking more shocked over this admission than she had been about his sudden distaste for Contraceptive Charms. "We're giving our future children *your* name now? I remember you being fairly *against* that idea."

"I made a promise to your mum. Cleanse the House. Fix the family. Dromeda and Cissa, they want me to take the Black seat on the Wizengamot."

"Well, that's insane," she said with a laugh, and he sighed with relief, thrilled that she did not hold the same opinion as his deranged cousins. "You'll end up back in Azkaban the first day when someone tells you that you can't speak out of turn."

"I tried telling *them* that!" Sirius shouted in agreement. "I wanted nothing to do with my family and the name but then . . . I had a sit down with Draco a few days ago after the two of you were done working on his Dark Mark. He wants to rebuild the Malfoy name. Boy's stubborn and driven. Do you know the words of House of Malfoy?"

Mia nodded. "*Sanctimonia Vincet Semper*. Purity Will Always Conquer."

"*Toujours Pur*. Always Pure," Sirius said with utter contempt. "Always about the purity. I told Draco as the Head of his House now, he should strike the words, burn the family crest, and start new."

Mia chuckled. "Knowing Draco, he had something to say about that."

Sirius dipped his head. "He gave me a long list of synonyms for purity. Goodness, honour, integrity." He sighed as he looked down at his hands. "I think . . . I want to rebuild my Noble and Most Ancient House. Actually make it noble."

Mia gave him a proud smile that warmed him inside. Despite the difference in colouring, the way she stared at him as though he had done something right, made him think of Dorea.

"And you want someone to leave a legacy to?"

Sirius reached out for her, leaning forward and kissing her collarbone, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her up against him. "I want a future with you. Nothing holding us back. I want to selfishly have it all," he admitted before leaning his head down and recapturing the peak of one breast between his lips.

Mia gasped, running her fingers through his hair as he tongued her sensitive flesh. "We still have enemies out there. Voldemort was a cancer, there's still an infection."

Sirius growled. "Then we cleanse it all."

She grinned, licking her lips as his fingers dipped back down to the apex of her thighs, finding their way to her clit with such ease it felt like no time at all had passed between 1979 and now.

"It'll be dramatic," she said on the end of a whimper. "I might have to make a scene."

Sirius chuckled, a shiver of anticipation running through him. "When *don't* you?"

"Cast the Contraceptive Charm."

Sirius stopped his ministrations. "But I thought . . ."

"My mother taught me that charm for a reason. Despite the fact that I could honestly care less what people think about me, Molly's scandalised tone of voice grates on my nerves. I am not getting pregnant out of wedlock. So unless you plan on proposing right now, cast the charm."

Sirius smirked, pressing his lips to her throat. "And if I *was* planning on proposing?"

"Then pull that ring off your chain and do it," she said, challenging him.

He froze and then jumped away from her as though he had been burnt. Staring into her eyes, he felt the colour momentarily drain from his face. "What? How—?"

Mia scoffed, rolling her eyes. "How did I know that you've got a ring hanging off the silver chain that I gave you? Disillusioned and charmed with a Notice-Me-Not? Sirius, I *taught* you both of those spells. I may not be able to *see* it, but I can sense my own charms."

Sirius frowned, narrowing his eyes. "How long have you known?"

"Since you came home with the ring after Jamie and Lily's wedding."

His mouth fell open. "How come you didn't say anything?"

"It was your job to propose," she insisted, leaning forward to kiss at the corners of his mouth that were currently turned down. "You were working yourself into a fit trying to get the nerve to do it, and I didn't want to ruin it for you."

He huffed. "And now?"

"Well . . ." She sat back and smiled at him. "You've had nineteen years to think up a pretty good proposal, and I'm sure you're over any cold feet by this point. Did you ask Jamie's permission?"

"Does that piss you off?"

"A little, but I bet it made *his* day."

"It did," Sirius replied with a chuckle until a sadness fell back over him. "I meant to do it that night. The night you left. Cheap Chinese takeaway in the middle of our living room. Thought it was more us than the grand production and speech that Prongs gave Lily."

Mia smiled and touched his cheek. "Definitely more us."

"And much better than what Remus did with Tonks." Sirius grinned and kissed her hand, sitting back to unclasp the silver chain from around his neck and slip the ring off, still Disillusioned, before putting the necklace back on.

"I never found out how he proposed," Mia admitted, glancing at the invisible piece of jewellery in his palm. "Let me guess, lots of poetry?"

"Hardly," Sirius said with a laugh. "From the way my cousin tells me, he blurted it out right after shagging her the night Dumbledore died."

Mia shook her head in exasperation. "It's actually adorable how stupidly in love with her he is."

Sirius held the ring in between two fingers, still not letting her see it just yet. "What do you want to do?" he asked her with a smile on his face, looking at the way her eyes sparkled.

"I think—" Mia grinned and bit the corner of her bottom lip. "—I'd like some cheap Chinese takeaway."

They left Grimmauld Place and walked to a small restaurant a few streets away where Muggles stared at them as they fed one another lo mein and split egg rolls. Sirius walked to the front counter where he set down a crisp, fifty-pound note and requested a bag full of fortune cookies. He returned to the small table in the corner, ignoring the girl behind the counter who was holding out his change for him.

He and Mia dug into the biscuits, breaking them open to read the silly fortunes.

Sirius smiled over "*A thrilling time is in your immediate future*" and laughed at "*Be mischievous and you will not be lonesome.*"

Mia fell into a fit of giggles when she read "*A good time to finish up old tasks*" and rolled her eyes when she saw "*Focus on your long-term goals.*"

She paused for a moment when Sirius reached across the table and took her hand in his. He closed her fingers around something he placed in her palm, and when she opened it she saw a small fortune there that read "*All things are difficult before they are easy.*"

Amber eyes met grey, and she leant forward and kissed him while he slipped her Grandmother Black's opal engagement ring on her finger.

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### October 14th, 1998

There was a time when a family gathering would have meant a large dinner at the Burrow surrounded by Weasleys. As it was, the only Weasley present was on Harry's arm as their large group approached the small restaurant in Diagon Alley.

They had gone in the middle of the day, in the middle of the week, and had owled ahead for proper reservations, arriving separately on the alley to avoid causing a stir of attention. Thankfully they had managed thus far to avoid any photographers, and Mia hoped that getting inside the restaurant would be a quick event. It would have been, of course, had the hostess not caught sight of Draco's face and gasped as though she was standing in front of Voldemort himself.

"One moment," she said nervously before darting back behind a door and returning with a portly wizard with greying brown hair, who ignored the entire party, save for the blond at the back. "We don't serve his kind! Bloody Death Eaters!"

"Excuse me?" Ginny asked, eyes narrowed.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" Both Narcissa and Andromeda hissed.

"I'll take care of this," Mia said calmly and turned back to the manager, smiling up at him politely. "I'm so sorry about my companions. I completely understand you have issues; the war was hard on all of us. Can I ask, do you serve *our* kind? War heroes?" She gestured to herself and Harry—noticeably, the most famous of the group—and ignored the way Harry's face scrunched up in distaste.

The man flushed as he suddenly recognised them both. "Bloody hell . . . Harry Potter. Of *course* we serve war heroes!"

Behind her, Mia could feel the heat coming off of Harry's face in waves, and if she turned to look around, she knew she likely would spot Draco glaring at him. She was pleased to know that Draco would not do anything embarrassing in front of his mother

and, even if he did, Harry was unlikely to say anything back with Remus and Tonks standing between them.

Mia smiled at the manager and feigned a humble expression before her stare turned cold. "Then you'll serve *him*," she said, gesturing to Draco, her tone one of finality, "either because he is a war hero, which he *is*, or because *other* war heroes insist upon it, which I do."

And just like that, the portly man changed his opinion of the famed Hermione Granger.

One Death Eater in her social basket and all her war efforts were for nothing. Luckily, the man apparently knew better than to turn a glaring eye on Harry Potter, despite how he now felt about her.

"I don't know how you can throw in with his lot! He's the son of Lucius Malfoy!"

Without raising her voice, Mia smiled politely. That in itself should have been a warning. "He's also the son of Narcissa Black, which makes him family. I don't take kindly to threats made against my family."

It helped a bit that the details regarding Voldemort's destruction and the deaths of many Death Eaters had not been made public. It helped that there were far too many rumours and far too much speculation as to how the Dark Lord really died, and what part the people standing in front of the gathered staff of the restaurant played in the end of the war. Hermione Granger was just a Muggle-born witch who helped Harry Potter, wasn't she? Or was she the Brightest Witch of the Age, as many had decided to call her, and if so, what *exactly* did that mean?

The manager looked at the ground briefly, apparently affected by the fact that she refused to break eye contact with him. "I ain't threatenin'," he mumbled, "just saying I heard he killed his own father, is all."

"That he did." Mia smiled as though it were the most pleasant news she had heard that day and she was eager to share it. "Took down Voldemort's right-hand man minutes after Bellatrix Lestrange had her throat ripped out by my handsome wizard here," she said, reaching back for Sirius who, instead of taking her palm properly, nuzzled up against her neck, kissed her shoulder.

"The House of Black." Mia grinned smugly, attempting to ignore Sirius's behaviour despite the fact that it amused her to no end. "We're not known for being very stable

individuals. Tell me, sir, if we're willing to remove our own kin violently from the family tree when they raise a hand or word to those we love, how do you think we'll react to a complete stranger disrespecting members of our House?"

Silence fell.

"A private room, if you please," Mia said politely. "We'd like to not be disturbed by the public, most especially the photographers. I have a habit of getting very angry when my name pops up in the *Daily Prophet*, you see," she said, her words laced with a not very subtle threat.

"Right this way," the waitress said when the manager turned and signalled his acquiescence to her.

"My apologies," the man whispered to Mia.

"Oh, you don't need to apologise." When he sighed with relief, she added, "*to me.*"

Her attention turned back to Draco, who was sneering at the manager with utter disdain.

"I'll offer my forgiveness in exchange for bourbon," Draco said, the attitude of arrogance settling back over him.

"Bourbon?" the manager asked, confused.

"Muggle liquor," Draco said mockingly to the shock of the staff as he turned to follow his family into the private room to which they were led.

Once seated and properly hydrated with a bottle of firewhisky for the wizards and champagne for the witches—all on the house, of course—the large family sat down to break bread and catch up.

Teddy was passed from person to person, and everyone smiled as the little boy changed his hair colour to match whomever was holding him. However, it ended up stuck on blond when Draco awkwardly held the child, much to Harry's annoyance. Narcissa, on the other hand, simpered over the platinum-haired infant, occasionally casting yearning glances at Draco, who was doing his very best to avoid all eye contact from the one woman to whom he had never been able to say no. Ginny, Tonks, and Mia chuckled over his discomfort until he glared at them, at which point they laughed louder.

Remus offered Ginny revision plans for when she returned to Hogwarts, while Tonks discussed Auror business with Harry. Draco and Sirius argued over the different

notes of the Muggle bourbon that the manager finally managed to bring around in the middle of their meal, while Mia, Narcissa, and Andromeda discussed Ministry business.

"Oh," Mia said, looking over at Draco, "I forgot to mention that you should be receiving an owl this week from the Ministry about your vaults."

He sat up a little taller, looking like he was trying to not appear excited. "Is that so? And how, exactly, did you go about returning me my money, Potter?" he asked, throwing her name in at the end and flashing a smug grin when Harry looked up as though he had been called.

"I simply suggested that whatever investigation they had regarding the vaults be expedited before I send a strongly worded letter to the goblin horde implying that Ministry officials were thinking about claiming goblin-forged items that may or may not be resting inside the Malfoy vaults," she said simply, reaching forward and taking a sip from her flute.

"You threatened the Ministry?" Harry asked, his mouth hanging open.

"Of course not. That would be rude of me. I merely offered suggestions and advice as to how certain things might like to be handled."

"And the manor?" Narcissa asked, hopeful.

"I'm working on it," Mia promised. "Are you each certain you'd not like to retain a residence there? Because if you're willing to downsize or relocate at all, I have a few ideas about the property that will have the Ministry giving it back faster than if it were infected with Spattergroit."

"That stopped being home . . ." Draco frowned and drew his attention down to his glass of bourbon.

Narcissa silently agreed. "That place is no longer home. The land, however, belongs to Draco, not the Ministry."

Mia agreed. "It's near the very top of my list of things to take care of."

"What else is on your list?" Ginny asked curiously.

"Many things. There will be a lot to do in the coming year." Mia sighed softly, her smile turning wider when Sirius leant in, kissed her cheek, and then whispered in her ear. She nodded without looking at him, reaching again for her glass of champagne.

"Speaking of things to do," Sirius said, clearing his throat as he reached inside his leather jacket, withdrawing a formal-looking, cream-coloured envelope with gold lettering on the front and a small, unbroken crimson seal on the back. "Harry, this is for you."

More than half the table fell into utter silence. Andromeda and Narcissa each gasped and brought their hands to their mouths in excitement. Draco eyed the letter with interest, an amused smirk growing on his face. Both Harry and Ginny stared at it curiously, clearly unaware of the content. Tonks sat quietly, bouncing Teddy on her knee while grinning, and Remus smiled across the table at Sirius and Mia, who sat pleasantly watching as Harry broke the seal and read what was inside.

"Lord Harry James, Head of the House of Potter . . ." he began, mumbling as he read along, completely ignorant to the title that preceded his name. "Hermione of the House of Potter—beloved sister . . . intention to . . ." He stopped reading and then glanced immediately down to the end where he found Sirius's name officially signed, all titles, properties, and vault listings included. "Sirius? What is this?"

"It's called a Letter of Intent," Mia said with a smile. "It's an old pureblood tradition that's fallen out of popularity these days."

"Unfortunately," Narcissa commented, her attention turned to Draco, and he inclined his head, as though confirming to his mother that, yes, when the time came, he was certainly going to follow proper traditions and customs. "When a wizard wanted to court a witch, he would write down his intentions in a letter and give the letter to her Head of House for approval."

Harry's brows furrowed. "I don't understand. Sirius, you and Hermione are already together. Did you send one of these to my grandfather when you first started dating?"

Sirius shook his head. "No. Remus did when he dated Mia."

Tonks turned and stared at her husband with wide grey eyes. "You did what? *I* never got a bloody letter!" she said loudly, though there was a teasing smile on her face.

"Would you like one *now*, love?" Remus asked with a chuckle, smiling when Tonks shrugged, both laughing as Teddy's hair turned a bright, distracting shade of green, vying for his parents' attention. "Andromeda, please expect my owl within the week."

Everyone smiled at the scene until Harry re-read the letter in his hands. "So, what does this mean? I've already said that I'm fine with your relationship."

"A Letter of Intent is very serious, Harry," Mia said. "When a wizard gives one, asking for permission to court a witch, it puts the power in her hands. She decides whether or not to accept or decline. Once declined, she can never accept an offer from that man again. It ends their relationship forever."

"What did she do with *yours*?" Ginny asked Remus.

"Burnt it in front of all of our friends. She's very dramatic."

"Harry . . ." Mia said. "I accepted Sirius's letter."

Narcissa and Andromeda gasped again, and all eyes fell on Harry, who still sat looking confused.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Oh, for Merlin's sake, Potter. He's asking your permission, as Head of your House, to *marry* the witch." He turned and stared incredulously at Mia. "Did you take his O.W.L.s *for* him?"

Harry ignored Draco's insult, turning instead to his godfather, who was staring at him with a serious expression on his face. "You're engaged?"

"Only if you approve, son," Sirius replied.

Harry scoffed and looked at Mia. "And you're okay with this? Hermione, you don't need my permission. Isn't this something you would say is archaic and demeaning to women?"

"Ordinarily, yes. But I'm a sucker for traditional things. My mother taught me, and Sirius and I plan on teaching you. Don't get me wrong, if you don't approve it, I'll have Ginny Bat-Bogey you until you cry," Mia said with a laugh.

Harry held the letter carefully, obviously not knowing what to do now and feeling awkward because of it. Draco, in a surprising move, took pity on him and quietly offered, "Shake the man's hand."

Harry nodded a silent thanks to his former rival and stood to face Sirius, who followed suit, accepting the outstretched hand of his godson, before grinning and taking him into a tight hug.

At that moment, Narcissa ended her silence, standing from her place at Draco's side to take Sirius's now unoccupied seat. "Where is it?" she politely demanded, a bright smile on her face that made her look years younger.

Mia extended her left hand and tapped her wand on it, revealing a previously Disillusioned opal ring.

Narcissa beamed at the sight of it. Even Andromeda leant across the table to get a better look. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Violetta Black's opal ring," Mia confirmed and then looked to Harry. "This is the one I told you your father tried to steal and send to Lily. But when he proposed, he gave her the Potter family ring."

"I wanted you to have a Black heirloom, but nothing that belonged to *Walburga*," Sirius said.

"For which I am forever grateful, love," Mia said.

As Narcissa examined the ring with great interest, Andromeda chuckled from across the table, causing her to look up. "What's so funny?"

"That ring has been passed down to every wife of the House of Black in a single line. Violetta Black was a Bulstrode, and before her, the ring belonged to Ursula Black, who was a Flint."

Narcissa finally joined her sister in quiet laughter.

"Generations and generations of pureblood Slytherins and blood purists, and the ring ends up in the hands of a Muggle-born Gryffindor," Andromeda said in amusement. "Given to her by the last heir of the House, who has been blasted off the tree."

Sirius could not have looked prouder.

## Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Nine

### *Don't Get Too Comfortable*

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*Hey, so glad you could make it  
Yeab, now you've really made it  
Hey, so glad you could make it now  
Oh, look at my face  
My name is might have been  
My name is never was  
My name's forgotten  
(Celebrity Skin - Hole)*

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**October 14th, 1998**

The group mingled for another twenty minutes or so before Andromeda offered to take Teddy home for the night, allowing Remus and Tonks to stay out and celebrate with their newly engaged friends. As she moved to stand, a waiter opened the door for her, and that was when they heard the loud, irritable shriek from the other side of the restaurant.

"What do you mean the room is unavailable?!"

While most in the room shuddered at the sound, Draco went absolutely pale and turned to face his mother. "Broken, right? You promised me."

Narcissa nodded as she patted him lightly on the arm, cringing as the screaming outside continued. "It's broken, darling. I wouldn't *dare* leave you in that situation."

"What's broken?" Mia asked.

"My betrothal contract," Draco said gravely.

The witch on the other side of the door was shouting again, "Do you have any idea who we are?! I can't imagine who on earth you think is more important than—" The voice grew closer until the door was pushed completely open, revealing Pansy Parkinson and a witch whose genetic attributes instantly painted her as the pug-nosed girl's mother.

"Well, well, well. A Mudblood and blood-traitor convention," Pansy said, her attention falling on Draco with a look of utter condemnation. She sighed loudly, crossing her arms and shaking her head in amused disapproval. "Oh, Draco, how the mighty have fallen."

Draco turned his gaze toward Sirius, and through clenched teeth, he pleaded, "Can you please pass the bourbon?"

Mia remembered how Pansy had once accused her of using Love Potions in an article that Rita Skeeter had written. She had been furious at the time, but the idea of retribution had not even occurred to her since she was too busy trying to get Harry through the Triwizard Tournament alive. Now, however, she was contemplating adding the little bitch to her list of Slytherins she'd punched in the face.

"Did you hear?" Pansy asked, glancing back at her mother for approval to announce.

The older witch was glaring daggers at Narcissa, who in turn held herself with abundant grace and poise, ignoring the dark-haired woman. Pansy's mother turned and nodded smugly to her daughter before resuming the glower directed at Narcissa.

"I'm marrying Marcus Flint now, Draco. He's just been picked up by the Montrose Magpies. We're to be married next summer."

Draco stood, raising his glass to his former fiancée. "Congratulations, Pansy, I'm sure you'll both be very . . . *wealthy* together."

Another female voice called from beyond the door, "—and you just *let* them through, disturbing someone else's meal? Is that how you do business here? You just let witches run around, ordering you about?"

The manager defeatedly replied, "Apparently."

A tall, blond woman, followed by two younger witches who mirrored her appearance, stepped into the doorway of the private room looking just as elegant and graceful as Narcissa. They were quite the opposite of the smug Parkinson duo, who were currently glaring around the table in turns. The woman met Mrs Parkinson's stare with disapproval before she turned her attention to Narcissa, who was at the front of the room standing beside Andromeda.

"Narcissa, so lovely to see you, dear." She greeted with a kiss to the cheek. "I was so sad to hear about your troubles. Lucius's passing. And I hear the Ministry's taken control of your belongings? Awful, just awful."

"You're a dear for thinking of us, truly." Narcissa smiled politely, her eyes filled with genuine affection instead of the feigned friendliness Mia had previously observed Narcissa using whilst out on shopping trips.

"I apologise for my sister-in-law. I hope she and my niece didn't interrupt your little . . ." The woman looked over the table, her blue gaze sharp. "Harry Potter," she said

the name with sweetness. "I've never had the pleasure." She released Narcissa's hand and took a step forward to greet him when her attention was distracted and her focus turned to Harry's left.

She gaped, wide-eyed, and her mouth fell open in shock. "Sirius Black? Bloody hell," her sweet aristocratic tone fell an octave or two. "I haven't seen you since . . ." She paused as she looked at the witch on Sirius's arm. "Holy shit."

"Holy shit," Mia muttered back at the woman, staring at her.

A voice called from the door, "Mother?"

"Daphne, take your sister and find a table outside; wait for me there," the blonde ordered her daughter, who immediately obeyed, leaving the room. "Mia?"

"Laurel, what's going on here?" Pansy's mother demanded.

Laurel turned around with cold, fierce eyes and stormed toward the pair of brunette witches, shoving Pansy's mother toward the door. "Fuck off, Posy. Pansy, take your mother home." Once both witches were banished from the room, she spun on her heels. "How the hell are you alive?"

Mia grinned and rushed forward to embrace her old friend.

Laurel hugged her back tightly. "No, but seriously, how are you alive? You disappeared, and I hired investigators. Hyperion threw a damned fit about it, and I made him sleep in his office for weeks."

Mia laughed loudly. "Oh, Merlin, it's so good to see you."

"I can't believe you're alive," Laurel said, wiping tears from her eyes as she and Mia parted. "And why do you look twelve? You've always been younger than me, but now I think you're throwing it in my face, you bitch."

"It's a long story," Mia replied, feeling an odd weight lifted from her shoulders. "And you clearly remember Sirius."

Grinning at the man, she eyed his body with approval, something Mia allowed without comment. "Of course. You look positively—" Laurel sighed pleasantly, smirking when Sirius preened under the attention. "Just how I remember you. Not a murderer, then?"

"Innocent of all charges," Sirius replied and kissed her hand in greeting.

"I never believed you murdered Muggles," Laurel insisted. "Rigged a Quidditch game? Perhaps. Robbed Gringotts? Maybe. But murdering Muggles? How utterly *boring* of you, Sirius."

"If it makes you feel any better, I was framed for the Muggles while attempting to kill a traitorous wizard," he offered, his grey eyes flashing.

Laurel grinned. "Oh, see, that's much better."

"Forgive me," Draco interrupted. "Madam Greengrass, you recognise this witch?" he asked, indicating Mia with a gesture.

Laurel smiled down at the boy as though he were slow, a look Draco was clearly unused to. "Of course I recognise her, dear. I may not have seen her in twenty years, but I know my best friend when I'm looking at her."

Mia looked over Laurel's shoulder to the confused Draco. "Laurel has never met *Hermione Granger*," she informed him, hoping that it was a simple enough explanation as to why the woman recognised her as Mia Potter when the rest of the Wizarding world was distracted with their image of the Muggle-born heroine.

Gasping, Laurel turned back to face Mia. "You know Hermione Granger?"

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Sirius smiled as Mia told Laurel the grand story of her trip through time, though the details of *who* sent her and why were left to the imagination. The fewer people who knew of the Time-Turner theft and Remus's involvement, the better, as far as they were all concerned. Once Posy and Pansy Parkinson were directed out of the restaurant, Laurel brought her daughters in to meet Mia. Daphne and Astoria both had apparently gone to school with Hermione, but were wonderfully polite and delighted to listen to the story of their mother's long-lost friend and the connection they all now shared.

With the witches catching up on gossip and fawning in adoration over Mia's engagement ring, Sirius, Remus, Harry, and Draco stepped outside to the adjoining balcony to share firewhisky, bourbon, and a few cigars that were brought along for the occasion.

"Didn't Hermione make you quit those?" Harry asked.

"She *requested* that I stop smoking *cigarettes*," Sirius clarified. "These are *cigars*." He wandlessly produced a bluebell flame in his hand and held it out for each of them to use.

Remus chuckled lightly. "Laurel hasn't changed much."

Sirius joined in on the laughter, shaking his head. "She'll be good company for Mia. Keep her spirits up. She's always needed a Slytherin in her life, and *this* one," he said, patting Draco on the back, "keeps stealing all my good liquor."

Turning his attention back to the women inside, Sirius felt relief at the way the witches were all smiling politely at one another. He immediately noted the way they were all sitting, something he was certain none of the other men, save perhaps Draco, if he paid attention to it, would catch. Instead of a circle to keep them all on equal social standing, they had formed an obvious hierarchy in their little conversation. Narcissa and Laurel sat side-by-side with Daphne and Astoria behind their mother. On the opposite side of the room sat Andromeda with Tonks and Ginny together beside her. Then there, in the centre of the group, was Mia.

Amongst the Black witches, by all rights, Andromeda—being the eldest present—should have been the centre of the group, followed by Narcissa who claimed standing, not only by her blood but by wealth from marriage. Even Tonks—a half-blood—could have stood above the others due to her position as Andromeda's daughter and an Auror to boot.

But it was the adopted Muggle-born that the women deferred to, either because of her status as Dorea Black's daughter or her relationship to Sirius, their official Head of House.

"It's frightening to see my mother politely conversing with Granger over tea and biscuits," Draco said.

Sirius quirked his lips at his young cousin. "Don't get too comfortable with the sight."

"Why's that? You think it's a once in a lifetime event? Do you think Mother's pretending to be polite to manipulate her or *you* through her?"

"Merlin, no. Don't get comfortable because the *polite* conversation you're referring to—" He turned and looked at the witches with an amused interest. "—I believe, is the subject of an arranged marriage . . . for you."

Draco turned back to look at the women with wide eyes just as Mia stood up and moved to sit between Laurel and her daughters. Mia was grinning, her eyes sparkling as she said something quietly to her friend, who then looked at each of her daughters. Both girls

turned their heads to meet Draco's blinking stare and then looked back to their mother and nodded.

"Fuck," Draco grumbled as he adjusted his posture, likely to stop himself from looking so panicked. He set his cigar and drink down and straightened his robes. "If you'll excuse me, I'd better get this over with." He cleared his throat and made his way back into the room where he smiled politely at all of the witches. "Ladies."

Too amused by the situation to miss out on the details, Sirius kicked his foot out to prevent the door from closing all the way so that the rest of the men could eavesdrop.

"Draco, darling." Narcissa reached for her son's hand. "Mia and I were just having a lovely chat with Laurel and her delightful daughters. Have you met?"

"On occasion," Draco replied to his mother and reached for each of the girls' hands in front of him, lowering himself to a bow before placing a chaste kiss to the knuckles. "Daphne and I were in the same year and House at Hogwarts, of course. Though I've not had the pleasure of getting to know either very well."

"Laurel is a very good friend of mine from years ago," Mia told him with a sweet smile. "She and I had very similar thoughts as to how the Ministry should be run."

"Mia tells me that you have plans as well, is that true, Draco?" Laurel asked.

"Many. Beginning with the return of my property, a Wizengamot seat, not to mention a list of outdated laws, educational reforms, and Azkaban regulations I'd like changed. I've been discussing my plans with Mia."

"Yes, Mia has always had such grand plans when it comes to the Ministry." Laurel chuckled, long having dropped her pureblood princess façade. "Oh, but she's got a wedding to plan now. You won't be too busy, will you?"

Mia shook her head and took a sip from her cup before answering. "I think *anyone* with a good head on their shoulders should be able to plan a wedding in addition to entertaining ambitious thoughts regarding Ministry reforms and thoughts of a future career. Don't you agree, Draco?"

"Absolutely," he said and turned back to Laurel. "One should first look to take care of one's family, one's lineage, and then next, one's community. It shows a lack of character to have the inability to do all flawlessly."

Sirius and Remus followed Harry back into the room when the boy's curiosity appeared to get the better of him.

Draco turned to face the men and cleared his throat. "Ah, Sirius. Have you met Madam Greengrass's lovely daughters?"

Sirius shook his head, understanding his role in the game. "I haven't yet officially had the pleasure."

Draco looked at both Daphne and Astoria for the briefest of moments before he reached for Astoria's slender hand and helped her to stand up. "May I present Miss Astoria Greengrass," he said and then turned for Daphne's hand, "and her sister, Daphne."

Astoria looked positively delighted as she stood to greet Sirius, Daphne a bit less so.

Sirius took each girl's hand and kissed their knuckles politely. "Ladies, it is a pleasure to meet you both."

"And you, Lord Black." Astoria dipped her head politely, casting a glance back at Draco once and winking at him.

Draco grinned and looked over his shoulder at Mia and Narcissa, who were both smiling in approval.

"I'm so glad our families can be such good friends." Laurel beamed brightly, taking and squeezing Mia's hand. She turned her attention to Harry, who was standing beside Sirius. "You still haven't introduced me to your . . . nephew?"

"Brother," Mia corrected. "It's easier that way. Harry, this is Laurel Greengrass, one of my dearest friends. And her daughters—"

Daphne stepped in front of her younger sister to smile brightly at Harry. "Daphne Greengrass. And you are—?"

"Taken!" Ginny jumped up from her seat and made her way to Harry's side, grabbing his hand. "And leaving." She turned her attention back to Mia and smiled. "Hermione, congratulations again. And congrats to you, Malfoy."

"What were you congratulating Malfoy for?" Harry asked as he was practically dragged from the room by his girlfriend. Ginny's answer was muffled as the door shut behind them.

Narcissa smirked at Ginny's exit. "She's delightful."

"Shame." Laurel sighed, twisting a lock of blond hair around her finger. "Hyperion will want them *both* arranged by the time they go back to Hogwarts."

"Are you going back to Hogwarts as well, Daphne?" Mia asked.

The elder Greengrass sister bobbed her head as she re-joined the table, changing seats to allow Draco and Astoria to sit side-by-side between their mothers. "Last year wasn't very educational."

Mia nodded in understanding. "Laurel, what are Hyperion's requirements for a betrothal?"

"Pureblood," Laurel replied, rolling her eyes. "You know it makes no difference to *me*, but at least he's no longer trying to pick future husbands for the girls based on war affiliations. Still, you know how his father was. Pureblood or nothing, everything else is just a bargaining chip."

Mia tossed her friend a conspiratorial grin that made Sirius both amused and uneasy at the same time. "In that case, let me put some ideas together, and I'll owl you later this week."

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### **October 19th, 1998**

Long gone were the days where Sirius would dream about the past and wake to struggle with a morning erection, desperate for release. Now he dreamt of the past, present, and future, and all three had Mia writhing beneath him, always wet and ready. Instead of waking up alone and frustrated, Sirius now found himself waking in the dark hours of the early morning, his witch positioned over his lap, descending on his steel-hard cock, throbbing from the pleasant dream he had just been having—which paled in comparison to the sight of Mia ravishing him with that hungry, determined look in her eyes.

"Feel free to wake me up like this *every* morning," he said, swallowing back a groan as she slid down him, her slick warmth engulfing him completely.

He was absolutely certain that she was attempting to shag the memories of Azkaban out of him, and he was not going to complain about her efforts. The prison had been nothing but cold and empty, and she was warmth and comfort. In Azkaban, his muscles had atrophied due to lack of use, and Mia seemed bound and determined to keep him well exercised. His legs, for instance, flexed when he planted his feet against the mattress, using

the leverage to thrust up into her. He grinned as he watched her struggle to cling to him, bouncing on his cock, desperate not to fall off.

"Sirius, please . . . harder."

He never could deny her what she wanted, especially when she asked so nicely.

When he took her in his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist to angle him deeper inside of her, Mia cried out loudly and dug her nails into the skin of his back. Sirius growled at the pain, shivering as her scratches sent chills down his spine. Her muscles squeezed him as he pressed a hand between their tightly-joined bodies to rub at her swollen clit.

When he felt her reaching her peak, Sirius bit down on her neck, just above the Pack Mark as though to remind her that even though Remus marked her once, Sirius would be claiming her for the rest of their lives—as often as their bodies would allow him to.

Mia cried out as she came, tugging on his hair and whimpering as he pulsed inside of her, groaning out his own release against her throat.

Catching his breath, he fell back against the mattress with a satisfied smile as he ran lazy fingers up and down her bare back.

When he woke again later that morning, every muscle in his body ached in that delicious way that reminded him he was alive and, despite being nineteen years older than the witch, he was still young enough to shag her into delirious exhaustion. Then again, considering how cold her side of the bed felt against the back of his hand, Mia had apparently been up for hours.

After a quick shower and throwing on a pair of jeans, Sirius made his way down the stairs, heading for the kitchen to replenish all the energy he had lost early that morning. He grinned brightly at the sight of food already on the table and walked up, kissing his godson on the top of the head in greeting as Harry drank coffee while reading the morning paper.

"As much as I appreciate breakfast every morning," Sirius said as he poured himself a cup, "I want to make sure you are completely aware that you don't have to cook for us all, Harry."

Harry waved off his worries. "I actually like it. Didn't used to when I was younger. But now that it's a choice and I'm cooking for people I actually love, it's . . . it's nice," he said with a thoughtful smile.

Despite the fact that the mere thought of Petunia and Vernon—and the years Harry spent in their neglectful care—made his blood itch, Sirius was glad that his godson was no longer holding back the details of his childhood as though they were something to be ashamed of.

"Well, then I appreciate you cooking all the more because it benefits you *and* me." He chuckled as he sat down at the table, reaching for the plate of bacon in the centre.

"Care to do me a favour in exchange for food every morning?" Harry asked, green eyes still focused on the paper in his hands.

"What's that, son?"

"Wear a shirt to breakfast," Harry quietly requested, his cheeks slightly pink from embarrassment.

"Am I so hideous that I'm turning you off your appetite?" Sirius asked, pretending to be offended.

"I'm perfectly accepting of your and Hermione's relationship. I know that you love one another, and I'm happy you're both happy," Harry promised as he finally made eye contact with Sirius. "But you've got scratch marks up and down your back, and the thought of *how* they got there at that particular angle is making me slightly nauseous."

Sirius laughed loudly but assented and stood, walking to a nearby cupboard where he pulled out a hanging robe and slung it over his shoulders. "Better?" he asked as he sat back down.

"It would be better if someone would remind Hermione of how great she is at Glamour Charms," Harry said with a wry smile. "She left the house this morning with love bites all over her neck."

"Sorry, Harry," Sirius said with a chuckle as he served himself up a plate of eggs. "As delicious as your breakfasts are, she happens to taste better."

Sirius smirked at the way Harry grimaced; something inside of him felt like everything would be good again from now on. It felt like being back before the war really began when he and Mia would tease James relentlessly with their affection. James would cringe, and Lily would giggle, and Remus would roll his eyes. Maybe, just maybe, things could be that happy and wonderful again.

"Where is my lovely witch off to today?"

"Errands." Harry shrugged. "I honestly thought she'd spend the morning crying in her room like she normally would, but I keep forgetting how different she is."

Sirius frowned, suddenly concerned. "Why would she cry at all?"

Harry passed over the *Daily Prophet*.

Glancing down at the paper, his nose twitched at the front page.

In the bottom corner was a lovely photograph of Draco and Astoria along with their engagement announcement, which was to be expected since Mia, Narcissa, and Laurel had orchestrated the timing to coincide with the Malfoys' recent scholarship creation for Muggle-born wizards and witches.

It was perfect timing to reveal the engagement, considering it had been announced already that the Malfoys had had their vaults returned to them, and the public would eat up the fact that the first thing Draco did with his Galleons was give them away to Muggle-borns. Establishing his story of redemption alongside a fairy-tale wedding was something the society pages were going to live off until the wedding, and considering Astoria still had another two years left of her Hogwarts education, the engagement was going to be a long one.

It was not, however, Draco and Astoria's engagement photograph that was centred in the paper, but rather one of Sirius and Mia in Diagon Alley just near an Apparition point. Both were smiling brightly, obviously in love. In the photograph, Sirius leant down and kissed her, cupping her face in one hand while the other snaked around her waist. The title of the article made him growl.

## GOLDEN GIRL TURNS GOLD DIGGER

*by Rita Skeeter*

*In the face of the wonderful news that Draco Malfoy, a reformed Death Eater and war hero, has found true love in the arms of Astoria Greengrass (daughter of Hyperion and Laurel Greengrass nee' Parkinson), his former lover, Hermione Granger, Muggle-born witch, is taking out her revenge on the Slytherin by seducing another wealthy pureblood heir: Sirius Black.*

*Black, considered one of the most eligible bachelors in Wizarding Britain, was spotted in the company of Miss Granger, and everyone is asking, "What Love Potion has the temptress slipped the infamous heir?"*

*Known for being framed and innocently imprisoned over the deaths of twelve Muggles in 1981, Black escaped Azkaban in 1993, only to supposedly die of unknown causes in 1996. Rumours of his return to the*

*land of the living came in the middle of the war, though the details are unknown. Now a declared war hero and godfather of The Chosen One, Harry Potter, Sirius Black is also recipient of the Order of Merlin, First Class and the last of a Noble and Ancient pureblood family.*

*Is Miss Granger looking for wealth and fame? Is she trying to dilute the pureblood Houses with her secret Muggle-born agenda? Or is this a case of simple revenge against Draco Malfoy for choosing a pureblood bride over his Muggle-born mistress.*

"This shit is getting ridiculous," Sirius groaned, rubbing his forehead. "I'm suddenly very glad that we're dealing with a rational Mia and not an emotionally vulnerable Hermione."

"She wasn't emotional, that's for certain," Harry said pointedly. "Pissed off was more like it. Keep reading."

Sirius looked down.

*Harry Potter was unavailable for comment on the scandalous relationship between his godfather and ex-girlfriend, but we can only imagine that our poor Saviour is heartbroken over the fact that his feelings were not taken into consideration. Unsurprising, as the witch has been hurting him for years with her many affairs.*

*Fellow member of The Golden Trio (pick up your copy of The Golden Trio: Young Love in War at local bookstores now) and also jilted ex-lover of the devious Miss Granger, Ronald Weasley, was asked his opinion about the relationship between Black and Granger. Though he refused to comment, he did not appear surprised by the news, which leaves us all to wonder how long has Miss Granger been finding herself in the company of older men? Was Sirius Black just another in a long line of wizards that fell prey to Granger's wiles during the war? Or is Sirius Black a knowing participant in his own godson's heartbreak?*

Sirius threw the paper down and snarled as he stood. "Shit!"

"I take it you got to the part where *you* become the villain?" Harry asked angrily.

"Like I give a fuck what people think about me," Sirius snapped. "We have a bigger problem on our hands. Where did Mia say she was going?"

Harry frowned, evidently confused and worried at Sirius's tone. "Errands, why?"

"Those were her *exact* words?" Sirius asked. "She didn't say where she was going or what she was doing?"

Harry shook his head. "No, just that she had some errands to run and a few details to work out before—"

Sirius paled. "What?"

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Mia stood outside the door of Bard and Beetle Publishing with a smile, both vinewood wands tucked neatly into their holsters—one on the arm of her robes and the other against her thigh. A copy of that morning's *Daily Prophet* was in one hand, while a delicately scripted list was in the other—something she had written down in haste that morning after reading the paper.

Her eyes flickered to the list in her hand, something that she had kept in her head for eight years and finally had written down. The top nine names were noted and then stricken with a line through the middle just so that she could get the sense of completion from doing so, but the bottom four names remained untouched, begging to be scratched out:

~~Tom Riddle~~  
~~Peter Pettigrew~~  
~~Bellatrix Lestrange~~  
~~Lucius Malfoy~~  
~~Albus Dumbledore~~  
~~Alastor Moody~~  
~~Fenrir Greyback~~  
~~Antonin Dolohov~~  
**Bartholomew Crouch**  
Dolores Umbridge  
Cornelius Fudge  
Vernon and Petunia Dursley  
Rita Skeeter

"Well, well, well." The door opened and in the frame stood a sneering, heavy-jawed, blond witch with tight curls and rhinestone studded spectacles on her face. Her thin red lips curled viciously at Mia, and her tiny eyes narrowed. "If it isn't Little Miss Perfect. I was wondering when I'd be seeing you again."

Mia smiled sweetly at the woman, her inner Animagus salivating over the primal need to hunt. "Oh, Rita," she said with a soft sigh. "I don't believe you've ever met *me*."

## Chapter One Hundred Forty

### *Comeuppance*

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*Soon she's gonna find  
Stealing other people's toys  
On the playground won't  
Make you many friends  
She should keep in mind  
She should keep in mind  
There is nothing I do better than revenge  
(Revenge - Taylor Swift)*

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**October 19th, 1998**

One would expect that after years of working in the journalism industry, Rita would have gained some sort of radar—or, from her Animagus form, *feelers*—to detect threatening presences. However, her pride was just apparently too great.

Without recognising that she was obviously being threatened, Rita invited Mia into her office. She was under the impression, of course, that the witch standing before her was none other than Hermione Granger, the sweet little Muggle-born who fought for house-elf rights and stood as the beacon of hope and change next to Harry Potter. Sure, Hermione had kidnapped Rita in her Animagus form and stored her in a glass jar for a few weeks only to blackmail her later, but clearly, things had changed. Rita was now a best-selling author, more famous than ever, and she was absolutely not afraid of Hermione Granger.

That was a *dire* mistake.

Mia's focus moved around the large office that was made to feel much smaller due to the number of trophies and awards that plastered the walls. Some were real, of course, as no one could deny that Rita had a way with words that enticed readers. Had she decided to sit down and pen fictional novels, she would very likely be deliriously rich. Unfortunately, the woman relied on deception and lies to gain her wealth and fame.

"I'm curious, with the success of your books," Mia said, glancing to the side where several pre-autographed copies of *Golden Trio: Young Love in War* were stacked on the edge of Rita's desk, "how come you're still even bothering to write for the *Prophet*?"

Rita shrugged and took a seat opposite Mia, entirely calm and collected and showing her abundant lack of intimidation. "The *Daily Prophet* is delivered by owl twice a day. If anything, it's free advertising for my books."

Mia observed several of Rita's awards. "You've done well for yourself."

"I have, thank you," Rita said, her words almost sounding genuine, which they might have been, considering that the scandals she had written about Hermione Granger's love life had provided the wretched reporter with attention-grabbing material.

Who cared about important things like Ministry corruption and Death Eater sightings when the *supposed* girlfriend of Harry Potter went to the Yule Ball with a Quidditch star?

Mia could not really fault the readers, though she remembered the cold shoulder that Molly had given her after the articles in *Witch Weekly* had gone public. After all, with rumours of Voldemort on the rise again, it must have been much easier to distract oneself from the horrors of an approaching war rather than face it head-on. Of course, she, Harry, and Ron had not had the luxury of distractions like that. Not at the forefront of everything, where they always ended up.

She wondered who would actually read the truth. Would people care more about the fact that she had been tortured than the lies about her love life? Would they turn a blind eye to the fact that two Ministers for Magic had ignored the threats to their world and instead eagerly eat up the gossip surrounding the men Hermione Granger associated with? Mia sighed, abundantly grateful that she no longer cared what people thought about her. The ring on her finger reminded her that once news of hers and Sirius's engagement—and her true identity—got out, she might not have to worry about rumours regarding Harry, Ron, and Draco anymore.

"Perhaps you should be thanking all of the victims of war that you've exploited," Mia said calmly, not even making eye contact as she looked over a framed photograph of Rita standing among the Triwizard champions several years ago. Fleur looked annoyed, Cedric politely smiled, and Harry and Viktor both looked uncomfortable. Especially Viktor, who was grimacing as Rita gripped his bicep and winked at him.

"You can leave me off of the list if you please, I hardly care what drivel you write about *me* these days." Mia waved her hand at the papers as though they were nothing more than slightly bothersome clutter. "Only the completely ignorant would ever think I've had

a grand love affair with Draco Malfoy but, then again, there were plenty of idiots that believed your lies about me and Harry."

"And Sirius Black?" Rita asked, pushing a copy of the Diagon Alley photograph to the edge of her desk, looking like she was eagerly waiting for the usual reactions accompanying the discovery of an affair to appear: the gasp, the flush, the shifting of eyes—all descriptions to add to her first draft follow-up article about the pair of scandalous lovers that was sitting in the drawer. "Am I lying about *this*?"

Mia smiled down at the photo, watching herself and Sirius embrace and kiss.

*Thank Merlin for giving me this man. He is beautiful,* she thought.

"A picture is worth a thousand words, they say. It's too bad that this picture came with *your* words. And really, you do have a tendency to ramble." She looked up at Rita and pursed her lips together, staring at the witch with something akin to pity. "Any *good* reporter could have said the same thing you did in half as many words."

Rita briefly narrowed her eyes, but Mia's lack of denial over the photograph had clearly sparked intrigue, and soon she was reaching for her Quick-Quotes Quill that began fluttering immediately behind her in the air, scribbling quickly against a pad of parchment.

"So you're confirming, then? You and Sirius Black are lovers?"

Mia rolled her eyes dramatically, her thumb casually playing with the opal ring on her left hand. She was sitting now, though, hands resting in her lap and out of view of Rita's penetrating gaze.

"Sirius Black and I are so much more than anything your simple mind could even *begin* to imagine. For instance, he loves me so much that, at my simple request, he would very *literally* tear your throat out with his bare teeth. Teeth which I can attest are quite sharp," she said, pleasantly remembering the way he bit and nibbled at her neck just that morning. "I doubt his bite would be as delightful for you as it is for me."

Rita might as well have been drooling, she was so obviously thirsty for the gossip.

"As for how *I* feel about Sirius . . ." She took a deep breath and let it out with a long sigh, watching as the Quick-Quotes Quill scratched constantly against the parchment behind the salivating reporter. "I love Sirius Black so much that while *I* care very little for being labelled a fame-seeking, gold-digging whore, I do take serious issue with you labelling him a lascivious degenerate."

The Quick-Quotes Quill stilled for a brief moment when Mia's voice and stare turned cold, and it looked as though Rita was contemplating something.

Mia hoped she was contemplating fear—it would make things a lot easier and a great deal more fun.

"And exactly *how* old were you when your . . . *association* with Mr Black began?" Rita asked.

There it was.

The implication was insulting to Sirius and offensive to Mia, regardless of the dreams she used to have as a teenager spending holidays at Grimmauld Place with a sleeping Sirius Black only doors away from her. Neither had ever acted on it until she was *definitely* of age or when they were *both* underage.

"Time and age mean nothing to me," Mia said firmly. "Had you been less of a treacherous bitch, I might have offered you the story of a lifetime. War, betrayal, murder, sex . . . love that goes beyond the bounds of time and death. Unfortunately, you have *severely* pissed me off one too many times, and even the overused idea of blackmail hasn't stopped you, so I hardly think we'll be best friends now."

She stood quickly, aiming her wand over Rita's shoulder and blasting the Quick-Quotes Quill into tiny shards; the parchment burnt to a crisp.

Her face scrunched up into an expression of rage, and Rita's eyes widened in a panic at the missing wand she normally kept in the pocket of her robes. She looked up to see Mia smirking at her, ash wand in one hand, vinewood in the other.

Rita hissed at the sight of her wand in the hands of another. "How did you—?"

Mia used her vinewood wand to summon a glass jar from her purse.

At the sight of the container, Rita took a step back. "I don't think so, missy. You think I'm stupid enough to shift in front of you so you can capture me again?" She laughed loudly—too loud to sound normal—perhaps hoping it would draw attention from a potential rescue party.

"Do you think I'm not smart enough to *force* you?" Mia asked. "What was it the papers have been calling me lately? In addition to 'opportunistic hussy,' of course. Brightest Witch of the Age? I imagine that someone bearing that moniker would know how to force an Animagus into their form. It's N.E.W.T. level Transfiguration. But we all know that I've always been a bit of an overachiever."

Rita paled. "What?"

"It's a simple spell. I'm surprised most Animagi don't learn it. I had it used on me once by a dear friend," she said, thinking of her Defence N.E.W.T. with Remus. "The dirty cheat."

"You're an—?"

"An Animagus? Yes, for *years* now. How long did it take *you* to learn how to do it?" Mia asked Rita, breaking out a haughty grin when the other witch gave her a bitter glare. "I hadn't even taken my O.W.L.s yet. Now, back to this amusing little charm. It's very simple, see, just a wave of the wand."

Rita flinched and covered her head in an attempt to protect herself while screaming, "You wouldn't dare!"

Mia chuckled at the sight of the terrified and yet still stubborn reporter. "Well, not right away, no. If I shift you into your tiny little bug self, then I don't get to see you cry when I do *this*," she said and aimed her wand at the stack of *Golden Trio* books, setting them on fire.

"You can't do that! I'll call the Aurors!"

Mia sat back down in the chair, crossing her legs at the ankles. "No hurry, dear," she said casually, turning her head only when the door to the office burst open to reveal a wand-holding Harry Potter followed by Sirius and Remus. "Oh, look, the Aurors have arrived."

Harry stared at Mia, eyes filled with worry, despite the fact that she was reclined in the chair opposite the desk. Rita Skeeter was screaming and trying to put out a fire in the corner without a wand. "Hermione! What're you doing?"

"I think that's fairly obvious. I'm lodging a complaint about Miss Skeeter's article." She twirled her vine-wood wand in one hand, tossing the ash wand to Sirius. "Narcissa, Laurel, and I worked very hard to get Draco's engagement the attention it needs, and it was pushed aside so easily. Plus, I look awful in that photograph."

Sirius grinned at her as he pocketed Rita's wand. "I think you look lovely."

She smiled up at him. "You're biased."

Harry stared between the two incredulously, turning back to gape at Remus, who only shook his head. His silent *I told you so* hung in the air.

Rita, using the distraction, attempted to make a break for the door, but Mia raised her wand with incredible speed, cutting her off mid-step.

"Love," Remus said calmly, "I know you're upset about the article—"

"Remus, stop talking to me like I'm going to *kill* the woman," Mia said, not breaking eye contact with the seething reporter.

"You do have a bad temper when it comes to protecting—"

"I'll have you know, Remus Lupin, it has been *years* since I've even *thought* about using an Unforgivable on someone," she said, drawing a gasp from Skeeter and a wide-eyed stare from Harry.

"So, wait . . . if you're not here to kill her, then what *are* you doing?" Harry asked cautiously.

Mia turned back and looked at Rita coldly. "I'm simply making a point," she said and flicked her wand. "*Avis!*"

"Oh, shit," Harry muttered, likely recalling the spell from their sixth year. Mia knew that Ron still bore the tiny pecked scars on his hands and arms from the attack.

However, instead of tiny yellow birds, large black crows emerged from her wand.

"Those aren't canaries," Remus whispered.

"*Oppugno!*" Mia hissed, and the murder of black birds circled over Rita and then dove down to attack.

Harry, ever the hero, was the only one to move to help.

Before he had a chance to act, Mia had banished the birds, though she had allowed them to get in a good few pecks.

As promised, Skeeter was crying—screaming obscenities and calling Mia a "Mudblood cunt" but crying nonetheless. It was not blood and death Mia had been after, but fear and humiliation, the same thing Rita had so often made *her* feel in the past.

With a satisfied expression, Mia reached for the glass jar, waved her wand in the intricate pattern that she had picked up from Remus years ago, and summoned the suddenly-small beetle into the container.

"Hermione, I'm still an Auror," Harry said, his jaw clenched and a look on his face that said he was not sure how he had ended up being the rule-abiding one in their friendship. "I can't just . . . You just *attacked* someone!"

"No, Harry, I've captured an illegal Animagus," Mia corrected him, tossing the glass jar through the air and watching in amusement as he caught it. "Granted, it took some effort to get her to cooperate, and my methods might have come on a little strong, but there she is. Take her to the Ministry."

He stared blankly at her in obvious confusion. "You're not blackmailing her?"

"Of *course* not. I tried that once, and she couldn't keep her mouth shut for more than a few years. Fool me once, shame on you . . ."

Harry sighed and rubbed at the scar on his forehead. Mia knew that it no longer hurt since he killed Voldemort, but in times of stress, rubbing the lightning-shaped mark had become a habit. "Hermione, if I take her to the Ministry to be charged . . . isn't that, I don't know, a little hypocritical of you?"

"Why?" Mia asked as she walked over to the group, kissing Sirius's cheek in greeting and taking Rita's wand from his grip so she could slip it into Harry's pocket. "Sirius and I are legally registered Animagi. Have been for two decades."

"What?" Sirius and Remus both asked, surprised.

"I worked at the Ministry. You *seriously* thought I wouldn't take into account *that* part of our future and create a fail-safe? I registered Jamie, too—not Peter, though, shame," she said, her nose twitching. "Then I filed away the paperwork and put a time-delayed Sticking Charm on it. I imagine our files have been stuck on the inside of the Animagi Registry file cabinet for quite a few years. Should have fallen down by now. Either way, the papers would be easy enough to summon if someone needed proof."

"Merlin's pants." Remus stared at her, gobsmacked. "You're brilliant."

Sirius grinned suggestively, stepping forward so that he could wrap his arms around her waist. "Would you mind terribly much if I just took you home and . . . ?"

She laughed and pushed against his chest. "Actually, I would. We've one more stop to make before I'm done with Miss Skeeter and these interesting articles she's been writing."

---

The sitting room of the Daily Prophet office was clean and quiet. Tacky art hung on the walls between framed articles from years past. Most had photographs of Harry in them.

When the supposed owner of the paper entered the room, Mia watched as his focus fell on Harry first.

"Mother of Merlin," he said, gasping. "Harry Potter in *my* offices. Good afternoon, Mr Potter." Stepping forward to grip Harry's hand in both of his, he grinned as he shook it wildly. "Such an honour, such an honour."

Sirius rolled his eyes, and Remus smirked at the way Harry's face flushed at the attention, awkwardly returning the greeting with a quiet, "Yeah, er . . . hi."

"And Hermione Granger and Sirius Black . . ." the man said, turning his attention to the couple, gazing at the sight of their joined hands, seemingly thrilled by the confirmation of their relationship. He did not acknowledge Remus, who looked perfectly content with being ignored. "Could I trouble any of you for a photograph? An interview, maybe?"

Sirius scowled angrily, doing nothing to hide his distaste. "I think you've been printing enough of our names lately, thanks."

Mia patted his arm gently. "Now, Sirius, Let's not be rude to Mr . . ." She turned her attention back to the man.

"Cuffe," the man said, introducing himself. "Barnabas Cuffe, Miss Granger, Editor and Owner of the *Daily Prophet*." He put his hands in his pockets, standing tall as though waiting for one of *them* to take *his* picture.

"Mr Cuffe. I'm sure you're just a grateful citizen of Wizarding Britain, eager to display your gratitude, aren't you?"

"Absolutely, Miss Granger, absolutely!" He beamed, his attention flickering to Harry every four seconds.

Mia nodded but then frowned. "Unfortunately, we've come to lodge a small complaint with the paper. See, two dear friends of ours were so excited about their engagement and were very saddened to find out that a piece of gossip was plastered all over the front page of the *Daily Prophet*, effectively stealing their thunder."

Barnabas flushed red and scratched the back of his neck nervously. "Oh, yes. Ah, yes. Skeeter's piece."

"Yes, Miss Skeeter and I have a past," Mia said thoughtfully, "as I'm sure you're well aware, Mr Cuffe."

Barnabas cleared his throat, suddenly realising that this was not a social visit. "See, Miss Granger, the thing is, Rita Skeeter used to bring in a lot of readers. The *Daily Prophet* lost a bit of a, well, profit during the war. Skeeter's not the kindest person there is, but she's always been a bloody good reporter, and people pay attention to what she says."

Harry scoffed loudly, angrily shoving his glasses up his nose and then crossing his arms.

"I'm well aware that people pay attention to what she says," Mia replied. "But let's overlook Rita Skeeter for a moment, sir. You're telling me that your company is having problems because of the war?" she asked, her tone filled with concern. "Losing money?"

He bowed his head. "Yes, Miss."

"That's terrible!" She gasped, placing her hand against her chest in a move that Narcissa Malfoy would have considered well-practised manipulation. "Isn't that just *terrible*, Harry?"

Harry glanced up, looking surprised that he was being brought back into the conversation. Before answering, he looked down at Mia's hands as though he were expecting black birds to emerge from her wand and start attacking the man in front of them. "Umm . . . yeah, I guess."

Mia turned her attention back to Cuffe. "Tell me, sir, was the *Daily Prophet* attacked at all during the war? The building, your employees, your family?"

"Not so much, no," Cuffe said. "No family of my own, just me, actually. And as for the employees, there were a few Muggle-borns I had to let go of," he said and then whispered, "for their own *protection*, you see."

Mia dipped her head to him. "Of course. It was so good of you to think of them." Her brows raised slightly, surprised, when Cuffe humbly nodded—clearly he was unable to pick up on what she thought was obvious sarcasm.

Sirius leant to the side and whispered to Harry, "This is about to get *really* bad."

Harry shook his head. "I don't get it. She doesn't even look angry."

Remus snorted. "She looks like Dorea."

"Now," Mia said, looping her arm through Cuffe's in a friendly gesture as she ignored the whispered conversation that all three knew she was capable of hearing. Cuffe blushed, clearly making plans in his mind to retell the story later about how Harry Potter walked into his office, and Hermione Granger, the most famous Muggle-born ever and

Brightest Witch of the Age, actually held onto his arm. "I say we put all this mess behind us and start fresh, yes?"

"That's good and kind of you, Miss Granger."

"In fact, I insist that the *Daily Prophet* be the very first to have an exclusive interview with myself and Sirius." She smiled, releasing Cuffe and making her way to Sirius's chair where she delicately perched herself on the arm, knowing that instinctively her wizard would place a possessive hand on her back or thigh—which was exactly what he did.

"I'm certain it would bring back a great deal of your readership." Mia watched as Cuffe's eyes widened at the intimate display, likely seeing the cover of the next *Daily Prophet* in his vision. "Perhaps even an interview with Harry?"

She was not sure if he even tried to contain it, but a gleeful giggle escaped the man's mouth.

Harry frowned. "Hermione, what're you—?"

"*Exclusive?* Really?" Cuffe asked.

"I insist. In fact, I am going to put a great deal of personal effort into the restoration of the *Daily Prophet*," Mia said as though the thought just occurred to her. "Hands-on interest. Investments, improvements . . ." She paused and frowned. "Of course, Rita will have to be let go."

Cuffe waved off the suggestion as though Rita Skeeter were the last thing on his mind. "Of course. We won't need her anyway, what with you lot helping out."

"Absolutely. In fact," Mia said as she stood to face the older wizard, "when I own this place, I'll make it my personal mission to let her go so that you won't have to. I imagine you've built quite a rapport with her over the years."

Cuffe's smile briefly faltered, and he looked bewildered. "Wait . . . what? When you . . ."

"When I *own* the *Daily Prophet*," Mia repeated with a saccharine smile, pausing to observe his furrowed brows. "Oh, you're confused? That's sweet."

He opened his mouth, looking like he wanted to object, but one glance at Sirius had him shutting his jaw so quickly that his teeth snapped. Mia found it interesting that he did not see the real threat standing in front of him.

"You see, not only have you willingly employed an unregistered Animagus who is known for trespassing in order to acquire her stories—" She noted the lack of shock on

Cuffe's face indicating that he had, in fact, known about Rita's illegal Animagi form. "— you've also published slanderous material in regards to several well-known war heroes, not to mention the blundering mess that the *Daily Prophet* was pulled into during the war by publishing anti-Muggle and blood-purist propaganda.

"Mr Cuffe, I plan on taking the *Daily Prophet* before the Wizengamot, where I will sue you for every last Galleon you've ever earned by printing my name, the names of my family, or anyone else I happen to be in association with for defamation of character."

The colour drained from Cuffe's face, and he took a step backward to catch himself on the edge of a desk, staring in shock as Mia stepped closer to him. "You . . . You can't do that."

Sirius laughed loudly. "Oh, she *really* can. Would you like me to track down a solicitor for you, kitten?"

Mia shook her head. "Thank you, love, but I believe I promised Mr Cuffe here that I would put my *personal* effort into the restoration of the *Daily Prophet*. Hands-on interest. It's been quite some time since I've been inside the Ministry, though, and in front of the Wizengamot no less. Harry, do you think it would be considered tacky to wear my Order of Merlin during court proceedings? I don't want to come across as prideful, but the shine of it does bring out my eyes, don't you think?"

When they finally left the offices of the *Daily Prophet*, Barnabas Cuffe was in hysterical tears, begging to keep his job. Mia offered him one in the Owlery Department to which he scrunched up his nose in disgust and mistakenly brought up the fact that he was a pureblood—as though that meant he was above such things.

"So what're you going to do with the *Daily Prophet*, Hermione?" Harry asked, shaking his head in disbelief as they walked away from the building.

"I actually hadn't thought about it. The threat kind of came out of nowhere," she admitted with a laugh.

"So you're not really going to sue?"

"Oh, I'm *absolutely* going to sue them. I'd run the whole place into the ground if it didn't have so many employees, and they can't all be bad," she admitted. "Maybe I'll see if Luna and her father want to take it over."

"Right, then. I'm off to the Ministry to report an unregistered Animagus." Harry gestured to the glass jar he had slipped into the pocket of his robes. "See you lot at home?"

Mia reached out and took Sirius's hand. "Actually, I'm stealing him away for a date."

"Is that so?" Sirius grinned. "And where are we off to, kitten?"

"A place not for Harry's ears," she said in a loud, staged whisper, chuckling when Harry groaned and rolled his eyes at her.

"Honestly, Ginny and I have never been as bad as the pair of you," he insisted and then waved to them all, turning and Disapparating away.

"You going to tell me where you're really off to?" Remus asked Mia. "Harry doesn't know you well enough to know when you're purposely hiding something. You've attacked and kidnapped a reporter, made a grown wizard cry, and it's not even noon. Who're you off to torment next?"

Mia smiled softly. "Plausible deniability, Remus."

"Noted," he said with an anxious sigh. "Please, just . . . *try* not to get into too much trouble. I'm married to an Auror, and I feel like she'd be cross with me if the two of you got arrested for something."

"I solemnly swear to you, Remus, we will not get caught."

He groaned and turned away from her, Disapparating on the spot.

Sirius kissed her cheek. "What dastardly plans do you have, my love? Where are we off to?"

Mia took a deep breath and sighed, her amusement fading as she said, "Little Whinging."

## Chapter One Hundred Forty-One

### *Family Matters*

---

*Shatter every window 'til it's all blown away,  
Every brick, every board, every slamming door blown away  
'Til there's nothing left standing, nothing left of yesterday  
Every tear-soaked whiskey memory blown away  
Blown away  
(Blown Away - Carrie Underwood)*

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**October 19th, 1998**

Mia remembered that when she had gone to Australia to say one last goodbye to her Muggle parents at the end of the war, Harry had been handling a few family matters of his own, having requested that the Order help get his aunt, uncle, and cousin back into their home on Privet Drive. He wanted to move them himself, but he was unable to even walk past the front gates of Grimmauld Place without being attacked by the press disguised as Muggle paparazzi. Then there was the fact that he just was not ready to face the Dursleys himself so soon after everything he had gone through.

Sirius admitted that he had not gone with the Order to Little Whinging, too worried about what he might say or do to the Muggles.

Arthur was one of the few who volunteered to go to Surrey, as he considered himself to have a decent rapport with the Dursleys. Mia figured that he was either happy to ignore—or completely unaware of—the Muggles' disdain for wizards and the Weasleys in particular, considering their past interactions.

He had returned to Grimmauld Place to inform Harry that his family had been successfully moved back into their home. When Harry had gone off to bed, Arthur confessed to Sirius that the home on Privet Drive had been almost entirely demolished and had to have immense repairs done before the Muggles could be moved back in. It had taken an extra week, and the Dursley parents had complained about it to anyone who would hear of it.

The very moment that the keys to the newly restored, fully furnished home were handed over, Vernon Dursley angrily demanded that all the "freaks" were to leave "his bloody property," and if they even dared to come back, they would surely be in for it.

Mia could feel Sirius quivering with excitement as they Apparated outside of a small, quiet park in Little Whinging. They paused before continuing on in order to transfigure her features to age her twenty years so that she no longer resembled Harry's friend from school.

Sirius waved his wand, shortening her hair a touch and adding a few laugh lines around her eyes and mouth. He had suggested some grey streaks in her locks, to which she asked if he was going to do the same to himself, and he surrendered immediately.

"You look sexy old."

"So do you," she said and winked at him. He scowled at her in reply, and she laughed.

They knocked softly on the door, and when it opened to reveal a tall, broad-shouldered young Muggle, Mia and Sirius both relaxed somewhat at the sight of Dudley Dursley.

The boy must have recognised their robes because his eyes widened in fear and concern. "Y-You . . . Is . . . . Is Harry okay?"

The words and expression caught them both entirely off guard, and Mia smiled. "You must be Dudley," she said sweetly, trying to remember that she currently looked to be in her late thirties, and he would see her as an authority figure rather than a peer. "Harry is quite safe."

"Surprised that you'd care," Sirius said questioningly, eyeing the boy.

Dudley looked down nervously. "I just . . . We didn't get to see him when we moved back, is all. No one would really tell us much about what happened."

"May we come in?" Mia asked politely.

Dudley looked around nervously, eyeing the driveway and the lack of cars on the street before slowly nodding. "My parents are due back soon. Went to lunch with some friends," he informed them as he opened the door, gesturing to the sitting room. "Umm . . . tea?"

"No, thank you," Mia said as she took a seat on the sofa, motioning for Sirius to sit beside her. "We'll try to be quick. I imagine your parents wouldn't be too happy to find us here when they return."

Dudley laughed nervously. "You could say that."

"You don't seem to mind us," Sirius observed, curious.

"Harry saved my life. From what the folks that moved us out and then back in again said, I guess he did a lot more than rescue me that one time from those, umm, cloaked things."

"Dementors," Mia provided.

Dudley bobbed his head, his face paling slightly.

Sirius, albeit hesitantly, said, "I was attacked by them, too. Spent twelve years in a . . . a building filled with them. I know how you feel."

Eyes wide as he took in the statement, Dudley muttered, "Twelve . . . bloody hell. So, umm, how is Harry?"

"He's good. Starting a career as an Auror. It's a highly trained position in law enforcement," Mia explained. "He lives in London. I could give you the address, or at least, a way to contact him if you'd like."

Dudley thought about it for a moment and then nodded. His attention turned to Sirius, anxiously looking him over. "You're his godfather, then?"

"How'd you know that?"

"Remember your face. You were on the telly a lot a few years back. Then Harry comes home from that school of his, saying how you were his godfather and Dad better start . . ." Dudley stopped mid-sentence and cleared his throat. "Just that, er . . . that you were his godfather and such." He then turned his attention to Mia and asked, "You his godmother, then?"

Mia laughed softly. "Something like that. My name is Mia Potter."

Dudley's jaw dropped. "Potter? But . . . Mum and Dad said—"

"That Harry didn't have any other family?"

He nodded. "Said that was why we—er, *they*—had to take him in."

Taking Sirius's hand in her own, Mia sighed. "Unfortunately, we were unable to take care of Harry when he needed us the most. We're very happy to finally be back in his life. Harry's father, James, is—*was*—my brother." There was an awkward silence that filled the room, and Mia searched for anything to distract from it. Her attention fell on a school bag in the corner, and she smiled. "You're in uni?"

"Yeah," he confirmed, a happy expression crossing his face. Clearly, the subject was something he enjoyed speaking about. "Barely got through, to be honest. I wasn't too good at the testing, and Dad thought it had something to do with the uh . . . you know," he said,

his gaze falling on Sirius, unable to bring up the dementors by name again. "Said it wasn't my fault. I knew better, of course, but wasn't gonna tell *him* that. Still got in, though."

"Congratulations." Mia smiled, wishing Lily had been there to hear the news about her nephew. "That's a wonderful achievement."

"It's all right." Dudley shrugged. "I like it better there than at my job."

"Where are you working?" Sirius asked.

"Grunnings. My dad got me the job. He's in sales. I'm not very good at it, but it pays for my flat. I only stop by here to do my wash."

"Are you attending class full-time?" Mia questioned.

Dudley shook his head. "Can't afford to just now. Not unless I move back home," he said with a wince. The idea was clearly not an option. "Maybe in a year or two, once I've saved up some."

"Dudley, I want you to write your school's information down for me and mail it to this address," Mia said, pulling a piece of paper and pen from her purse and noting down the Muggle mailbox that all the residents of Grimmauld Place used when they needed to correspond with the Muggle world. She handed the boy the paper and smiled.

Dudley took it, looking confused. "Umm . . . can I ask, what's this for?"

"You're going to quit that job you hate and attend the university you love full-time," Mia informed him. "We're going to pay for your education."

"We are?" Sirius asked, shocked, and Mia pinched his thigh. "Ow, fuck! I mean . . . we are. Of *course* we are!"

"Yes, and since we know what your parents would say about you accepting money from people like us . . ." She barely prevented herself from rolling her eyes. Sirius did not even try to stop himself. "You're going to tell them that you won a special scholarship. I imagine they'll be so proud of you that they won't ask too many questions."

Dudley's eyes were wide. "What? I mean . . . why?"

"Because . . . Because Lily would have offered it to you," Mia said, swallowing back several emotions as they rose to the surface. "Your aunt was the kindest person I've ever met, and family meant the world to her. I think she would have been very pleased to know that you were furthering your education."

Suddenly there was the sound of a car door shutting outside.

"Shit," Dudley muttered and stood up immediately, securing the mailing address away in the pocket of his jeans. "I, umm, I don't suppose that you'd take the offer back over whatever my parents might say when they walk in the door?"

Mia shook her head. "The offer stands, I promise. Perhaps . . . give us a chance to have a chat with your folks? I haven't seen them in twenty years. And I did actually come to try and catch up. Make peace. We're all still family, technically."

Dudley nodded but looked uneasy at the same time.

When the door opened and Vernon and Petunia stepped inside, the portly Muggle man first caught sight of Mia and her robes, and his face turned red. "What are you people doing here?!" he bellowed, slamming the front door behind him. "Get out! I told you lot to stay away!"

Petunia rushed toward Dudley, grabbing his head in her hands and hugging it tightly. It created an awkward sight as the large boy—who stood a good foot taller than his mother—was angled down, his cheek against her chest as she stroked his hair. "Oh, Diddums, are you all right? What did they do to you?"

"Nothing, Mum . . . M'fine," Dudley insisted, his cheeks red with embarrassment. "I'm going to be late for class." He breathed a sigh of relief when Petunia released him. "They're Harry's family."

"Family?" Vernon scoffed. "That boy hasn't got any family! If he had, then we wouldn't have had to put up with . . ." The man stopped, his eyes blinking a few times as he stared at the couple in front of him, evidently recognising them both.

"It was lovely to meet you, Dudley," Mia said, offering the boy an out.

Dudley nodded to Mia and Sirius and then leant in to kiss his mother on the cheek before rushing out the front door, making his escape before things got too bad.

The moment the door shut, Mia's eyes blazed. "Hello, Vernon," she said, all sweetness gone from her tone. "You and I are going to have a nice, long chat." Without a wand in her hand, she magically locked all the doors and windows and shut the drapes.

Petunia made a dash for the next room only to find herself faced off against a large black dog snarling viciously at her.

"You!" Vernon shouted, his meaty finger shaking in the air as he pointed at Mia. "You're Potter's sister!"

"Mia," she said, reintroducing herself to the man, adding a little curtsy. "It's been quite a number of years, Vernon, but I thought our last chat would have left an impression. Something about you daring to hurt my family, if I recall," she said thoughtfully. "Do you happen to remember what I said would happen to you if you did such a thing?"

Vernon paled, sweat beading on his forehead.

In the corner of the room, Petunia was screeching as Padfoot stepped closer.

"I'd be careful there, Petunia. Who knows if he's had all of his shots," Mia said with a chuckle as Padfoot barked loudly, causing Petunia to scream and rush toward Vernon, attempting to hide behind her husband who immediately tried to push her away from him.

"Now," Mia said calmly, "I would like to point out something very interesting. See, there are two couples here in this room who have much in common. We do share a nephew after all. And yet . . . despite being the *horrible freak* that I am—" She sent Vernon a scowl, which he returned. "—I do not believe *I* have it in me to physically, mentally, or emotionally harm a child. Let alone an orphan."

Padfoot growled.

Petunia whimpered.

"Were I a heinous person, I would have done something terrible to your son while you were gone. The two of you certainly would deserve it. Lucky for you, I have a history of being able to forgive people who were bullies as children. It's not *their* fault, after all, that their parents were ignorant arses," Mia snapped. "You two, however . . . You neglected Harry for *years*."

"He wasn't our responsibility!" Vernon shouted. "That old man just left him on our door and expected us to take him in, just like that!"

"Yes. Dumbledore overstepped in ways he clearly shouldn't have. *A lot* of people in the Wizarding world did things that they shouldn't have when Harry was placed in your care."

"Right, then." Vernon dipped his chin as though the matter had been settled. "Then go and deal with *them*!"

Mia smirked deviously. "I already have. They're all *dead*. Murdered."

It was the truth, of course, though she let the implication that *she* had been the one to kill them hang in the air while the Dursleys quivered in fear of her. She enjoyed their

fear and was half-tempted to track down a boggart and release it upon the Muggles if only to see herself reflected back in the image of the creature.

Petunia's crying distracted Mia from her pleasant thoughts. "What do you want from us?"

"Right now? Come with me," Mia said and walked over to the hallway to stand in front of a small open door.

Vernon and Petunia caught her meaning immediately and, with Padfoot snarling behind them, slowly stepped into the cupboard under the stairs. Vernon had to go in sideways, and Petunia let out a piercing cry when he stomped on one of her feet.

Mia smiled pleasantly as Sirius transformed back into a human so he could stand at her side as they leant against the doorway. They watched, smiles on their faces as Petunia was crushed against the wall by her husband while they tried to fit into the tiny space that was unfit for a house-elf, let alone a child.

"What are you going to do?" Vernon asked, officially frightened.

Mia stared at the man and then turned to look at Sirius. "What do you think, love?"

Sirius grinned. "I say we lock them inside."

"For how long?"

"How old was Harry when they finally let him out of it?" Sirius asked, his focus narrowed on the Muggles.

"Eleven," Mia answered, ignoring the gasp of terror that left Petunia's mouth.

"Eleven years. That ought to be long enough," Sirius said, and then slammed the door shut, locking it from the outside. Vernon and Petunia began screaming.

Sirius and Mia made their way into the kitchen before they started laughing.

He rushed up behind her, gripping her hips and pressing himself against her arse. "Would it be twisted to fuck you on their kitchen counters?" he asked before leaning forward and capturing her ear between his teeth.

Mia giggled and pulled away from him. "Yes, it would be *incredibly* twisted."

Sirius pouted. "So what are we *really* going to do with the Muggles?"

"Well, we haven't used magic on them, so other than threats—which they wouldn't even know how to report—we've really done nothing wrong, legally speaking. I suppose we'll let them out in an hour or so. Once we're done pilfering their liquor cabinet."

"And you think that one hour locked in that cupboard is enough for everything they did to Harry?"

Mia shook her head and sighed. "Not even close. They starved him. Literally," she said, clenching her teeth. "One hour today won't lessen my anger over *that*. Which is why I imagine I'll come back in a month or so and do this all over again."

"Lily wouldn't approve," Sirius pointed out, looking only *slightly* guilty.

Mia nodded with a smile. "No, but *Jamie* would have."

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### October 31st, 1998

Mia woke up on the morning of Halloween, remembering spending the holiday with her Muggle parents so long ago. Her mother would dress her as a rabbit or a kitten when she was very young and, ironically, once as a witch. Then her father would take her hand and lead her door to door to collect sweets before returning home to dig through her treasures and pick out the least offending pieces before taking his turn at the door to hand out toothbrushes to the costumed children who came knocking—officially making them the least popular house in their neighbourhood.

When she went to Hogwarts, all Halloween activities were limited to school; even then, there was not much in the way of dressing up and eating sweets. She met with a troll during her first Halloween at Hogwarts and, instead of chocolate bars, she walked away with two best friends. The years that followed were not any better. A petrified cat and an opened Chamber of Secrets, Sirius Black—purportedly an escaped murderer—attacking the Fat Lady, Harry's name coming out of the Goblet of Fire . . .

Mia was surprised that with a history of bad things happening on Halloween, that she had chosen that specific date to lose her virginity to Remus. She wondered if perhaps it had been an attempt to erase all the bad memories of the holiday that she had experienced. Or maybe it was to forget what the future had in store.

*James jumped over the end of the long, red sofa in the Gryffindor common room to find her curled up on the other end with Sirius's head in her lap. The couple was jostled by James's rough landing, and he chucked when one of Mia's fingernails dug a little too sharply into Sirius's scalp.*

*"Fuck off, Prongs, go find yourself another sofa."*

*"What if I came for the company?"*

*"Then find yourself another witch, this one's taken," Sirius said, sighing happily when Mia started playing with his hair again.*

*James eyed them both. "Taken? Is that right, Mia?"*

*"He didn't mean it like that," she insisted, blushing.*

*James rolled his eyes. "Right. So this is platonic head petting?" he asked, gesturing to Sirius's head buried in Mia's lap.*

*"Always has been. Jamie, where's Lily?" Mia asked, trying to distract her brother from the awkward conversation he was trying to start. She had been broken up with Remus officially for almost two months and, despite the fact that she and Sirius were obviously in love with one another, the two had silently decided to avoid the subject of an actual relationship. It appeared that their mutual decision to ignore the obvious was bothering their friends and family to an extreme level.*

*"She's getting ready for the Halloween Feast," James said with a grin. "Are you two coming down?"*

*"In a bit," Sirius answered.*

*Mia shrugged. "Maybe. I . . . I don't much feel like celebrating Halloween."*

*"Why not? It's the best holiday just after Christmas and our birthday!" James declared.*

*"I just don't like Halloween," she said, getting irritated.*

*Sirius snorted, muttering, "That's not what Moony says."*

*Mia growled and pinched his ear.*

*"You two are getting ridiculous," James said, shaking his head and laughing.*

Sirius slept soundly in bed next to her, his face tucked into the pillow, one arm hanging off the end of the bed and the other wrapped around her waist. She had gone to sleep early only to wake when he stumbled into the room close to four in the morning, smelling of Muggle bourbon. She had been worried about him drinking alone, but then she heard a loud bang outside their bedroom door and opened it to find Remus unconscious at the foot of the stairs, smelling worse than Sirius.

She had levitated her best friend to his room and sent a Patronus to Tonks letting her know where her husband was, only to receive one back from the Auror indicating that she knew this would happen. Both Sirius and Remus apparently had a habit of spending the night before and the night of Halloween drinking in an attempt to forget the past.

Mia's fingers traced over the tattoos on Sirius's back lightly, smiling when the phoenix on his shoulder turned its head to rub against the pad of her index finger. Below it sat two shaded silhouettes, one of a doe and the other of a stag. She ran her fingers over the stag and frowned. Leaning forward, she wiggled her way out of Sirius's grip and reached across his back to place a kiss to the tattoo memorialising her brother.

"I miss him, too," Sirius muttered as her lips pressed against him.

Mia swallowed down her grief and then whispered against his spine, "I want to go to Godric's Hollow."

## Chapter One Hundred Forty-Two

### *Bad Ideas*

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*I can feel you all around me  
Thickening the air I'm breathing  
Holding on to what I'm feeling  
Savouring this heart that's healing  
(All Around Me - Flyleaf)*

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**October 31st, 1998**

"It's a bad idea," Sirius said to Remus over breakfast while Mia was in the shower getting ready for the day.

They had slept a few more hours after he had woken to find the witch kissing the stag tattoo on his back, which was a great deal healthier than what he and Remus usually did to cope with Halloween. The hangovers they were currently nursing while the Sober-Up Potion finished brewing was proof enough of that.

"Maybe she needs this," Remus suggested as he drained his third cup of coffee.

"Mum said to drink water," Sirius said, reminding him of Dorea's strict rules for hangovers before changing the subject back. "And yes, she might need this, but I don't think she's ready."

"She's technically already been there. Didn't you say that you, Hermione, and Harry went to Godric's Hollow last year on Christmas?"

"And then got ambushed by Death Eaters. Not my best Christmas ever," Sirius said with a scowl. "Then again, I *did* kill Dolohov, so it wasn't exactly my worst."

"You're probably right," Remus said. "It's only been a little over a month for her. I know she understands that they're gone, but emotionally they might as well be on an extended honeymoon. Will Harry be okay?"

Sirius remembered how his godson had broken down at the sight of his parents' graves. It reminded him that it had been years since he had visited Charlus and Dorea's final resting places. Making a mental note to revisit that thought later, he focused on Harry. "The first time was a shock to his system, I think. He'd never seen their graves before. Then again, neither had I."

"Are *you* going to be okay?"

"I have to be," Sirius said firmly. "I have to be strong for them both."

"You sure you don't want me to come along?"

Sirius shook his head. "I know you don't like going there. You've told me before. Plus, full moon's in a few days, and after the amount you drank last night, you should get some rest while you can."

Remus chuckled. "After three cups of coffee, I don't think I'll be resting much."

"Then take the kid out to collect sweets from Muggles," Sirius suggested.

"Teddy's six months old, Sirius. What's he going to do with a bunch of sweets?"

"Give them to his father, I assume."

Remus grinned. "He's a good son, a very thoughtful boy."

---

The ground of Godric's Hollow cemetery was not covered in snow like the last time they had been there, but the cold of October left a sparkling frost on the grass that crunched when they stepped forward, slowly closing in on the marble headstone. Harry approached the memorial stone with a bouquet of pink lilies in his hand, having come prepared this time. He did not feel the stabbing pain in his chest; instead, a dull ache reminded him not of his own pain, but of the suffering and grief he had known Remus and Sirius had gone through, and that Hermione was going through now. He would have to be strong. Strong for his family.

He reached out and brushed his fingers against the engraved names, hoping that his parents could give him that strength.

*James Potter - Lily Potter*  
27 March 1960 \* 30 January 1960  
Died 31 October 1981

"The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death," Harry whispered as he set the flowers down at the foot of his parents' graves.

He turned to tell Hermione and Sirius they could come forward, having assumed they were both giving him a moment to himself. However, he did not see a sad couple

waiting for him. Instead, he saw Hermione buckled to the ground, struggling against Sirius's grip as she clawed at the grass, tears pouring down her face.

He had only seen grief like that on the day of the Final Battle when she had thought that he had died and turned her grief-stricken wrath toward Voldemort in an attempt to kill.

The expression on her face was frightening; she looked like she was screaming, but no sound was coming out. It was only when he saw Sirius's wand in hand that he realised his godfather had silenced her.

"We don't need any more attention," Sirius said in a broken voice to Harry as he rushed over and fell to his knees in front of Hermione while she sobbed.

Her eyes were clenched shut and her knuckles white as her fingers dug into the frozen ground beneath them, as though she could pull his parents back to life through the grass. As her body shook, Harry could see that she was gasping for breath, letting each gulp of air she got into her lungs out with a deafening scream, or at least, it would have been deafening were it not for the Silencing Charm.

Harry was grateful that Sirius had thought ahead for that. Despite Godric's Hollow being a small village, if spotted, he would draw the attention of anyone who dared look their way, and today was not about him; it was about his parents and the sacrifice they made.

It was also about Hermione and what she felt she needed to do, which right now, Harry felt had been a mistake.

She broke free from Sirius's grip and fell into Harry's open arms. The moment they touched, it was as though he were pulled into the bubble of the Silencing Charm. The cries torn from her sent cold chills through his body. Hearing her pain was torture, but nothing like the Cruciatius. No, this felt like the Killing Curse. It felt cold and empty, as though merely being near her grief was hollowing him out.

He could feel as she choked for air and tried to adjust her body so that she could breathe easier. Instead, she buckled further, curling in on herself while he stroked her hair and back in a comforting gesture, not knowing what else to do. He had faced Death Eaters, a basilisk, dragons, Voldemort himself, and had even died once, but he felt unbearably helpless as he tried to comfort his best friend.

Harry hoped that Sirius would have a better plan, but apparently the moment that Hermione had broken free from his arms, his godfather had rushed away from them, clenching his fingers in his hair around the back of his head, his elbows bent, nearly touching in front of him as he shielded his face while he let out deep heaving sobs. Unlike Hermione's, they were easily heard.

Eventually, Sirius stood up straight and wiped his face before returning to Harry and Hermione, who still was sobbing, though instead of screams she appeared to be silently mumbling something. He aimed his wand at her, whispered, "*Finite*," and her voice was returned to her.

Harry leant his cheek against the top of her head, still stroking his fingers up and down her spine while she repeatedly whimpered, "Jamie . . . Jamie . . . Jamie . . ."

"This was a bad idea," Sirius mumbled. "I'm so sorry, kitten . . . I should have stood my ground and said no," he said, his grey eyes glassy as he avoided Harry's gaze.

"I . . . I . . . want my brother . . ."

Sirius winced and looked away.

"Hermione," Harry whispered, "I think you should let Sirius take you home."

She pulled away from him immediately and stood up. "No! I'm not going back. I want . . . I want my brother," she said again before gripping her wand tightly and Disapparating.

"Fuck!" Sirius shouted, too late to have stopped her. "Oh, shit. She could be anywhere. What if she splinched herself? I need to send Remus a Patronus!"

Harry frowned. "I know where she went."

"What? Where? We need to follow her!"

"I think I should go alone," Harry said quietly. "You heard her. She . . . She needs my dad. I'm the closest thing she's got. She wants her brother." He cleared his throat and stood up. "*I'm* her brother now, so she's got me." He looked up and met the worried but approving stare of his godfather. "I'll send a Patronus when I find her," he promised and then Disapparated away.

He arrived moments later at Hogwarts and stepped through the iron gates, noting that though magical wards had been set up, they still allowed him to pass freely. As he closed the gates behind him, Hagrid and McGonagall approached him, both with concerned expressions on their faces.

"I take it she's here?"

"Is everything all right, Harry? She looked right upset when she came through. Tried asking her to stop in for tea, but she darted right off into the forest there," Hagrid said, his eyes swimming with genuine concern. "We was just going to go in after her."

Harry frowned and looked from Hagrid to the headmistress. "We went to Godric's Hollow," he said, and both the half-giant and witch signalled their immediate understanding. "I'm really sorry about this, Professor . . . er, Headmistress."

McGonagall shook her head. "Nothing that could be done about it. She has to grieve sometime, and grief is not a pretty thing. Still, is there a reason that you believe she's gone into the Forbidden Forest?"

Harry nodded but kept tight-lipped, knowing that he had already told more people than he should have about the Resurrection Stone and dropping it in the middle of the forest. "She's looking for something."

"I hope she finds it, then."

Harry sighed and turned to walk toward the trees, whispering under his breath, "She won't."

He slowly began his walk through the forest where he had—technically—died, eyes raking over the scenery that was lit by the afternoon sun breaking through the branches of the trees. The Forbidden Forest held so many memories for him. He noted briefly an area where, as first years, he and his friends—and Malfoy—had been brought for detention with Hagrid.

*"The forest?" Malfoy said in shock. "We can't go in there at night! There's all sorts of things in there . . . werewolves, I heard."*

The memory made Harry chuckle to himself as he thought of the scared look on Draco's face. Draco, who now, according to Hermione, was family. Harry never thought he would live to see the day when he would be friends, let alone family, with Malfoy. Then again, he had not thought he would live to see much past his seventeenth birthday.

*"You've been so brave," his mother said as she approached him.*

*He went into the forest to die. To save everyone. And he knew he did not have much time because he had stunned Sirius in order to get out without a fuss. Harry knew the moment his godfather came to, he would be in trouble with the whole Order descending upon the forest to stop him from what needed to be done.*

*He stared into the mirror image of himself that he knew to be his father.*

*Harry had always known his parents had died so very young, but to see them face-to-face like this only reminded him more of his own impending mortality. He was only seventeen, but soon to die at the hands of the man that killed both of his parents—not much younger than they had been when they died.*

*"You're nearly there, son," his father said with a smile on his face. "We are so proud of you."*

*"I'm scared," Harry said. "Does it hurt?"*

*"Dying?" his mother asked. "Not at all, sweetheart. Don't be afraid. We're here with you."*

*"I'm so sorry. You died, and it was all because of me . . ."*

*"It was because we made choices, son," his father insisted. "Life isn't about fate. It's about choice. We chose to fight. The only thing we didn't choose was to protect you because that came naturally. As naturally to us as you protecting those you love."*

*Harry tried to summon back his courage. "Ginny and Sirius and Ron and Hermione."*

*His father grinned brightly.*

*"You'll stay with me?" Harry asked.*

*"Until the very end."*

"Hermione!" Harry called out for her as he began to wander in the direction of the clearing where the final battle had taken place—where Voldemort had struck him down with the Killing Curse, destroying the Horcrux inside of him and ultimately sealing everyone's fate. The place where Sirius and Remus were tortured, where Neville killed Nagini, and where Hermione tried sacrificing herself.

"Harry Potter."

Harry turned, wand drawn on instinct until he was met with a familiar face and withdrew it with an apologetic smile. "Firenze. You're looking . . . well," he said, his eyes immediately scanning the centaur's flank where he knew he had been wounded in battle. "I didn't expect to see you in the forest."

The palomino centaur stepped forward, his long, white-blond hair pulled to the side in a braid. "While the castle is being finished, I have re-joined my herd here and have yet to decide whether or not to return to the school."

"Have the planets and stars not told you what's already going to happen?" Harry asked with a wry grin and was answered by a silent stare that looked neither upset nor amused but left him feeling guilty all the same. "Sorry. Umm . . . you haven't seen Hermione, have you?"

A chestnut-coloured centaur trotted up behind Firenze, his red tail swishing behind him. "The weeping human? She's foolish to enter this forest alone."

"Ronan." Firenze turned back to look at his brother. "She's much stronger than she appears, if you remember."

Ronan rolled his eyes briefly but then bowed his head in bitter agreement. "Yes, she's the one that delivered the offensive witch to us," he said, scowling as he spoke of Umbridge. "Shame we let her go."

"Agreed," Harry said.

"Where did you see the girl?" Firenze asked.

Ronan gestured to a grouping of trees, his crossbow tight in hand as though it were an extension of his arm. "Just through there. She should not shout at such a volume. Not all creatures in the forest are as understanding of her reasons for being here as we are."

"And what *are* her reasons?" Harry asked.

"Healing," Ronan answered.

Harry frowned and then nodded. "Thank you both so much."

"Farewell, Harry Potter," Ronan said and walked in the opposite direction.

Firenze hesitated. "Tell your friend that she will not find her answers in the past but in the future."

"I will. Thank you."

Harry made his way through the trees where Ronan directed him, and soon everything began looking very familiar. He could hear Hermione yelling just up ahead—her words like a dagger to his heart.

"*Accio* Resurrection Stone! *Accio* Resurrection Stone!"

She walked around the clearing, aiming her wand out randomly, attempting to summon the Resurrection Stone he knew would not come to her. Tears streaked down her cheeks which were now dirty. Her hair was dishevelled in a way that reminded him of when she was younger. Spinning around to aim her wand in a different direction, she slipped and fell to her knees. Not even bothering to dust herself off or check to see if she had been injured, she stood back up and resumed her search.

"Hermione?"

"*Accio* . . . *Accio* . . . I can't do this . . ." She collapsed on the ground, burying her face in her hands. "I can't live here. I want to go back. I should have *done* something."

Harry rushed to her side and drew her quickly into his arms. "Hermione, we've talked about this," he said, pressing his forehead against hers.

"I want him back. I want . . ." She took in small gasps of air as she struggled to breathe. "I want my brother."

"Aren't *I* your brother?"

Hermione gave a small smile and nodded but then continued to cry.

His wand was in one hand, the other had been clenched into a tight fist, and he struggled to move as he whispered, "I don't know how to help you."

"That's not true, son," a voice said from behind him.

Harry turned and looked up to see the image of his father staring down at him, a look of pain in his eyes as he focused on Hermione. Harry swallowed hard and looked down in his hand, opening it to reveal the Resurrection Stone that he had kept secret from everyone.

"You've held onto it this long for a reason," James said. "You lied about dropping it for a reason. It's okay. She needs this, and then you can both let go."

Harry acknowledged his father's words and reached out for Hermione's hand, slipping the stone into her palm.

She looked up, surprised. "Harry?"

He swallowed nervously. "I . . . I kept the stone. I'm so sorry, but I . . . I was weak, and I couldn't let it go. But I think I *need* to let it go, Hermione. I *have* a family. *You're* my family. You, Ginny, Sirius, Remus, Tonks, Teddy, Ron . . . and apparently Malfoy," he added, slightly annoyed. "I have a family, and I need to let go of the ones I've lost." He turned the Resurrection Stone in her hand. "I think *you* need to let go, too."

Hermione's eyes widened as she looked up to see James standing beside Harry.

"Jamie?"

James smiled crookedly at her and knelt down in front of her. "Hey, baby sister. Why's your face all wet?"

She burst into a fresh set of sobs. "Jamie, I'm so sorry!"

He reached out as if to wipe away her tears, but his hand never connected with her face. "I know, but you don't have to be."

She shook her head. "I let you die. I didn't tell you about Peter . . ."

Rolling his eyes, James ran a hand through his messy black hair. "Yes, you did. In your own way, and none of us listened. We were all stubborn, just like you're being now."

Harry smiled softly when Hermione pouted petulantly.

"I'm not—"

James laughed at the look on her face and just smiled down at her. "Mia, love, you have to live. You've been doing so good with Sirius. You've been getting better. Don't let one stupid day of the year ruin all of that."

"But I let you die."

"And you've saved my son," he said, his eyes turning to look at Harry who dropped his gaze to the ground, not used to parental appraisal. "More times than I can count. I would gladly die a thousand deaths if it meant that *he* lived."

Clearing his throat, Harry slowly inhaled as he tried to focus. It would do no good to stop Hermione crying if he started himself. Whether for her or himself—he was not sure—Harry took her hand and squeezed it gently before returning his attention to his father.

"I could have saved all of you," Hermione argued. "I could have fixed it."

James shook his head. "No. You couldn't."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do. I'm dead. I'm in the afterlife, which means I know more than you," James said rather smugly, looking a lot like Sirius. Then, using a fake mystical voice that sounded like Professor Trelawney after too much cooking sherry, he said, "I know all the secrets to life."

Hermione finally broke a smile. "Fine," she said, sniffing. "If you're so smart and you know everything, then where did I hide your collection of *Playwizard* magazines in sixth year?"

"That was *you*?! I thought Sirius stole those!" James bristled and then looked down to see Harry staring at him with wide eyes. James cleared his throat nervously and scratched the back of his head. "I mean . . . because . . ." He turned and looked to Hermione for help.

"No, no." She grinned slyly, wiping her eyes. "You're doing great, Jamie. Dig yourself out of *that* hole."

James looked down at Harry. "Er, Son . . ."

Harry shook his head. "Sirius gave me the talk years ago. I really don't want to have another one."

James looked relieved and turned his attention back to Hermione, who had stopped smiling again.

"Mia, you made a choice, and you chose right. It's all about choices, isn't it? You and Sirius fought each other for so long because you thought you didn't have a choice, but you *did*. And you chose one another. This wasn't fate. We all made choices in the war. I chose my fate the moment I joined the Order. We all did."

She looked down. "How can you ever—?"

"There's nothing to forgive," he said, cutting her off. "You kept your promise, Mia. You were there for Harry, and I couldn't have asked for more. Actually, I *do* have a lot more to ask. I want you to move on. I want Remus to stop feeling sorry for himself." He turned and eyed Harry with a stern glare. "Same goes for you, son," he insisted before looking back at Hermione. "I want you and Sirius to be happy. To let go of all that anger. I want you to learn to forgive Dumbledore, Snape . . . and Peter."

Hermione scowled bitterly at the request. Harry could understand where she was coming from, but the look on his father's face brokered no argument. Harry thought of Pettigrew himself and wondered if he had already forgiven the man. He knew he pitied him, especially in death.

"Do it," James insisted. "The war is over. Put us all to rest."

"I miss you, Jamie," Hermione said as she stood up.

"I've missed you too, Mia. Don't tell Sirius, but *you* were always my best friend," James said and then glanced down at her hand, noticing the ring. "I see the prat finally gave you Grandmother Black's ring. Did he say that it was *his* idea? Because he's a fucking liar. It took me *hours* to find that thing."

Hermione laughed. "So I've got your blessing?"

James shrugged, smirking as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his robes. "Well, I personally think you can do much better than that prat. You know he's old enough to be your father now, right?"

She rolled her eyes. "Very funny."

"Was he at least romantic? He couldn't top *my* proposal, of course. Christmas lights and a well-rehearsed speech."

"He proposed over Chinese take-out."

James scoffed. "What a tosser."

"I loved it."

"You would."

"Jamie . . . I don't know how to do this without you and Lily," Hermione whispered, looking down at her ring. "I'm going to get married and continue on with life and you're not here."

"What are you talking about?" James asked incredulously, smiling in approval when Harry retook her hand. "We're right there."

---

Sirius sat at the table in the large dining room of number twelve, waiting to hear either the sound of the Floo activating or Apparition to let him know that Harry and Mia were all right. Remus and Tonks sat with him, his cousin holding his hand and her husband draining a glass of firewhisky opposite him.

Remus poured another serving of the drink and held it out to Sirius, who shook his head, rejecting the offering.

"All clean," Ginny declared as she walked into the room carrying Teddy in her arms. The boy was wearing a tiny Halloween costume that looked like a lion constructed from the dual efforts of Luna and Molly. "Any word yet?"

Before anyone could answer, a silvery stag leapt through the window and looked directly at him before speaking in Harry's voice: "*Found her. Everything is fine. Going to be home in a few hours. Have some things to take care of.*"

Sirius let out a large sigh of relief.

Remus stared as the stag disappeared. "Is it just me, or does Harry's Patronus still kind of—?"

"Freak you out?" Sirius nodded. "A bit."

"So now that the Potters are all taken care of," Tonks said as she stood up, "we all need to get out of this depressing house and celebrate by apparently pretending to be Muggles and collecting sweets from strangers. No harm in that, right?"

Sirius shook his head. "You go. I'm going to stay and wait for Harry and Mia."

Almost as though his words summoned her, a silvery fox followed the same path that the stag had taken in through the window. The vixen pawed across the table to stare Sirius in the face before speaking in Mia's voice: *"Get out of the house. If I come home and you're drunk again, I'll tell Harry who your first kiss was."*

Sirius stood in a rush and grabbed his leather jacket. "You heard the witch, let's get out of here."

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Across town in Muggle London, Harry sat back in a reclined chair, his face scrunched up as he winced in pain. Mia was sitting beside him, rolling her eyes at his dramatic expression.

"Oh, it's not *that* bad," she said, sneaking a peek as the Muggle tattoo artist put the final touches on Harry's shoulder. "That looks great! Almost as nice as mine."

Harry laughed, letting out a sigh of relief when the artist wiped down the ink with a wet paper towel. He stood to look at his new tattoo in the mirror. "I actually think mine looks better. Yours is all . . . girly. House words should be, I dunno, manly."

Mia laughed as she examined their matching ink, differing only in font. She leant her head on Harry's shoulder and smiled at their reflection. "Courage and Craft."

Harry nodded, putting an arm around her and leaning in to kiss the top of her head. "Courage and Craft."

## Chapter One Hundred Forty-Three

### *Breaking Walls*

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*Lights will guide you home  
And ignite your bones  
And I will try to fix you  
(Fix You - Coldplay)*

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**November 8th, 1998**

Mia was smiling as the crowd of them gathered in front of the Hogwarts Express to send off their friends and family for one final year. Plenty of people had taken to staring, but she encouraged everyone to ignore them. It was not as though Rita Skeeter was buzzing about looking for ways to expose every detail of their private lives. The *Daily Prophet* had taken to being completely silent in regards to the Golden Trio, Sirius, and the Malfoys. Mia had made a point to have a meeting with *Witch Weekly* with Narcissa and Laurel in tow to befriend the Editor-in-Chief. All publicity was tightly controlled now, which was exactly how she had planned it.

As Ron approached her, carrying a trunk behind him, Mia smiled.

"Hey 'Mione," he said nervously.

"Don't look so sad, Ron."

It had been weeks earlier when he finally made his way back to Grimmauld Place, hanging his head in shame as he begged Sirius to speak to her. Sirius had growled protectively, which Mia said was hardly necessary as Ron had been properly afraid of her himself when he thought she was his Muggle-born, swotty best friend. When finally left alone, Ron fell into a long-winded apology for his behaviour, not just during their last encounter, but over the years that preceded it.

*"You were right. I did rely on you and Harry. I just . . . I didn't know how much." He looked down and sighed loudly.*

*"What happened?"*

*"I failed my exams," he confessed with a defeated shrug. "All of them. Kingsley said because of what I did in the war, he could pull a few more strings but . . . I failed. I'd be a terrible Auror if I let*

*Kingsley just open all the doors for me. I'd end up dead or worse, I could get someone else killed. I don't know what to do now. Maybe Fred and George will give me a job."*

*Mia sighed, feeling sympathy for her childhood friend and recalling all the times over the past she had hoped that he had come to some sort of realisation like this but only ended up halfway. Now it appeared that everything was finally clicking in place and he was ready to listen—really listen.*

*"Can I offer you some advice?"*

*He nodded enthusiastically. "Of course."*

*She took a breath and smiled. "I think you should go back to Hogwarts."*

*Ron winced. "But you and Harry said you aren't—"*

*"Exactly," she said, cutting him off. "Ron, you've spent your whole life living in the shadows of your brothers, and then you spent seven years being Harry Potter's best friend. You got through classes because I did your homework and helped you revise. And you got out of trouble because you were friends with the Chosen One."*

*Ron chuckled lightly, scratching at the back of his neck. "To be fair, I got into a lot of trouble for being friends with the Chosen One, too."*

*Mia laughed, feeling a weight lift from her heart. "We both did." She smiled, pleased to see that there was a hint of true reconciliation between them. "I think you should go back. Make a name for yourself without Harry to steal your thunder and without me to catch you when you fall."*

*"I dunno. I'd be stuck there with only Ginny, Neville, and Luna."*

*"Then make new friends. Expand to the other Houses."*

*He rolled his eyes and groaned. "You just want me to be friends with Slytherins."*

*Mia quirked her lips and nodded. "Honestly . . . I think it would be good if you did. And being civil to at least a handful of them is a requirement of my forgiveness."*

*Ron smiled at her in wry understanding but then added, "Can I at least pick which ones?"*

*"Is it always going to be like this?" Harry asked as he frowned, glancing at the few members of the press who were aiming cameras at their group, some yelling out his name to try and get him to look their way. Mia promised him that nothing would be printed without her consent. "I'm dreading the day I have to bring my kids here."*

*"Oi!" Ginny smacked him on the arm. "I'm not even on the train yet! Can you plan our future family when I've at least graduated?"*

*Harry blushed red. "I, umm, I wasn't . . . because . . ."*

She laughed at his mumbling and threw herself into his arms. "I'm gonna miss you, git," she said before kissing him, grinning against his mouth when he spun her around.

Mia smiled haughtily when she noticed camera flashes. She could see the headlines now.

#### *CHOSEN ONE SUPPORTS GIRLFRIEND WHILE SHE SEEKS EDUCATION*

"You and I apparently agree on something, Potter," Draco drawled as he approached the group, Astoria's small hand wrapped around his arm. His grey eyes flickered to the photographers and staring crowd. "The photographers really are a bit much. Are they expecting us to fall back into old patterns and start cursing one another?"

Harry scoffed. "For the record, I only ever threw *jinxes*."

Draco sneered at him. "Scars on my chest says otherwise."

Before Harry had a chance to fall into an embarrassing apology or Draco had a chance to snap at him loudly, Mia stepped between the pair and smiled sweetly at Draco. "Maybe you could tattoo Astoria's name over it," she suggested with a grin.

Draco smirked and looked down at the witch on his arm, reaching forward and placing his index finger under her chin to force her to look up at him. "Would you like that, pet?" he asked and grinned when her cheeks coloured.

"I would . . ." Astoria began and then took a breath and a pause before collecting herself. "I would like for you to put my trunk on the train for me," she said with an equally Malfoyish twitch of her lips.

Draco grinned at her and leant forward to kiss her cheek, ignoring the flashing cameras again.

#### *MALFOY HEIR DESPERATELY IN LOVE WITH FLANCÉE*

"He's already taking orders?" Mia asked Astoria as she watched Draco take hold of her trunk and move it toward the train. "Well done."

Astoria smiled at Mia. "Thank you, for everything," she said, a genuine appreciation in her eyes.

"He picked you. I didn't."

"Daphne's still a bit jealous," Astoria whispered. "It's the first time I've ever gotten something before her."

"He's a spoilt prat," Daphne declared, sounding only slightly bitter over her younger sister's engagement. "And he looks like a girl," she added petulantly as she watched Draco use his wand to levitate Astoria's trunk onto the Hogwarts Express with grace. "I bet he could wear *my* clothes. Seekers are always so slender. I'd like a man with a little more muscle."

"Hey!" Harry said, offended.

"Are you opposed to redheads?" Mia asked with a devious smile as her eyes turned to watch Ron say goodbye to his family a few feet away before returning to their group.

Daphne followed Mia's gaze until her attention landed on Ron. She looked him over curiously and turned her attention back to Mia. "Don't the Weasleys hate Slytherins?"

"He's promised me that he'll be expanding his social circle this year. I'm sad to say that I don't think he's very accustomed to being social with others, girls specifically. Perhaps you could help him navigate the waters?"

"A Weasley, hmm? That would fit into father's requirements and still piss him off a bit."

"It would also make Ron and Draco brothers-in-law," Mia pointed out.

Daphne's blue eyes lit up, and a wicked grin crossed her face. "Oh, that's positively evil. I love it."

Mia smiled as she touched Daphne's arm. "Hey . . . be nice to him. But don't let him get away with a single thing," she insisted and then turned toward her friend. "Ron! I'd like you to meet Daphne. She's the daughter of my friend Laurel."

Ron stared at the girl. "Er . . . hi."

Daphne smiled brightly at him. "Hello, Ronald, it's a pleasure to *finally* meet you. Silly how we've attended school for so many years together and only now meet face-to-face. I just appreciate that yours, Harry's, and Mia's war efforts will help erase ridiculous House prejudices, don't you?"

"Umm . . . Yes?"

"While we've never officially met, I have watched you play Quidditch."

Ron's face turned pink, and he gave Daphne a lopsided grin. "You have?"

"Why wouldn't I? You're brilliant."

"Don't oversell it," Mia muttered under her breath.

"Would you be a dear and help me with my trunk?" Daphne asked with a pretty frown. "It's very heavy."

Ron raised a confused eyebrow. "Can't you just use your wand to . . . Ow!" He winced as Mia elbowed him in the ribs. Understanding finally reached his eyes, and his blush deepened. "Oh. Umm . . . yeah, I can get it for you."

Daphne lightly touched his shoulder when he reached for her trunk, and Ron stared at her hand, eyes wide. "Thanks so much," she said sweetly. "Can I save you a seat inside?"

"Really?" Ron swallowed. "I . . . Yeah, that'd be great."

"Bye, Mia," Daphne said and smiled as she followed her sister onto the train after Draco spent a good thirty seconds bent over Astoria's hand, kissing her knuckles for the flashing cameras.

Ron rubbed the back of his neck as he approached Mia after putting Daphne's trunk on the train. "You sure she's a Slytherin?"

Mia chuckled in amusement. "I've never been more certain."

"Well, maybe they're not *all* rotters," he conceded for a moment but then glared as Draco approached them. "This one, however . . ."

"Remember my rules," Mia said sternly.

"Weasel," Draco said looking at Ron.

"Ferret."

"Boys," Mia hissed.

Draco sighed dramatically, hands in the pockets of his tailored trousers, looking relaxed even as put together as he was. It was a trait Mia attributed to the *Black* family genes; Lucius Malfoy was always annoyingly stiff. Looking back at Sirius, who was leaning against the wall talking with Harry and trying to hide the cigarette in his hands, she decided that, yes, the relaxed manner was certainly a Black family trait.

"Weasley," Draco said as though it was uncomfortable to have the name roll over his tongue. "I won't be returning to Hogwarts. As it is my responsibility to look after the safety of Astoria, I find myself in a position where I could use your . . . *assistance* in keeping an eye on her or, more likely, keeping an eye and a well-aimed wand on those who might seek to do her harm for being associated with me."

Mia sucked in a breath, shocked that Draco was able to get through the whole speech without a single insult.

"You can *aim* a wand, can't you?"

*Almost.* Mia sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose.

Ron was smirking. "You want a *favour*, Malfoy? From *me*?"

Draco narrowed his eyes. "I wouldn't call it *that*."

"Fine." Ron shrugged when Mia gave them both warning looks. "I'll look after your girlfriend."

"Fiancée," Draco corrected.

"Whatever, Malfoy."

Mia smiled in relief. "Now shake hands."

"What?" Both turned and stared at her.

"It's proper. You've just made a deal with one another. You don't have to be friends, but this is, at the very least, a truce," she said, stepping back to allow them room.

Begrudgingly, both wizards decided to take the high road and shake hands.

Cameras flashed.

Mia grinned.

*HOUSE PREJUDICES PUT ASIDE.  
WAR HEROES SET EXAMPLE FOR US ALL!*

Draco scowled at Mia. "Are you happy?"

"I will be once you do the same thing with Harry."

"May I ask what you were doing with Astoria's sister and Weasley?"

"Nothing important," she insisted. "Just making sure I don't ever have to tolerate Lavender Brown for Sunday dinners at the Burrow."

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## December 25th, 1998

Holidays were all too quickly upon them, and no sooner had they sent their friends and family off to Hogwarts, they were returning for Christmas.

Sirius, as usual, had gone all out, bringing home the largest Christmas tree he could find. Though he denied it strongly, Mia could not help but be suspicious that he had stolen one of the trees that Hagrid used to set up inside the Great Hall.

The entire Weasley clan stayed the night at number twelve, and they all opened presents in the early morning hours, while Molly took to the kitchen to fix up a feast for everyone.

Teddy was the very centre of attention, his black hair matching Harry's. He helped him tear into each and every new present—including a brand new training broom, much to the worry of Mia and Remus, who were apparently the only adults that thought the gift was inappropriate for a child who had not yet turned one.

Sirius let loose several screaming mistletoe to warn everyone anytime Harry and Ginny were alone together, and by breakfast, Fred and George were making him a business offer. Harry and Ginny were less than pleased with the new item that would be sold in Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes next Christmas, but Ginny managed to dismantle every single one of them—much to the bitter shock of Remus and Mia, who had never been able to do so when they had been the targets years ago.

When the Slytherins finally made their appearance, Draco presented each of the Black women with a recently engraved family ring to replace the many cursed ones that needed to be disposed of over the years. He also offered a massive emerald encrusted diamond engagement ring to Astoria, who squealed with delight and hugged him in front of everyone, much to the surprise of Narcissa and the amused grin of Laurel.

Before Ron nervously approached Daphne with a bracelet he had saved up for, Mia had to take him aside. Despite being a pureblood, she was concerned her friend might not have been completely aware of the customs and traditions that girls like Daphne would have been taught.

Ron gathered up his courage and presented the bracelet to his girlfriend, and she eyed him speculatively before opening it. Daphne smiled, Ron blushed, and Molly fumed

from the other side of the room that her son had entered into an understanding with a girl without even discussing it with his parents.

The attention was pulled away from Ron for the moment when Fleur and Bill announced that she was pregnant—due the first week of May.

"When are we going to have *more* babies?" Molly casually asked as she sat down in front of Sirius, Mia, Remus, and Tonks.

Remus paled, and Mia frowned, knowing that despite having a perfectly healthy son, the subject was still a sore spot her friend was working through.

Tonks ignored her husband and just shrugged flippantly. "Whatever happens, happens."

"We're working on the wedding first," Mia said quickly before Sirius could imply something inappropriate just to get a rise out of Molly.

"Are you going to have a traditional ceremony?" Luna asked with a smile, wearing a pair of strawberry-shaped earrings that matched the ones Mia was wearing, a Christmas gift from Sirius, though Mia's ruby jewels paled in comparison to Luna's homemade baubles.

"Some parts," Mia said thoughtfully.

"What exactly is a traditional Muggle wedding?" Arthur eagerly asked.

Mia cleared her throat. "Oh. I actually . . . I meant a traditional *Wizarding* wedding."

Molly gasped, the tray of treacle tarts that she was hovering slanted dangerously toward the carpet. Narcissa, Laurel, and Andromeda looked amused but pleased. Draco was holding back a chuckle at the confused look on every young Weasley face—Harry included.

Only Luna seemed completely unaffected. "I can show you the circle where my parents were bonded. It's not very big, though, I don't think many people would fit."

"Thank you, Luna, but as I said, we're only doing *parts* of a traditional ceremony," Mia emphasised. "For instance, instead of a dress, I'll be wearing ritual robes."

Molly let out the breath she had obviously been holding.

"Why's everyone acting so strange?" Ron asked.

"Traditionally, witches married in the nude," Daphne whispered to him, looking slightly worried when he began choking on a mouthful of egnog.

"Let's talk about something else," Mia said, wide-eyed as she covered Sirius's mouth with her hand while he chuckled beside her. "How is your father, Luna? Are you going to go back home and finish spending Christmas with him?"

"Oh no. Daddy's tracking down the elusive tempussalito. They're known for sneaking into clocks and setting the time backward and forward when you're not looking. I'm meeting Neville and Hannah at St Mungo's later. Neville wanted to introduce her to his parents, and I agreed to go along for support."

Mia frowned, and a deep weight settled in the pit of her stomach. "Oh, Merlin . . ." she whispered. "Alice and Frank. I didn't even think . . . How could I not even think about them? Sirius, I haven't even thought about visiting—"

"Do you want to go, kitten?" he asked with a frown. "I'm ashamed to say I haven't gone myself."

Mia nodded and swallowed hard as she wiped away the tears from her eyes.

Luna, Harry, Ginny, Mia, and Sirius left everyone else behind at Grimmauld Place and headed to St Mungo's to see Neville and his parents. Remus remained bitter over the fact that he was still not allowed inside the hospital due to his lycanthropy, and Mia put that at the top of her list of things to set straight once she called in Kingsley's life debt. But before that, she had some debts of her own to pay.

As the group reached the fifth floor and headed toward the Janus Thickey Ward, Mia felt her heart beat rapidly in her chest. When the doors opened, and she looked around at all the people stuck in the hospital due to long-term spell damage, she frowned.

"Cheer up, kitten. It's Christmas, and you don't want to make Neville feel worse," Sirius said, forcing her to nod, swallow down her guilt, and put on a holiday-worthy smile.

"Hello there!" a blond wizard said as he jumped out at the group, startling Harry to the point that he pulled his wand in shock. "Would you like an autograph?"

Mia's mouth fell open. "Holy shit," she mumbled as she stared into the blank, innocent-looking face of Gilderoy Lockhart. "How come we always forget that he's here?"

"Isn't this the wanker that's on the cover of all those books Molly likes to read?" Sirius asked, staring at the man who was appraising his outfit with interest. "Oi, back up, pal."

"Sirius, he's . . . broken," Mia quietly scolded him. "He was the Defence Professor we had during second year. The one that had the Memory Charm backfire on him."

Sirius raised a brow. "*This* is the tosser you used to fancy?"

Mia blushed in embarrassment and shame.

"Did you know that I'm the five-time winner of *Witch Weekly's* Most Charming Smile Award?" Gilderoy inquired with a flashing grin.

"Yeah? Well, I'm *Witch Weekly's* most eligible bachelor," Sirius said smugly as though he were competing. When Mia cleared her throat and narrowed her eyes, he amended his statement, "I *was* the most recent eligible bachelor. Now I'm happily engaged to *this* sexy witch," he said, trying to rub it in the man's face.

"Good gracious, man." Gilderoy chuckled. "Aren't you old enough to be her father?"

Sirius growled, and Mia dragged him away from her former professor. "Sirius, honestly. Be an adult for once in your life, please."

"I have the most charming smile."

"Yes, love. Very charming."

"Hey, guys!" Neville called to his friends and dashed over to hug Luna and Mia before shaking Harry and Sirius's hands. "Glad you could make it. Mum and Dad'll be thrilled."

Mia frowned. "Neville . . . aren't they—?"

"Oh, yeah. But I think they get happier around the holidays. Plus, I just introduced them to Hannah, and Mum seems to be humming a bit more. I think she likes her," he said with a blush to his cheeks.

Mia hugged Neville tightly. "You look so much like your father," she whispered.

"Would you like to see them?"

She nodded and quietly allowed herself to be led down the small hallway to the end of the aisle where the Longbottoms were gathered together, sitting on the edge of a bed.

Augusta Longbottom sat in the corner of the room, wearing that hideous, stuffed vulture hat, and Mia grimaced as she recalled the bird when it had been alive.

She gasped at the sight of her friends sitting together, white-haired and sallow-skinned. Frank was holding onto Alice's hand tightly while she smiled blankly up at Hannah Abbott, who was eagerly telling them both wondrous stories about Neville during their seventh year at Hogwarts when he had taken charge of Dumbledore's Army. Augusta looked proud as she listened to the tales.

"Gran, do you remember Mia Potter?" Neville asked.

Augusta looked Mia over carefully and then, as she eyed Sirius at Mia's side, the pieces seemed to fit together for her. "Dorea's girl. Your parents were lovely people," she said matter-of-factly. "Yours—" She glanced to Sirius. "—were wretched."

"Agreed," Sirius said with a chuckle.

"Mum," Neville said, taking Alice's hand. "Someone's come to visit you. Old friends," he added quietly, tossing a smile of appreciation to Hannah, who beamed back at him with love in her eyes.

Alice turned and looked wide-eyed at Mia, who immediately broke under the empty gaze of her friend and fell to the bed next to her.

"Oh, Alice, I'm so sorry . . ." she cried, burying her face in her hands, unable to look at her friends in such a state, knowing that she should have done something to stop this from happening. Jamie and Lily were one thing—Harry needed to be protected—but she could have stopped Alice and Frank from being tortured.

"Uh . . . Hermione?" Neville whispered.

Mia looked up, glassy-eyed, into Alice's vacantly smiling face. Alice blinked rapidly, her gaze darting back and forth as she reached for empty sweet wrappers. She handed three to her son.

Neville frowned, looking down at the wrappers in his hand. "Sorry, guys . . . she does this."

"I remember." Harry inclined his head. "What does it mean?"

Neville shrugged. "Her way of giving me a gift? She scratches at the papers, though. Healers used to think that she was trying to communicate but the only letters that she'd leave behind were 'i', 'a', and 'm'. We tried asking her, 'I am what?' but nothing ever came out of it."

"Holy fuck . . ." Sirius whispered and ignored the scowl that Augusta gave him. "She's not spelling out 'I am', Are you, beautiful?" he asked Alice, grinning at her. "You're spelling 'Mia.'"

Alice hummed at him and then turned her head toward Mia, widening her eyes further.

"It can't be that simple," Mia whispered.

"What?" Neville was asking, looking terrified. "What's wrong?"

"Neville, I . . . I taught your parents Occlumency. I knew what was going to happen to them, so I put up barriers around the pain sensory areas of the mind," she said, not knowing better words for what she had done. "I'd already been tortured by Bellatrix myself, so I knew where those memories were stuck, and I didn't want . . . I didn't want your parents to suffer more than I knew they would," she said, her voice breaking.

"Merlin, please let this work," she whispered and reached for her wand, staring into Alice's large eyes. "*Legilimens.*"

*"Should have stayed hiding, Longbottoms!" Bellatrix yelled, laughing as she aimed her wand at the young couple. "Not that it would have done you any good. The Potters stayed hidden, and they're still dead!"*

*"So's your Dark Lord," Frank spat bitterly.*

*"You watch your mouth, you filthy blood-traitor!" Bellatrix screamed. "Crucio!"*

*"Frank!" Alice yelled as Rodolphus Lestrage held him down. Her own arms, held back by Barty Crouch Jr, were throbbing, and she was certain that one of her shoulders had been dislocated.*

*When word reached them of the Potters' deaths and the destruction of Voldemort, Frank and Alice mistakenly thought it was safe to leave their Fidelius-protected home. Leaving Neville behind with Frank's mother, the Longbottoms had planned to go and seek out Dumbledore to learn of Harry's whereabouts. They had heard rumours that something happened with Sirius and there was some mix-up with an arrest, which had not been too surprising; Sirius had a habit of getting himself arrested.*

*Unfortunately, they never made it to Dumbledore. They had been accosted barely a few streets from their home, stunned, and dragged away where they were tortured—not for information but for revenge. Somehow Voldemort was dead, and his Death Eaters had scattered to the wind as Aurors rained down upon them. These four decided to give a little back to the Aurors, which was exactly what they had said when they first attacked.*

*"You bitch!" Alice screamed and spat toward Bellatrix, who turned on her, wand raised.*

*"You'd like a taste then, sweetheart?" Bella sneered.*

*"Hide . . . Hide away . . ." Frank mumbled incoherently as Rabastan Lestrage approached him, wand aimed with a Cruciatas at the ready. "Hide away," he said again as Alice prepared herself for the pain to come once more.*

*And they hid away.*

*Hid far away behind the barriers that Mia constructed.*

*"Reducto," Mia whispered.*

Alice gasped loudly and fell forward into Mia's arms and, unsupported, they both collapsed to the floor. Neville and Sirius both rushed to help them. Mia was wincing and holding her head, and Alice was breathing heavily and coughing as she struggled to sit up.

"Mum, are you all right?" Neville asked as he pulled her up in his arms.

Alice looked up and, in a hoarse voice no longer used to speaking, she whispered, "Neville."

At the sound of his mother's voice, Neville's lip quivered, and he hugged her desperately, ignoring the stares of everyone else in the room.

Augusta began screaming for Healers, calling them all idiots and incompetent fools who did not think to even try Legilimency, and she would *certainly* be speaking to the hospital board about this!

## Chapter One Hundred Forty-Four

### *Predecessor*

---

*It's in the stars  
It's been written in the scars on our hearts  
We're not broken just bent  
And we can learn to love again  
(Just Give Me a Reason - Pink)*

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**January 15th, 1999**

With everyone home for the holidays, Grimmauld Place was completely full, which did not bother the permanent residents one bit. It did, however, pose a small problem when the full moon came around. Rather than send everyone to the Burrow—where they would no doubt be squished into the tight space—and unmarried couples separated as per Molly's orders—Remus, Sirius, and Mia decided to relocate to The Den for the duration of the moon, leaving their family and friends back at number twelve where they would be safe.

Safety had always been a big concern for Remus, and for good reason. Despite the Wolfsbane and all other precautions taken, the cellar door of The Den broke open during the night, allowing Moony to escape into the woods behind the cottage—the call of the wild was too strong to ignore.

Padfoot and Vixen kept a close watch on him to make sure he did not venture out of the property boundaries, but the idea of herding him back into the cellar was unrealistic at best—utterly insane at worst. When he woke up the following morning beneath the shade of a tree instead of cement walls, he panicked.

Rather than fix the door—and about one thousand other things that were wrong with the old Lupin Cottage—Mia and Sirius convinced Remus it was time to bury the past. Once their things were removed from inside the small home, the pack gathered together to knock the old building to the ground.

"You'll move into Grimmauld Place," Sirius insisted joyfully.

"And we'll have a new home built for you," Mia added.

Remus argued and fought with them over their enforced "charity." Mia called him adorable, much to his annoyance. In the end, he caved when she insisted that if he did not take her money—the same money she had set up for him prior to her disappearance in 1979—then she would open a Gringotts account in Teddy's name, give the boy *all* of her Galleons and build the new home just for him. Remus and Tonks could be allowed in at Teddy's leisure.

Remus agreed to accept the money and new house, considering it all retroactive payment for having to babysit Sirius in her absence during the past few years.

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Despite Harry seeming a bit sad with Ginny back at Hogwarts, Grimmauld Place had never been happier with a nearly complete pack under one roof. Tonks and Harry had been paired as partners in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, which made everyone feel much safer knowing that they both had someone at work they could rely on. Remus set to work on the werewolf book that Sirius and Mia had been bothering him to write for years, and Sirius even turned his father's old study into a private office for him to be able to write in peace and quiet.

When they had free time—and Remus was too busy to feel bitter about not being included—Sirius, Mia, and Harry would go and visit Alice and Frank at St Mungo's. The couple was making slow strides toward a full recovery and had even been moved from the Janus Thickey Ward to the temporary rehabilitation area of the Spell Damage Floor.

Frank still struggled to speak and walk without assistance but was making large improvements in other areas. Alice had regained full use of her speech, though sometimes she had momentary memory lapses. To show his gratitude, Neville had gifted Mia with enough new plants to fill the garden out back—complete with magical herbs.

Draco still stopped by Grimmauld Place whenever he felt like it to pilfer Sirius's alcohol, but he quickly learnt that owling ahead was a smart thing to do when he first stumbled upon Sirius and Mia christening the staircase one afternoon.

*"Why are your House words tattooed on your arse?!" Draco shouted as he covered his eyes.*

*"Because it seemed offensive to tattoo them on my—" Sirius began and laughed when Mia covered his mouth.*

*"Do I even want to know why you're wearing a Hogwarts uniform?" Draco asked Sirius, eyes still closed.*

*Sirius responded by throwing a giggling Mia over his shoulder and carrying her off to their room.*

Many could sympathise with Draco—who begged for Obliviation. Harry sat Sirius and Mia down later to insist that the kitchen, dining room, and all other places where food was to be eaten was a sex-free zone. Sirius pouted, Mia laughed, and they both moved to their bedroom and did not come out for two days except to gather food.

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"Sirius!" Mia called up the stairs. "Come down here. I need your help with something!"

Sirius took the stairs two at a time, jumping down on the landing with the energy of a teenager and a grin on his face as he kissed her good morning. "Where've you been? I woke up, and you were gone. Lousy way to wake up, I'd like to never do it again," he insisted, burying his nose in her hair.

*"Filthy, rotten stain on my House . . . lying with blood-traitors and Mudbloods!"*

"Who opened her curtains and pissed on her frame this morning?" he growled, looking up to see the portrait of his mother glaring at him in severe disapproval.

"I did," Mia said. "The curtains thing, not the . . . anyway. I was bored and thought I'd show my engagement ring to Walburga." She smiled deviously at the painting.

"How'd Mummy Dearest like it?" Sirius asked with a wry grin.

"She had some very colourful things to say about my ancestry," Mia said with a chuckle. "Then she told me my skirt was too short, and I looked like a trollop."

"And how did you reply to *that*, my love?" Sirius said, reaching for the hem of her skirt and grinning as his fingers traced around her thigh.

"I set her painting on fire," Mia replied sweetly. "Repeatedly. Apparently, the Sticking Charm that keeps her up there prevents her from being permanently damaged as well. Still, just because the fire doesn't completely destroy her doesn't mean she can't scream."

"You set my mother on fire?" Sirius gave her a heated stare before hitching her thigh against his hip, rubbing his sudden erection against her. "Keep talking like that and you'll need to put out another fire."

Mia quirked her lips and threw her head back, laughing. "That's a terrible line. But hold that thought. I made a trip to the Apothecary this morning," she said, reaching into her handbag and pulling out a small bottle of bright red, oval eggs.

Sirius took the bottle from her and examined it.

"Care to take a guess?"

Sirius scoffed, offended. "I was in Advanced Potions right next to you and Lily, thank you very much. Ashwinder eggs. You planning on brewing Amortentia?" He leered before saying in a voice made husky in arousal, "I have to tell you, kitten, it's *very* unnecessary. Give me a Love Potion, and I'm liable to lose my mind and break this *sweet* little body of yours." Brushing his lips against her jaw, he slid his hands to her waist and regarded her thoughtfully. "Though, I am curious as to what *yours* smells like."

She smiled suggestively at him. "Fresh cut grass, parchment, and leather."

"That sounds familiar. I like leather. I'd like to take leather straps and tie you up against this wall," he said and picked her up, pressing her against the wall and pushing her wrists above her head as he ran his tongue along the side of her neck, repeating the action until she broke and let out a whimper. He chuckled against her skin and pressed himself against her centre with a groan.

"What does *yours* smell like?" she asked him, moaning.

"Firewhisky," he whispered in her ear. "Honey. And strawberries."

"You're a liar."

He laughed and nipped her earlobe. "It smells like the orchards behind Potter Manor. What else? That and old books. I wasn't lying about the firewhisky, though," he said as he licked his way up her throat, ignoring the prejudiced slurs Walburga was throwing at them from her portrait.

"As much as I'd love to continue this . . ." Mia gasped when his hand palmed her breast and the pad of his thumb stroked over a nipple. "I'm not having sex with you in front of your mother. I draw the line there, and let's be honest, that line has been pretty flexible up until now."

Sirius lowered her. "To the bedroom, then?"

Mia smirked and snatched the ashwinder eggs back from him. "I'd prefer right here, actually." She approached Walburga's portrait, stepping up and throwing the frozen eggs at the top of the painting, layering them against the frame. "Sirius, are you ready to say goodbye to your mother?"

He stared at her, not entirely sure *how* she was planning on doing what her eyes and words were promising, but he still felt like a little boy attending the Quidditch World Cup for the first time with light in his eyes and hope in his heart. "No need for goodbyes. Old bitch can fuck off for all I care."

"Good to know," Mia said and aimed her wand at the painting. "*Incendio!*"

The bottom edge of the frame caught fire first, and Walburga screamed obscenities at Mia from beyond the flames and smoke that she syphoned off with a Filtering Charm. When the fire reached the top of the frame, the bottom began to repair itself as it had been spelled to do. However, the heat thawed the ashwinder eggs which crackled and set fire to the seam where the painting met the wall. It was not Fiendfyre *exactly*, but strong enough to detach the portrait from where it hung.

The painting fell to the floor with a loud bang.

Mia raised her wand, shouting, "*Evanesco!*" to vanish the sizzling eggs and the flames they had ignited.

The wall was blackened from the fire but could easily be painted over.

Sirius stared at the fallen portrait and the blank space on the wall and then slowly turned, mouth open toward the witch. "Marry me."

Mia laughed. "We're already engaged, idiot."

"It's not enough," he insisted and pulled her into his arms. "You need more. Do you want a bigger ring? I'll get you a bigger ring. I'll get you ten rings!" He swung her around in a circle, moving a few steps forward so he could stomp his dragonhide boots all over his mother's fuming face. He kissed Mia deeply, plunging his tongue into her mouth and stroking hers with hungry, needy movements. Eventually, he pulled away and pressed his forehead against hers. "Do you want diamonds? Rubies?"

"Emeralds?" she suggested with a sly grin.

"Fine," he said and crushed his lips against hers. Mia chuckled against him and ran her fingers through his hair, pulling a rumble from his chest.

He stepped off of the painting and kicked it over so Walburga faced the ground, and neither had to look at her as she screeched from beneath them. Sirius questioned Mia with a buck of his hips, and she answered with a whimpering moan.

"Oh, kitten. I'm desperate to reward you for what you've just done, you have no idea how bad," he said, rutting his denim-clad hardness against her.

"Reward? I'm not entirely sure I should be rewarded."

"Why's that, love?"

"I almost set the house on fire," she said, gesturing to the blackened wall behind him. "Very dangerous. I should . . . I should definitely be taught a lesson."

Sirius groaned. "Now I'm torn."

"Why's that?" Mia asked as she rolled her hips against him, wrapping her legs tightly around his waist as she did so, gripping the railing above her to hold herself upright.

He closed his eyes and bit his bottom lip as she rocked herself against him. "I should punish you for nearly setting the house on fire," he said, moaning when she scratched the nails of one hand down his chest. "But I want to reward you for getting my mother off of the wall *and* for nearly setting this piece of shit house on fire."

Mia laughed.

Sirius grinned and slipped a hand between their bodies, inching her skirt up her thighs until he could dip his fingers between her legs. When he reached their apex and felt a bare warmth, his eyes widened. "Kitten? You seem to be missing something."

She grinned smugly, her amber eyes flashing.

"Did you at least wear knickers to the Apothecary?"

Mia rolled her eyes. "You haven't corrupted me *that* much, Sirius Black," she said with a chuckle that was replaced with a low whimper when he slipped two fingers inside of her.

He watched her face with amused concentration as he touched her, grinning madly when she gasped as he ran his thumb over her clit. "You like that, don't you, kitten?" he whispered in her ear. "So wet for me. How long have you been planning this very specific seduction?"

"Years." She whimpered and leant back against the wall, thrusting her chest out toward him when he hit a sensitive spot inside of her. "Oh fuck—Sirius, there! Right there!"

When he felt her begin to tense around his fingers, he smirked and removed them, leaving her empty and wanting. Her eyes drew to his face, a look of confusion replacing the recent expression of wanton desire.

She let out a breathy, pleading sound. "What . . . ?"

"You wanted to be punished. I think denying you the right to come should teach a proper lesson on playing with fire, don't you?"

Mia narrowed her eyes and leant forward, pressing her own hand down between them until it slipped into his faded jeans, wrapping her fingers around his cock.

He swallowed hard and tried to hold his resolve, but it broke when she squeezed, and soon he was pushing her hard against the wall behind her, using one hand to hold her to him and the other to undo his buckle, releasing himself.

As he fought with his trousers, she tugged the shirt from his back, ripping it over his head, lips quirking when his hair got mussed as she pulled the garment off of him. While Sirius lined his cock up to her entrance, she left alternating kisses and bites along his jaw and down his neck, stopping only when he surged up into her, causing both of them to freeze in the moment.

He savoured the feel of being inside of her. He desperately wanted to move, yearning for friction, aching to fall over the edge. At the same time, he never wanted to withdraw from her.

When Sirius finally pulled out of her only to thrust back in hard and deep, Mia moaned loudly. He clenched his teeth and hissed. She chuckled. "You . . . sound like a snake."

Sirius growled loudly and withdrew again, plunging back into her and biting the side of her neck at the same time to make a point.

Mia whimpered pleasantly and pulled his head up to kiss him, stroking his tongue with her own and lightly biting his bottom lip before whispering, "Bad dog."

"Mine," he said in a gasping breath as he sped up, wrapping his large hands around her hips and gripping tightly as though he would lose himself and her in the process if he dared to let go.

"All yours," she agreed, placing a kiss to the side of his head as he buried his face in the crevice of her neck.

He panted against her skin, growling and nipping at her shoulder anytime he felt her walls clench down around his cock as he surged in and out of her, the pleasure building back up to a wild burn in his veins. He kissed her neck and up her jaw until their mouths met, licking her bottom lip before sucking it between his own, biting gently when he felt her start to shake in his arms.

Mia cried out, her arms and legs gripping him tightly as she came hard around him, pulsing wildly in time with his heartbeat.

The synchronicity of their movements, the shared heat, the constantly vibrating bond between them pushed Sirius to his own end, and he spilt himself inside her, focusing as hard as possible to not let his legs give out and have them both collapse on the ground.

When his voice finally came back to him, he chuckled. "You, my love—" He kissed her temple, honey-brown curls stuck to the skin of her neck, bathed in sweat. "—are going to be the next Lady Black."

"I guess it's fitting that I just officially removed my predecessor then, isn't it?" she said, looking down at the overturned painting on the floor.

"Don't remind me. My mother is off of the wall, and the very thought makes me want to fuck you until neither of us can see straight. But my refractory period is not what it was twenty years ago."

She smiled at him. "I don't want twenty years ago, Sirius, I want you," she promised as she reached for the wand in her pocket, aiming it at her stomach.

Sirius snarled lightly at the piece of wood and grabbed it out of her grip, tossing it down the hallway.

Mia rolled her eyes.

Sirius knew she could cast the charm wandlessly, but his point was made.

She sighed, placing a soft kiss to his mouth. "Soon," she promised. "There's still so much to do first. I have a Ministry to disrupt, and the idea of vomiting in front of the Wizengamot is not appealing. Marry me first."

---

Celebrating the removal of Walburga's portrait would have to wait as more alterations to Grimmauld Place were needed. The entire house went into a massive panic,

especially Remus, when an unnaturally-fast Teddy ended up crawling into the fireplace of the library in an attempt to follow Tonks through on her way to work.

Remus had caught Teddy just in time, but the incident made him anxious for the rest of the day. Eventually, Sirius convinced him to place the baby in his crib to sleep, allowing Remus a chance to take a Calming Draught and lie down.

Harry and Sirius left the house for baby proofing supplies, allowed to go shopping on their own with the promise that they stick to Mia's list and not venture outside of the specified shops. With Remus passed out due to the effects of the potion, Mia stayed home and watched Teddy.

Later, Remus shouted in his sleep, drawing Mia's attention. After placing Security Charms around Teddy's crib, she rushed into her friend's bedroom to find him in the middle of a nightmare. Frowning, she placed a gentle hand on his forehead. "Remus. Remus, wake up."

His soft green eyes shot open, and he gasped for air. "Teddy?"

"Perfectly safe," she promised him. "Come on." She took his hand and slowly helped him to rise. She walked down the hall, shoving him toward her and Sirius's room, directing him to the bed, where he collapsed on Sirius's side with an exhausted groan.

She departed for a brief moment only to return just as quickly with a yawning Teddy in her arms. She delivered him to his father, who sat up against the headboard, cradling his son gently and smiling when the curious boy fell fast asleep, his turquoise hair shifting to sandy blond as he relaxed.

Mia, meanwhile, set up gentle Security Charms around the room, preventing Teddy from crawling out the door or near the fireplace in the corner before she placed her wand on her bedside table. She crawled in next to Remus, resting her head on his shoulder and smiling when he lazily draped an arm over her.

Sirius and Harry found them like that an hour later when they returned home. Mia blinked lazily as she watched Harry looking uneasy at the sight, his gaze flickering to Sirius to gauge his reaction. When Sirius only smiled, Harry offered him a confused look.

"C'mon." Sirius motioned to the bed, setting the bags of items down on a large armchair in the corner before he crawled diagonally across the mattress, draping his legs over Remus's until his head fell onto Mia's lap.

She yawned as her fingers slid through his hair. She gestured to Harry with her head, noting the empty space beside her and feeling a strange weight lifted from her heart when he came to lie down on her right.

Hours later, Mia woke in the middle of the night as the light from the moon poured in through the window. She smiled when she saw Tonks curled up next to Remus, her legs thrown over Sirius's calves. Teddy was cradled between his parents.

Mia gently ran her fingers through Sirius's hair, grinning when he made a contented noise against her thighs. She caught sight of Crookshanks nestled against his chest.

Despite knowing it was not James beside her, Mia felt comfortable and whole with Harry there, one arm tossed over his face, his glasses crooked on his nose. She reached for the spectacles, pulling them away and levitating them to the table wandlessly. She brushed aside the hair from his forehead, frowning at the lightning bolt scar that still made her feel wrathful whenever she saw it.

Voldemort was dead, and Harry had killed him, but Mia wished she had done it herself. Her attention flickered to Harry's forearm where the scar from Wormtail's blade remained, a reminder of the Triwizard Tournament and the resurrection of the Dark Lord. Peter was dead, too, and Mia had not even had the chance to witness his demise for herself.

She sighed softly, looking up at the window and following the path of light from the moon as it cast itself across her arms, Sirius's head, and Teddy's tiny toes.

A small reflected light caught her attention, and she looked down at Harry's hand, a glimmer of light showing a smooth texture across the back where there, in soft silvery-pink letters read: *I must not tell lies.*

That familiar bubble of rage built up inside of her, and Mia slowly extracted herself from the dog-piled pack, making her way quietly out the bedroom and down the stairs, where she found Mercury resting in his cage.

"Need you to go on a little trip, boy," she told the owl as she pulled out a quill and parchment, making a quick note:

*Kingsley,*

*I'm calling in your debt.*

*Mia*

## Chapter One Hundred Forty-Five

### *The Wizengamot*

---

*They tortured every inch of me  
Then expect me to forget it  
They thought that they would finish me  
But I pull through every time  
(Vengeance is Mine - Alice Cooper)*

---

**January 16th, 1999**

She sent the boys to visit Fred and George, knowing that the twins were keen on having the Marauders advise them on current and future projects they had in the works. Insisting on staying home, Mia informed everyone that Kingsley was stopping by to answer a few questions she had in regard to her potential future within the Ministry—something that she had voiced a curiosity about over the months since her return to 1998. Now that her grieving period was over and she felt somewhat readjusted to the decade, she was determined not to sit around the house and hope for projects to fall into her lap.

When the Minister for Magic stepped through the fireplace with a nervous smile, Mia grinned at him, noting aloud that he very likely had every reason to be at least a little anxious.

"How did she do it, Kings?" she asked after catching up with him for several minutes. She refilled his mug of tea, pushing a bottle of firewhisky across the table to him, should he like a splash.

Kingsley shook his head at the bottle, instead, dumping lump after lump of sugar in the beverage before stirring it only once and then drinking. Mia tried not to cringe. "She claimed Imperius, how else?"

"Rubbish," Mia hissed. "You know that's bullshit!"

He inclined his head. "Of *course* I do, but unfortunately, there's no proof that she wasn't. Dolores Umbridge claims she doesn't know who cursed her, so there's no way to trace anything—no wand to investigate. Besides that, she's a member of the Wizengamot. Granted, not a seat of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, but she was voted in. What's worse is that she still has friends there. Do you know the kind of hoops you have to jump through to

even *begin* an investigation against a member of the Wizengamot?" Kingsley laughed bitterly, adding an extra lump of sugar to his tea. "Lucius Malfoy had to be caught red-handed in the middle of the Department of Mysteries, overheard by *three* Aurors and several other witnesses shooting curses and threatening Harry's life before we could actually arrest the bastard. Never mind the hurdles we encountered actually getting him into Azkaban."

She glared across the table. "Funny, Sirius got thrown in just fine."

Kingsley frowned, looking guilty. "Yes, and that was because Crouch and Fudge combined the efforts of *both* of their departments and skipped over every bloody lawful step."

Mia felt bad. She knew it had not been his fault. Kingsley had only been a regular Auror at the time. Even Moody—if he had felt like it—would not have been able to single-handedly fight back against what Crouch and Fudge had done when Sirius had been arrested.

"Including a trial."

Kingsley nodded. "Including a trial. It was corruption at its worst."

"Fudge and Umbridge are still on the Wizengamot, Kings. They've also been on a very long list of mine that's getting shorter by the day. In fact, only two names remain. Theirs."

"You want to have them arrested, I understand—"

"I want them buried alive! I want *everything* taken from them."

"Can you do it *legally*?" he asked her. "My platform as Minister is to correct the problems my predecessors left me. To *eliminate* the corruption. Since Fudge did everything during his time as Minister with the Wizengamot's approval, there's nothing I can do about him. As for Umbridge . . . If she were a branded Death Eater, that would be different but, as it is, Dolores Umbridge doesn't have the Dark Mark."

"Did you check the bitch's soul?"

Kingsley grinned at her. "You're much more entertaining than Hermione, did you know that?"

She glared at him. "I'm still the same witch, Kings. Insulting Hermione is insulting me. I *am* Hermione. I'm very well aware that when I was a child, I could be—"

"An uptight swot."

She growled under her breath. "Yes, when I was *younger*. Don't change the subject. Dolores Umbridge sent Muggle-borns to Azkaban over the trumped-up charges of stealing magic. I was a witness to it myself. Harry and Ron saw it as well."

"Yes," Kingsley agreed with her. "When the three of you broke into the Ministry of Magic, mugged three people—two of whom are members of the Wizengamot—impersonated them with Polyjuice, and caused a riot in the building."

"Are we being *officially* charged?"

He let out a full belly laugh. "Merlin, no! The three of you are Order of Merlin, First Class recipients. If I even *attempted* to arrest you, the public would start another war on your behalf. I'm Minister for Magic, not King of Wizarding Britain." He sighed and ran a hand over his head. "You know I have limitations, too, Mia."

"I know."

"You're still calling in the debt, aren't you?"

"Absolutely," she said and watched the man sigh in frustration. After a long bout of tense silence, she asked, "You know what Voldemort's problem was?"

The Minister blinked at her and chuckled as they shared the thought: *Just one problem?* before he answered, "A long-term plan for genocide?"

Mia shook her head. "A short-term obsession with Harry."

Kingsley raised a brow. "Your point?"

"Dolores Umbridge is a tiny thread in a large tapestry that needs to be unravelled and re-stitched from scratch," she said matter-of-factly, reaching forward and taking a sip from her own cup of tea. "You told me when the war ended that you would find a place for me in the Ministry."

He nodded. "The offer still stands."

"I know what place I want."

He smiled at her, looking desperately curious to what she had in mind. "And you need my life debt for . . . ?"

"A session with the Wizengamot." He frowned at her reply, clearly not understanding where she was going. "I'm aware that a new Chief Warlock has not been elected, therefore the position falls to the Minister."

"All right, as the Minister for Magic I do have the ability to organise that," he agreed.

"You also have the ability to *keep* it in session for as long as needed."

His eyes widened, finally looking as nervous as she knew he would be. "And how long do you need it?"

Mia smiled innocently. "As long as it takes."

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### **January 18th, 1999**

The walls of the large courtroom were made of dark stone, and the torches that gave light to the room made it feel as though the government of Wizarding Britain was set back centuries—which, according to many of their practices and laws, they were.

The members of the Wizengamot had long since abandoned the official dress code for more casual—though still proper—dress robes. Those who stuck to the old ways wore the official uniform and sat bunched together to show the animosity between the groups.

Dressed in plum robes with a silver embroidered "W" on the front were Cornelius Fudge, Dolores Umbridge, and a scattering of pureblood elitists—most of whom held the family seats of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. William Burke sat between Damocles Belby and Marcus Flint Sr, all behind Peneus Parkinson and Horace Slughorn. Mia knew that Slughorn very likely wore the official robes because he thought the colour plum brought out his eyes. Sitting among the families, but out of uniform, were Theodore Nott, Tiberius Ogden, Elora Zabini, and Cygnus Bulstrode.

The opposite bank of seats was much more colourful, a fact that seemed to offend their tradition-bound opponents. Elphias Doge sat conversing with Amos Diggory and Adrian Abbot as though they were all old friends. Aubrey Fawley was catching up with Augusta Longbottom and Ernest Macmillan Sr, while Bill Weasley—who had accepted the Weasley seat on behalf of Arthur—was shaking hands with Garrick Ollivander and helping the elderly wizard into his own family seat.

A small group of citizens were allowed in to view the open session, as was protocol, and that was how Mia, Harry, Sirius, and Remus found themselves facing the Wizengamot that early morning.

When the large doors to the left opened, and Kingsley walked in, Mia smiled at him.

Following behind the Minister for Magic was Arthur, accompanied by a tall, blond man who somewhat resembled Lucius Malfoy but without the permanent sneer and looking much more relaxed as well. Percy Weasley brought up the rear.

As the doors closed, locking the session, Kingsley took possession of the podium. "I call to order this session of the Wizengamot on the eighteenth of January, 1999. Presiding Minister for Magic and interim Chief Warlock, Kingsley Shacklebolt. Advisor to the Minister, Hyperion Greengrass," he said, gesturing to the tall, blond wizard, "Undersecretary Arthur Weasley, and Junior Assistant Percival Weasley present. First order of business is what was voted upon during our last session."

Almost immediately, half of the Wizengamot began muttering bitterly under their breath.

"Harry James Potter, please step forward."

"We've rehearsed this," Mia whispered to Harry. "Do *not* divert from the script. I know the legislation better than you do. I spent my entire time working at the Ministry researching every ancient law that still applies. If we plan to hold them accountable to those laws, then they'll do the same with us. No matter what, control your temper."

Harry acknowledged her words silently and stepped to the centre of the room.

Kingsley smiled down at him from the podium. "The Wizengamot has petitioned and voted and, in overwhelming favour, has decided to grant to the House of Potter its ancient family seat on the Wizengamot, effective immediately."

Half of the Wizengamot applauded; the audience followed suit.

Harry smiled politely. "Thank you, Minister. As the Head of the House of Potter, I accept."

"And will you, Lord Potter, join us now?" Kingsley asked, gesturing to the empty seat beside Bill Weasley.

Harry cleared his throat. "No. I am formally declining the offered position."

Many began whispering and mumbling in shock.

Hyperion Greengrass spoke up, "You refuse to sit in the seat you've just accepted on behalf of your House?" he asked, obviously curious, though not nearly as offended-looking as many who were sitting to his right. Peneus Parkinson was glaring at Harry. Fudge and Umbridge both looked apoplectic.

"Yes," Harry said simply. "As I am not the *only* Potter, I feel it's my duty to my House to have my family name best represented in the Wizengamot. I'm an Auror. So, I did quite well in Defence Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts, but I was pants at History of Magic. I elect to pass my family seat on."

Fudge could apparently not stand to remain silent any longer. Either that or Umbridge was elbowing him in the ribs, indicating that he should do something. "What do you mean you're not the only Potter?"

Mia smiled and stood to make her way to Harry's side. Many glared at her, but the only set of eyes she took immediate notice of were Umbridge's. She smiled at the toady old witch and watched in amusement as the woman bristled.

"The Wizengamot recognises Hermione Granger," Kingsley said.

"Potter, actually," Mia corrected him. "I've just come from the Wizengamot Department of Administration to have my name officially changed."

Umbridge stood, her face turning a shade of purple that matched her robes. "This is an outrage!" she screamed, not even trying to use her generally honeyed-poison tone of voice. "Do you mean to tell me that Harry Potter has married a Mudblood and intends to pass to her a noble family seat in the Wizengamot?" She held her hand against her heart as though the very idea would cause her to faint. "Lords and Ladies, *this* is why I voted *against* bestowing such a seat of honour to the House of Potter. They have defiled their name in the past and continue to do so!"

Many bobbed their heads in agreement. Others rolled their eyes dramatically. Every Weasley present—Percy included—stood at the mention of the slur in outrage.

"Dolores, you will hold your tongue and refrain from using such language. We will not have this conversation again," Kingsley ordered.

Mia cleared her throat and smiled. "I'm *hardly* Harry's wife," she insisted, watching with a chuckle as Harry recoiled at the very suggestion of such a thing. "My name is Hermione Potter, but many of you might know me as Mia."

Something was dropped in the back, and the bang of whatever it was echoed around the room. When the echo cleared, the room was left in utter silence until Damocles Belby gasped. "Son of Salazar . . . Mia Potter?"

Adrian Abbot stared down at her, eyes wide. "Mia?"

Elora Zabini focused her attention on her old school rival. "That's her all right."

"Adrian, Damocles, it's so good to see you again." Mia smiled at the wizards and then turned her eyes on the witch. "Zabini."

Elora sneered. "Potter."

"I demand an explanation!" Umbridge cried.

"Gladly, Dolores," Kingsley said, taking charge of the room and silencing all the whispers in the crowd. "Several months ago, Hermione Granger came upon a trap set by the Death Eater, Antonin Dolohov. He had triggered a Time-Turner and placed it among Miss Granger's belongings. Hermione was sent back to 1971, where she was adopted by Charlus and Dorea Potter, thus known as Mia Potter. She recently returned from 1979 and informed me of the situation."

"And you just believed her?" Umbridge scoffed loudly. "Minister, this girl is a well-known manipulator!"

"Madam Umbridge, Miss Potter went through an official interrogation by the Minister himself," Percy said, the air of self-righteousness surrounding him as he spoke, offended on the Ministry's behalf that they would not have taken such a claim seriously.

Umbridge frowned at the declaration, turning her attention to Kingsley and forcing herself into a sickeningly sweet smile. "With all due respect, Minister, it's known that you're acquainted with Miss Granger. Some might consider any interrogation by you biased. I would hate to see a man such as yourself belittled and badmouthed over what could be considered a scandal."

From the audience, Mia could hear Sirius scoff loudly. All things considered, he could have done much worse. She had actually thought about leaving him at home, but he was necessary to her plans, and she did so enjoy showing him off in public.

"I'll allow for Veritaserum questioning if that would please the Wizengamot," Mia said with a smile, turning her attention to Umbridge. "Perhaps slip some in my tea, Dolores. If not, I'm open to Legilimency. Madam Fawley, I've been told you're quite the accomplished Legilimens," she said to the witch near Neville's grandmother, who preened under the compliment.

"And also a Gryffindor," Umbridge argued. "No, I think perhaps someone without House affinities would do better. Lord Parkinson? Lord Bulstrode?"

Peneus Parkinson broke out in a devious grin at the offer and sat tall.

How such a sour-faced man was related to Laurel, Mia would never know. She smiled at him all the same, even as she could practically see the word *Mudblood* running through his mind as he stared at her.

"I'd be delighted," he said politely and then raised his wand, made eye contact and whispered, "*Legilimens*."

It did not take him very long to find whatever he was looking for, and when he broke eye contact, frowning bitterly, Mia smiled.

"Apologies, Madam Umbridge, the witch is speaking the truth. She is Mia Potter, daughter of Charlus and Dorea, who was tricked back in time by the Death Eater known as Antonin Dolohov."

Umbridge pouted but looked like she was trying very hard to remain collected. "Still, she's a Muggle-born and cannot accept a family seat on the Wizengamot. There are laws. There are rules that must be followed."

"I completely agree, Dolores," Mia said, a delightful shiver going up her spine when Umbridge grimaced at her use of her given name. "However, as it stands, I was properly bonded in the adoption to my parents and, therefore, under the laws of magic, am considered pureblood. I am able to accept the seat of my House."

Umbridge screeched, "Preposterous!"

Mia frowned as though she pitied her, and then spoke slowly. "Are you unfamiliar with pureblood laws, *Dolores*? Do you *not* know how magical adoption works? It was my understanding that *all* pureblood Houses instructed their children in the old customs and traditions. Did your *pureblood* parents not properly instruct you?" she asked with a sly smile, noting immediately the way Umbridge flinched at the inflexion Mia used on the word *pureblood* in reference to her parents.

"I . . . I still object to this insanity. She's a common Mudblood!"

"Dolores! I won't say it again!" Kingsley shouted.

Before the Wizengamot descended into chaos once more, Mia cleared her throat. "If the seat to the House of Potter will be denied me, I shall simply take up another, *Dolores*."

The toad-faced witch hissed loudly enough to be heard by all in the chamber before saying, "You have no respect, little girl! You know *nothing* of Wizengamot proceedings and protocols, and you should address your betters by their proper titles, *Miss Granger!*"

Mia's brow lifted, and she smiled and bowed her head. "As you wish *Madam* Umbridge, but if you insist on proper titles then you should recognise me as Lady Black."

The collective Wizengamot, save for the members of the Order, gasped loudly.

"I beg your pardon?" Umbridge choked on the words.

"My mother was Dorea Black before she was a Potter and, as Walburga Black—the last Lady Black—passed on a number of years ago, I claim her title. It is mine by right either by my mother's blood—as I am yet unmarried—or through marriage later this summer," she said and flashed them all her large opal engagement ring.

"Marriage?" Fudge gaped at the ring, and his eyes widened dramatically when Sirius rose from his seat to stand at Mia's side.

"Yes, Miss Potter . . . or Lady Black," Sirius said, "is my fiancée. And the House of Black offers her its rightful Wizengamot seat."

Members of the assembly all began shouting.

Mia shook her head at Sirius's obvious delight; he was always happiest when causing trouble.

"You cannot allow this, Minister!" Umbridge shouted.

"I am merely following protocol, Dolores," Kingsley insisted calmly. "The Heads of two Houses have passed on their familial seats to Miss Hermione Potter. Nothing can be done about it."

"That's not true." Fudge stood. "According to procedure, the seat must be offered to any living descendants of a House that comes after their Head of House. Nothing can be done about the House of Potter . . . *apparently*. But the House of Black . . . It's too important to hand over to a . . . a . . ." He struggled as he clearly avoided calling Mia a Mudblood, but corrected himself in time. "A nineteen-year-old *girl*."

"Very well," Sirius accepted. "The next Black heir would be Harry Potter."

Harry grinned, looking really pleased with himself. "I decline and offer the seat to Hermione Potter."

Yelling continued.

The noise was eventually silenced when the doors to the right opened and Draco, dressed to the nines in proper robes, looking the very near-image of his late father, stepped through.

"Excuse me," Kingsley said, "this is a Wizengamot session already in progress. You can't just burst in without—"

"Apologies, Minister," Draco said with a polite bow of the head as he moved to stand in the centre of the room, purposely distancing himself from Harry, Mia, and Sirius. "Esteemed Lords and Ladies—" He made eye contact with Umbridge first, smiling at her and looking ever the part of a perfect, pureblood prince. "I've only just now received word that a session had been opened, and I thought it an appropriate time to officially accept the seat of the House of Malfoy."

"Thank goodness." Umbridge breathed a sigh of relief. "*Someone* with a proper head on their shoulders."

Kingsley nodded. "The Wizengamot recognises the claim that Draco Malfoy—"

"*Lord*," Draco said, correcting the Minister for Magic with an arrogance that made half of the Wizengamot chuckle under their breath.

Mia rolled her eyes at his theatrics.

Kingsley cleared his throat, trying to not seem annoyed. "Apologies. *Lord* Draco Malfoy has made a motion for his familial House seat. All in favour?" All hands were raised, save for the Weasleys' and Augusta Longbottom, but even then their eyes were focused on Mia, who smiled at them. "Welcome to the Wizengamot, Lord Malfoy. Perhaps you would have a say in our current conversation."

"And what is that?" Draco asked.

"Lord Malfoy is *also* a descendant and heir to the House of Black," Fudge spoke up. "If Sirius Black and Harry Potter each deny their ancestral seat, it is then offered to Lord Malfoy."

Draco appeared surprised. "You want *me* to take up the seat of the House of Black as well?" he asked and grinned as though the thought was greatly appealing.

"Very much so." Umbridge smiled gratefully, as though Draco Malfoy—not Harry Potter—was the Saviour of the Wizarding world.

"Interesting," Draco said with a devious grin before he cleared his throat, stopped smiling, and stood tall—his posture reflecting his formal upbringing. "I decline and offer the seat to Hermione Potter."

Those who opposed Mia's claim sat looking positively shocked at Draco's statement.

Taking advantage of the lack of yelling, Draco continued, "And before anyone else objects, I have letters from both my mother, Narcissa Malfoy née Black, and Andromeda Tonks née Black, declining the family seat as well."

Mia smiled at Draco as he bowed his head toward her. "For the record, if Madam Umbridge and Mr Fudge continue to deny me the Black family seat, I believe next in line would be the Weasleys, would they not? Followed by the Longbottoms."

Fudge never looked more defeated save for the day he had to hand the reins of the Ministry over to Rufus Scrimgeour. Umbridge looked like she was about to have a stroke.

"Hermione Potter, Lady Black," Kingsley said, addressing her formally with a smile, "has made a request for her familial House seats, denied by the Heads of each House and those who might be considered in line ahead of her. All in favour?"

Mia knew many would oppose her claim and was not surprised to see Umbridge and Fudge sitting with their hands firmly in their laps. Likewise, Peneus Parkinson, Marcus Flint Sr, and William Burke sat still. Shockingly, she noted that Theodore Nott, Cygnus Bulstrode, and Elora Zabini raised their hands in favour, along with the rest of the Wizengamot.

Kingsley grinned. "Welcome to the Wizengamot, Lady Black."

Mia smiled and walked forward as Sirius and Harry each stepped back and retook their seats in the audience.

Draco held out his arm to her, and she politely took it. "Mia."

"Cousin." She grinned at him as he led her up the stairs to join the gathered assembly.

Arthur, Percy, and Bill greeted her with a kiss on the cheek, also shaking Draco's hand in congratulations. She then said hello to all the members who voted for her, Lady Longbottom first and foremost, before Draco led her to the opposite side of the seating where she was wrapped in a gentle hug by an old friend.

Damocles chuckled. "Mia, you're as beautiful as you ever were."

"Damocles, I can't tell you how good it is to see you. I read your recent article in *Potions Monthly*, and I have about a thousand questions for you."

"I imagine you would."

"Mia, er . . ." A tall, lanky wizard stood to greet her. "Do you prefer Miss Potter or Lady Black?"

"Adrian, you may call me Mia as you always did," she insisted, shaking his hand in greeting. "Keep your eyes up here, though." She pointed to her face when she caught her former classmate looking over her twenty-years-too-young body.

"Sorry," he said, flushing red.

Elora stood, staring Mia in the face. "Potter."

"Zabini." Mia smiled politely at her. "Didn't think I'd have your vote."

"You were a self-righteous little cunt in school, but I'm not stupid enough to deny how smart you are. It'll be an enjoyable experience not to be the only witch on the Wizengamot willing to stand up to the ridiculous patriarchy. Lady Longbottom aside, of course."

"Does Madam Umbridge not speak up for her fellow witches?" Mia asked sweetly.

Elora rolled her eyes. "If it *pleases* her to do so."

"Did you know . . . I hear she's a half-blood," Mia leant in and whispered, echoing gossip that Laurel had given her twenty years ago.

Elora's eyes widened and then narrowed in Umbridge's direction.

Mia knew from the occasional run-in with Elora's son, Blaise, in school that the Zabini family did not care much about blood status so long as you were Slytherin and/or good-looking and wealthy. By the look on Elora's face, Mia deduced that Slytherins also greatly disliked being deceived.

"Oh, and Zabini?"

"Hmm?"

"We'll get along famously as long as you keep your eyes off my fiancé."

Elora grinned and then muttered, "I've learnt to swim."

Mia chuckled in amusement. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Theo, may I introduce my cousin," Draco said as he led Mia toward a tall, dark-haired wizard, "Hermione Potter."

The man Mia recognised as Theodore Nott stood and took her hand, bending his head slightly to brush his lips across her knuckles before smiling at her. "I assume this will all come with a proper, lengthy explanation," he said, his crystal blue eyes questioning Draco, who merely gave a quick nod in reply. "I feel like some bits and pieces were left out of your delectable drift through time. Speaking of delectable, your hair is tamer than I remember from school, but I can't imagine it still matches the witch."

Mia smirked, amusedly wondering if it was her change in blood status that had Nott acting so well-behaved toward her, or whether or not Draco's influence was that great amongst Slytherins. "Flirting with me, Theo? That's dangerous."

She and Nott both looked at Sirius, who was eyeing the exchange with amusement.

"Because of Black?" Nott asked. "Any proper son of a noble House should be prepared for decent competition."

"You are dangerous, Theo," she said with a laugh, shaking her head incredulously. "Perhaps, in another world, you would be considered severe competition. As it stands, I'm delightfully taken." She looked back at Sirius, who beamed up at her proudly, obviously having overheard the conversation, the eavesdropping canine.

Draco led her toward the centre of the seating nearest her actual seat, which had the name BLACK engraved on it in silver. They stood before Hyperion Greengrass, who took her hand politely and kissed her knuckles.

"Lady Black."

"Lord Greengrass."

Draco addressed his future father-in-law with a respectful bow of the head. "Sir."

"I'm to understand *you're* responsible for the arranged marriage between my youngest daughter and this wizard before me." Hyperion gestured to Draco as a form of acknowledgement. "I'm in your debt for such a boon to my House."

Draco stood a little taller at his words, accepting the obvious compliment but saying nothing.

"It was my pleasure," Mia said kindly.

"You have, however, *also* made introductions between my eldest daughter and a certain young wizard of a different kind."

She feigned innocence, letting a surprised smile cross her features. "Oh, I'd almost forgotten that Daphne and Ronald have become friends."

"Yes, we had the boy over for dinner over the holidays. Has he always eaten like that?"

"Unfortunately," Mia said with a smirk, glad that it was Ron's manners and not his family that Hyperion objected to. "I rarely had the time to instruct him properly what with O.W.L.s and—"

"Destroying a Dark Lord?"

"Something like that," she said with a quiet chuckle. "I'm sure Daphne will be quite the positive influence on him."

"My wife has always been taken with you, and since your return, she's been in, well . . . She's been much more *pleasant* than usual."

Mia mirrored his sudden grin. "Is Laurel ever *anything* but pleasant?"

He scoffed incredulously. "If she weren't, I'd be hard-pressed to inform her best friend, lest I end up sleeping on the sofa."

"Your home doesn't have spare rooms?"

"Not when Laurel's in a mood, it doesn't," he replied cheekily.

Kingsley cleared his throat, requesting everyone to take their seats. He wore a smile on his face, and Mia wondered if he truly believed that this was the end of her plans.

Draco escorted Mia to her chair before taking his place right behind her in the seat marked MALFOY.

"All right, now that the family seat situation has been settled," Kingsley said with a relaxed sigh, "is there any further business?"

Mia stood, gently clasping her hands in front of her. "Yes, Minister, I have *several* things I'd like to take care of, actually."

Kingsley did not even pretend to be surprised by this. "We recognise Hermione Potter and offer her the floor."

"I won't need the whole floor, Minister." She smiled as she walked down to turn and face the Wizengamot. "Not unless things get out of hand," she added, her focus on Dolores.

"Lords, Ladies, and fellow members of the Wizengamot. I would like to take my first action as a member of this esteemed assembly," she announced with a deceptively sweet smile, one that she knew made her look so much like Dorea Potter that she might as well have worn green, "by accusing Madam Dolores Umbridge of fraud, legislation forgery, and the use of an Unforgivable on a high ranking Ministry official."

Umbridge turned red with fury, and the Wizengamot fell silent in shock.

"I formally request that she be immediately dismissed from the Wizengamot."

## Chapter One Hundred Forty-Six

### *Mercy*

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*Now the past I've tried forgetting  
And my foes I could forgive  
Trouble is, I know it's petty  
But I hate to let them live*  
(My Lullaby - Suzanne Pleshette)

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**January 18th, 1999**

"EVERYONE QUIET!"

Kingsley was shouting and had taken to using a Sonorus Charm in order to get the attention of the chaotic Wizengamot.

Most of the blood purists were in an outrage on behalf of Umbridge, though the Order members were just as loud on the other side, defending Mia's accusation. It was the members in the middle who remained silent. When an actual fight broke out between two lower opposing members, Theo Nott, with an annoyed look on his face, stood from his own family seat and made his way to sit beside Draco, rather than get trampled on by duelling half-bloods.

"She's likely to destroy the place without lifting a finger of her own. Was that in whatever dastardly plan the two of you had concocted when you so *conveniently* arrived in the middle of a session?"

Mia made eye contact with Draco, overhearing the question, and smirked.

"Remember how smart Granger was?" Draco asked his friend.

Theo nodded. "Enough to frustrate you into some delightful common room hissy fits for besting your scores."

Draco ignored the insult and the quiet laughter that Mia was trying to stifle. "She's had an additional eight years of education, plus this time, she was raised by a pureblood Slytherin mother."

"Merlin, help us." Theo chuckled. "Look at her face. She's enjoying this quite a bit."

And she really was.

"Taking on Umbridge? I don't think I've seen her this excited since she broke my nose third year."

"*That* made *everyone* who saw it a little happy. 'If an injury has to be done to a man, it should be so severe that his vengeance need not be feared,'" Theo said with an entertained smile.

"What do you think Umbridge did to incur this kind of wrath?" Draco asked.

"Other than exist? By my count, she's called her a Mudblood twice already."

"Minister!" Umbridge finally broke, turning to Kingsley with a shout and thus pulling Mia's focus away from listening in on the Slytherins as pandemonium erupted around her. "I request that Lady Black be removed from the Wizengamot immediately!"

Finally, the crowd began to calm as Umbridge's volume increased, everyone waiting to see how Kingsley would side. Those who knew the man waited to see how the blood purists would react when he made his choice known.

Before the Minister could say anything aloud, Mia spoke up, her voice calm and rational, "If Madam Umbridge has justification for having me removed, I willingly give her the floor. If not, my accusations stand."

"Miss Potter, you're aware of the seriousness of your accusations?" Kingsley asked her as though he had not been informed of her desire to ruin Umbridge. "You are accusing a member of the Wizengamot of using an Unforgivable."

"Yes," Mia affirmed, "against the former Minister for Magic, Harold Minchum." Umbridge briefly flinched at the specified accusation, and Mia's inner Animagus shivered in delight. "And, lest we forget, I also accused her of forging his signature on legislation she wanted to pass."

Umbridge huffed incredulously. "This is offensive! As a *victim* of the Imperius Curse myself," she said, fanning her face with her hand to further show how emotionally distraught she was by the accusations being thrown at her, "I am more than aware of how difficult it would be to even *begin* to investigate such a horrendous claim."

Mia smiled at the woman, an action that apparently continued to irritate. "Yes, it would take wand monitoring after a suspicion has been aroused, signed by an Auror and registered with the Improper Use of Magic Offices. And, considering that the person being monitored is aware of being monitored, they're unlikely to perform said Unforgivable Magic."

Umbridge hissed, "Precisely, you foolish girl! Not only that, but as I am a member of the Wizengamot, to even *begin* such a ridiculous investigation you would need to file an application to the court for an investigation."

"Yes, and those applications take roughly one hundred and eighty days to process," Mia agreed.

"Precisely!"

"I suppose, then," Mia began, removing a rolled and sealed parchment from her bag, "it's a good thing that I filed one in 1979, isn't it?"

A single bead of sweat slid down Umbridge's temple, and in a very small voice, she squeaked, "What?"

"Oh, yes. You see, I used to work for the Ministry." Mia quirked her lips, turning her attention to Kingsley and the rest of the Wizengamot. "I was a simple little file girl that had suspicions about several pieces of legislation that Madam Umbridge was passing at the time. A friend of Minister Minchum brought to my attention that the minister was behaving strangely following his meetings with Madam Umbridge. Worried for the Ministry, I filed an application for investigation to the courts, which was surprisingly approved by the Minister himself—shocking, almost as though he were willing to sign *anything* that crossed his desk with the name 'Umbridge' on it."

Whispers filled the room, and even some of her supporters began looking at Umbridge with narrowed eyes.

"Then, I simply had an Auror file the proper paperwork to have Madam Umbridge's wand monitored," she said, purposely not looking in Sirius's direction as *he* had been the Auror in question. She pulled out a small stack of papers and passed them over to Kingsley. "Here are the findings. As I said when I arrived, I previously stopped by the Administration Offices this morning. I'm sure there are copies of the reports if anyone believes I've tampered with these."

"You . . ." Umbridge gaped at her in obvious horror. "You . . . You still have to launch a proper investigation and . . . and . . . I object!"

Kingsley fixed her with a stern glare. "Dolores, you may step down voluntarily, or be forcibly removed," he said as he looked down over the papers in his hands, passing them to Hyperion Greengrass, who sneered at the parchments and their findings.

Umbridge stomped her foot in outrage. "I will not let a filthy little Mudblood accuse me of—"

"If I may, Minister?" Mia asked, cutting off Umbridge's rant.

"Miss Potter?"

"I understand this must be incredibly embarrassing to Madam Umbridge." She offered a fake sympathetic smile. "It is my understanding that the Wizengamot still follows and adheres to the rules of ancient magic?"

"Of course," Kingsley answered and even the blood purists began nodding their head in agreement, as though suggesting anything else was offensive to the entire Wizarding culture.

"If she sees fit," Mia offered, "Madam Umbridge may challenge my accusations per ancient law."

"Yes, I challenge the accusations!" Umbridge quickly spat.

"Very well, then, by the similar ancient laws, I have the right to challenge Madam Umbridge in turn for the slander against my Houses." She set her bag down and unbuttoned her cloak, throwing it gently into her seat. She smiled when Draco leant forward and folded it properly for her.

Umbridge stared, clearly confused. "I never said one word against—"

"Would the collective assembly agree that they've heard Madam Umbridge refer to me as a 'Mudblood' no less than three times in this session?"

Theo looked to Draco and smirked.

"They would," Kingsley said angrily.

"I'm sure it was an accident," Mia said sweetly, "and that Madam Umbridge is unaware that it is *illegal* by ancient laws to slander a pureblood and their House by referring to or implying that any member of a Noble and Ancient House is impure. As I am the adopted daughter of Dorea Black and Charlus Potter, I am considered by those same ancient laws a pureblood. Madam Umbridge referred to me as a 'Mudblood', and I offer her the chance to either step down from the Wizengamot willingly to save herself some dignity and accept a formal investigation or accept my challenge to rightfully defend the honour of my Houses."

"She is *not* a pureblood! She is not! Adoption only—"

"Stop talking, Dolores!" Fudge stood and hissed at the woman. "You know *exactly* what pureblood adoption means!"

Umbridge looked confused.

Mia frowned, which was difficult because she wanted to start dancing. "Perhaps she *doesn't*, Mr Fudge. Perhaps Madam Umbridge, as a *half-blood*, wasn't taught our customs and traditions."

The Wizengamot made a collective gasp.

"What?" Umbridge swallowed. "I . . . How dare . . . I'm a—"

"It's true," Elora Zabini said, looking bored as she glanced down at her hands to examine her nails. "I heard she was only a half-blood."

"And there's nothing wrong with that. Some of my best friends are half-bloods," Mia said jokingly, looking over her shoulder and winking at Harry and Remus, who both rolled their eyes at her.

"I . . . I . . . I accept your challenge!" Umbridge blurted out, likely to save face and change the subject of her own parentage.

"Oh, good." Mia grinned brightly. "I will be sad to kill you, of course."

Umbridge blinked. "What?"

"A challenge to defend the honour of one's House is a duel to the death, Dolores. Do you understand *nothing* of our laws? Surely a simple Mudblood like me couldn't *possibly* know more about magic than you."

Umbridge visibly panicked and looked at Kingsley. "Minister . . ."

"Lady Black is correct, Madam Umbridge. These are our ways," Kingsley said firmly.

"But she—"

"Oh, for the love of Salazar, Dolores!" Peneus Parkinson snapped. "Duel the little chit and put an end to this nonsense, or we'll be here for days!"

Umbridge began to remove her plum cloak and hat, reaching into the pocket of her robe for her wand.

Mia stepped down the stairs, stretching her arms and neck as she removed her robe entirely, revealing Muggle clothing beneath which caused the blood purists to look at her with distaste.

"Madam Umbridge should be aware that I did quite well in my Defence N.E.W.T.," she said with a proud smile as she approached Sirius, Harry, and Remus. She handed her

robe over to him, grinning sardonically. "Beaten out only by one other person, and he was a dirty rotten cheat."

"Did not," Remus whispered.

Mia turned to face Umbridge as the woman descended the stairs to meet her in the centre of the floor. "Then again, you *do* have a number of years on me. Much more knowledge and experience, I gather. It's not as though I *personally* defeated the Dark Lord. I was only taught how to defend myself by Harry Potter." She smirked and a wave of quiet chuckles echoed through the chamber. "And then again by the wizard who taught Harry Potter how to defend himself. I'm sorry, I ramble when I'm nervous."

Umbridge narrowed her beady eyes. "Who stands as my second?"

"I'll stand," Peneus Parkinson said.

"And *your* second, Miss Potter?" Kingsley asked.

Mia grinned when no less than twelve wizards stood at the question in a silent offering. Augusta Longbottom also stood, looking like she was in the mood for a good execution before afternoon tea.

"Remus Lupin will be my second."

"A werewolf?!"

"Yes. I imagine that, should you be so lucky as to kill me, he'd be quite entertained with the idea of duelling you." Mia's amused smile faded. "If you should get injured, however, I wouldn't expect him to carry you to St Mungo's. He's not allowed inside, you see."

Her words were calm but ever so threatening as her personal issues with Dolores Umbridge were laid out bare for the entire Wizengamot.

"If you have a problem with duelling a werewolf, I can always refuse to have a second. But you must do so first."

Umbridge avoided glancing in Remus's direction as she announced, "I refuse a second!"

Peneus Parkinson sat down, looking annoyed.

"I'd watch that temper of yours, Dolores. Very Gryffindor of you to behave so recklessly." Mia turned around to empty her pockets and decide which of her vineyard wands she wanted to use. Harry was the only one in the stands who looked nervous.

"Provoking her with me?" Remus asked, raising a brow.

Mia smiled slyly. "Angry?"

"Hardly. Did you see her face? Merlin, it's like Christmas all over again."

"If you let that bitch kill you," Sirius whispered, taking Mia's face into his hands, "I will be very cross with you."

"Hermione, are you sure you . . . ?" Harry began, nervously fidgeting with the sleeve of his robe. "I mean, we've never exactly seen her fight properly, have we? What if she cheats?"

"Oh, I know she'll cheat. But she underestimates me on at least two levels. First, I'm aware she *might* be properly decent in a duel, whereas she doesn't know the half of what I'm capable of."

"And second?"

Mia smiled innocently, something Harry had hopefully learnt to be afraid of. "Second, is that Dolores Umbridge will hope to kill me in this duel to rid the world of one extra Mudblood who's trying desperately to besmirch her good name. I, on the other hand, don't want to *kill* the witch."

"What do you want to do to her, then?"

"Make her bleed, and weep, and suffer, and beg me for mercy."

"Kiss me for luck, kitten." He pressed his lips against hers, delving his tongue into her mouth, grinning when she gripped the front of his shirt tightly. He brought her into his arms and hugged her, making it look like they were saying goodbye, just in case. In reality, he brushed his lips against the shell of her ear and whispered, "After this is done and everyone leaves, would you like me to fuck you on the Black family seat?"

Mia chuckled and pulled away from him.

Remus handed her wand over. "Don't play with her. Just finish it quickly."

"No promises. I'm going to enjoy this. Keep *them* in line," she said, gesturing to Sirius and Harry.

Remus nodded.

When she stepped back to the floor, wand in hand, Kingsley stood.

"Ladies, as Interim Chief Warlock and Minister for Magic, I decree that this duel is valid by the ancient laws of magic, and the victor will *not* be held accountable for the death of the other. That being said, the use of Unforgivables is, as always, denied."

Before Kingsley even had a chance to officially begin the duel, Umbridge flicked her wand out and sent an Entrail-Expelling Curse at Mia that was easily blocked with a shield.

Umbridge hissed as she missed her target, and Mia grinned at her. "Sneaky witch."

She allowed the woman to attack her repeatedly with wild motions and harsh hexes and curses. Each time she threw up a well-placed shield, grinning calmly as Umbridge descended further and further down an unending pit of anger and bitterness.

"*Titillando!*" Mia called out and, as the Tickling Hex hit the target square in the chest, the body of the Wizengamot began murmuring to one another in confusion. Most of the blood purists believed that Mia was out of her element, relying on defences taught to fourth year Hogwarts students. Her friends and family knew better.

Remus was rolling his eyes. "I told Mia not to play with her."

"Fight me!" Umbridge screamed in frustration as Mia deflected yet another curse.

"I'm sorry, Dolores," Mia said calmly. "Are you having trouble getting through my shield?"

"She's provoking her," Harry whispered to Sirius. "There are only a few curses strong enough on their own to get through a . . ."

"*Stupefy!*" Umbridge shrieked, her temper rising as each and every hex, jinx, and curse bounced off of Mia's well-placed shields, completely unaware that she was being lured into a trap. "*Stupefy! Deprimo! Reducto!*" She hissed in frustration when nothing appeared to stick.

Mia let out a taunting laugh, spinning her wand between her fingers.

Umbridge narrowed her eyes and sneered before snapping out, "*Expelliarmus!*"

Mia's wand flew into her hand, and the toad-faced woman gave a shout of triumph.

Harry stood and made to move but, sensing him behind her, Mia shouted, "Remus!" depending on him to take Harry by the shoulders and shove him back into his seat.

Umbridge aimed her own wand at her unarmed opponent and grinned. "I have waited a long time to do this," she said, her eyes manic and the grin on her face a little too smug for her own good.

"Not as long as I have," Mia said, not looking even slightly intimidated. She reached her small hand out, empty palm up.

Umbridge laughed. "A hand of mercy, is it? Or is it one of friendship?" she asked mockingly.

"Neither," Mia whispered. "*Incarcerous*."

Ropes were conjured out of the floor and flew up toward Umbridge, wrapping around her arms, legs, waist, and throat. She looked up with wide eyes just as Mia closed her fist tightly. The ropes, in turn, tightened, pulling the woman to the ground with a sickening thud, binding her.

Umbridge screamed against the tightening rope around her neck.

"Apologies, Dolores." The click of Mia's heels on the floor echoed as she walked toward Umbridge gracefully. "Are you not skilled at wandless magic? Perhaps you should have studied harder in Defence Against the Dark Arts. Theory isn't everything, you know. Then again, perhaps when *you* were in Hogwarts you learnt defensive spells in a secure, risk-free way. Perhaps, when *you* were in Hogwarts, you weren't exposed to irresponsible wizards, not to mention . . . extremely dangerous half-breeds. Then again, I suppose if one studies theory hard enough . . ."

Umbridge made a loud choking noise, and Mia adopted a patient expression.

"Speak up, dear. Would you still like me to fight you?"

When Umbridge said nothing and instead snarled, eyes narrowed, Mia inclined her head and picked her own wand out of her enemy's hand. "*Avis*," she said, her tone full of sweetness as crows burst from the tip of her wand, flapping their wings in the air and circling around, waiting for a command.

Harry, Sirius, and Remus all grinned at the sight of the birds, having seen this particular spell before, and prepared for the crows to attack the bound woman. The Wizengamot, expecting the same, all sat forward on their chairs, suddenly enthralled with the path the duel had taken.

What no one expected was for Mia to whisper, "*Draconifors*."

The flying black crows gave a sudden caw as their feathers turned into scales, and each bird transfigured into a small, black dragon.

Umbridge screamed in terror as Mia said, "*Oppugno!*"

The circling dragons overhead rapidly flew down, screeching loudly as fire ignited in their throats, spewing forth from their mouths onto the thrashing witch below.

Mia turned away from the sight to clean Umbridge's hand-sweat off of her wand. She looked to the audience where a shocked Harry watched the tiny dragons attack while an unsurprised Remus observed, his hand still carefully placed on Harry's shoulder.

Sirius, on the other hand, was staring at Mia with a devious grin, and she could only imagine the things he was planning in that depraved mind of his.

"Let me go!" Umbridge screamed as the fire burned away the rope around her neck, leaving behind sizzling welts. "Let me go!"

"Are you giving up, Dolores? Do you not know how duels work? Are you begging me for mercy?" Mia banished the dragons. One by one, they vanished into thin air. "Sirius, my love, am I known for being merciful?"

He barked a laugh. "You've never shown *me* an ounce of it."

The crowd quietly laughed.

She stepped close, kneeling down beside Umbridge. "Perhaps I should learn to show mercy. Dolores . . ." Mia whispered softly so that only the other witch could hear her. "I'm not going to kill you. I am going to *destroy* you. When I am done with you, you'll wish that the centaurs I trapped you with when I was sixteen had trampled you to death, you prejudiced, toad-faced cunt. I will strip you of every ounce of dignity and watch your soul bleed into the ether until I have the chance to bury you . . . alive, if I'm in the mood for it. *Finite!*"

The ropes released Umbridge, and Mia stood, turning her back on the woman.

Umbridge stood, her purple robes burnt away, showing the singed pink cardigan beneath. Her hair was burnt in several places, and there were flame induced blisters on her left arm where a Dark Mark *should* have been. The witch, ignoring the mercy that Mia had offered, bitterly raised her wand and began to cast, "*Cruci—*"

"*Sectumsempra!*" Mia spun, her hair flowing in a circled wave behind her as she turned, wand slashing through the air like a fencing sword.

The curse cut through the skin of Umbridge's right arm down to the bone, spewing blood onto the floor, and then down slicing straight through her wand, breaking it in two. She gave a loud cry of anguish and fell to her knees, grasping at her bleeding arm.

"I offer mercy," Mia said loud and clear as she sheathed her wand in the holster at her thigh.

"Dolores Umbridge." Kingsley stood, trying to keep his composure. This appeared to be a great deal easier for him—he had been an Auror, after all—than it was for the Wizengamot members who never had seen battle. Most of them were staring at Umbridge in horror and at Mia in fearful awe. "You are hereby stripped of your Wizengamot seat pending a formal investigation into the accusations of fraud, forgery, and the use of an Unforgivable on former Minister for Magic Harold Minchum. I strongly suggest you have someone escort you to the Floo and get to St Mungo's."

"Minister, if I may?" Mia spoke up as guards came through the doors to collect Umbridge.

Kingsley sighed. "Go ahead."

"Before Dolores is escorted out, I'd like to formally file charges against her person on behalf of the House of Potter."

"This is excessive, Shackbolt!" Fudge stood, eyes wide as he stared at the bleeding woman that had once been his right hand when he himself had been Minister. "She's already defended her Houses against Dolores for what she called her!"

"Yes, that matter has been settled," Mia agreed. "However, this one is much graver. Dolores Umbridge forcibly spilt the blood of the scion of my House, permanently scarring him when he was but a child. Isn't that right, Dolores?"

When Umbridge did nothing but weep, Mia cleared her throat.

"I said isn't that right, Dolores? You willingly, illegally, forced the sole heir and scion of a Noble House to spill their own blood, leaving him scarred."

"I did no such thing!"

Mia grinned. "I was really hoping you'd say that. *Coccinus Mendax*."

Very slowly, a crimson stain escaped from Umbridge's mouth and moved along the skin of her face until it settled in the centre of the woman's forehead, spelling out: *I must not tell lies*.

## Chapter One Hundred Forty-Seven

### *Interest*

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*Now it's happened once or twice  
Someone couldn't pay the price  
And I'm afraid I had to rake 'em 'cross the coals  
Yes, I've had the odd complaint  
But on the whole I've been a saint  
To those poor unfortunate souls*  
(Poor Unfortunate Souls - Pat Carroll)

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**January 18th, 1999**

It had taken a short time to explain to the Wizengamot what had happened to Umbridge's face and, despite having suffered through the Crimson Liar Curse herself, Elora Zabini remained perfectly silent when everyone began asking if there happened to be a cure.

Mia talked to Kingsley, Arthur, and Hyperion about the potion that she had created at Hogwarts, and two of the three men laughed at the story about a Great Hall filled with screaming teenage girls covered in the red stain.

Hyperion, needing to remain unbiased, asked Damocles to investigate the potion that Mia had created and swallowed herself, afterward touching Umbridge and delivering the incantation to activate it. Once the famous Potioneer gave his judgment on the brew—and accompanying curse—members began whispering to one another about implementing the Crimson Liar instead of Veritaserum in future court proceedings.

Umbridge was led away by Aurors to await a proper investigation into all accusations against her, but Mia knew the Pensieve memories alone would have her rotting in Azkaban for decades.

When the chamber floor had been cleaned of blood and scorch marks, the Wizengamot members retook their seats, some moving either further away from Mia in mild fear or closer in awe and respect.

Kingsley sat back, allowing Hyperion and Arthur each to take turns discussing laws and legislation up for review, most of which were ridiculous and had to do with cauldron thickness, broom exports, and whether or not flying carpets should be legalised in Britain.

When Arthur cleared his throat and looked mildly embarrassed as he glanced down at a piece of parchment, Mia took notice.

"Er . . . well, this is awkward. Dolores Umbridge has written a piece of legislation requesting that the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures create official registries for all half—er, magical . . . beings," he said, nervously glancing into the audience and smiling apologetically at Remus, who was listening with rapt attention.

"Well, as Madam Umbridge is no longer a standing member of the Wizengamot, I believe it is in the best interest for us to deny her request," Kingsley said firmly.

"Minister?" Mia spoke up. "If I may. I know it's still pending a proper investigation, but if Dolores Umbridge is convicted, shouldn't we look into each and every piece of legislation that she has put to the Wizengamot since, well, since she started working at the Ministry?"

"Do you have any idea how long that would take?" Flint Sr shouted. "To even begin to look for all the pieces of legislation . . ." he said, and as he spoke, she reached into her small bag again, removing a large stack of papers. "Am I to assume that you've already done it?" he asked, exasperated.

"I've been known to be quite organised, Mr Flint. I have here, organised by date and category, each piece of legislation ever written by Dolores Umbridge. The majority of which seems to be in relation to the control of the werewolf population, making me wonder if Madam Umbridge had a personal grudge against the magical beings, or perhaps a long, unfulfilled fetish," she said with a grin.

A wave of amused chuckles washed over the Wizengamot, and Mia sent a wink at a gobsmacked Remus, whose cheeks had turned red.

"Still, there are proposals in here relating to centaurs, merpeople, giants, and house-elves. There's no way to note which of these laws have been signed under an Imperius. Regardless, they are outdated, archaic, and discriminatory. I propose they all be rescinded immediately." She dropped the large stack in front of Kingsley with a loud thud.

As predicted, there were arguments against her suggestion, for which she, naturally, had counter-arguments.

"Because we shouldn't own the lakes where merpeople are living. They've *always* lived there and are not *renting* from wizards," she said, rolling her eyes when

someone brought up the potential loss of underwater potion ingredients if left to the procurement of merfolk. "And we should treaty with them and treat them with respect."

Ten minutes later, she was shaking her head. "Hogwarts has a friendly giant living in the Forbidden Forest. With the exception of the war, we've barely heard from them. As long as we leave them alone, they won't just 'come in and gobble us all up.' Honestly!"

Fifteen minutes after that, she narrowed her gaze. "It's S.P.E.W.!"

Draco grinned at her in reply before suggesting that perhaps a division be created in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures for the benefit and welfare of house-elves, including legislation that would make it illegal for a wizard to abuse one.

"And will this new law have some sort of asinine acronym as well?" Peneus Parkinson asked, arms folded across his chest.

Draco sneered. "I hadn't thought what to call it."

"Dobby's Law," Harry suggested loudly from the audience.

The mocking expression on Draco's face promptly fell. He cleared his throat and gave a polite nod of his head.

Mia smiled softly at Harry.

Finally, it came down to the werewolves.

Even the most anti-blood purist Wizengamot members were afraid to broach the subject of loosening their control on the "creatures" by a fraction of an inch. Mia, however, was resolute in that she would not allow Kingsley's life debt to be fulfilled without this subject being addressed and put in the process of being resolved.

"They're not even allowed medical treatment!" she pointed out when someone—she did not even bother noting names anymore—began arguing with her.

"For good reason! What if they infected others?"

"Please . . . *Please*," she begged, "tell me that the governing body of the world that I so very much love and respect is not so stupid as to misunderstand something as utterly *simple* as the lycanthropic process. *Please*, tell me that you grown witches and wizards don't fall for the ridiculous myths and scary stories that first year Hogwarts students tell one another. I figured this out when I was a *third year* for Merlin's sake!"

Calling their intelligence into question had shut the majority of them up, and she was given a chance to explain the details of how lycanthropy was spread, how it affected the body, and the brilliance of the Wolfsbane Potion.

"I should give you half the credit for that, by the way," Damocles said with a smirk.

"I'd settle for you insisting that the cost be lowered."

Zabini shook her head. "They're too bloody dangerous. I apologise, Potter. I know your bleeding Gryffindor heart is in the right place here," she said, though the look on her face was less than sympathetic. "But they shouldn't be allowed in public buildings, hospitals, or schools. Could you imagine?"

"Yes. In fact, I went to school with a werewolf. As did many of you." She gestured to Elora herself, Damocles, and Adrian specifically. "Some of your children were then taught by one. And the lessons *he* gave them saved their lives in the middle of a war. And no one knew who he was because he was safe every day of the month save for one."

Some looked shamed, others shocked.

"But what about that one day?" someone asked. "They need to be controlled. You can't just hope that it all works out and people won't die."

"Isn't that why the Werewolf Support Services was created?" Arthur asked curiously. "It's a department within the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures that's supposed to help werewolves find proper shelter for the full moon."

Mia nodded, grateful for someone else to have a bit of a brain in their head.

"Yes, it's supposed to also help them locate decent employment, medical treatment, and support. But because of laws that Dolores Umbridge and *several others*," she said, eyeing Fudge, "put into place, it negated the entire purpose. Now, werewolves aren't allowed medical treatment. Now, werewolves aren't allowed to work. How are they supposed to shelter themselves from the full moon and protect the rest of you if they have no money to buy a home or pay for the Wolfsbane Potion that would help them keep you safe? How are they supposed to trust a service to aid them when they're not even allowed to seek medical treatment for self-inflicted wounds?"

"You can't trust them," Parkinson insisted. "Just look at the damage that they did in the last war. Many killed, mostly children. *You* would have us release them into the population without even blinking."

"I would not. I would have the stigma of lycanthropy removed from our system. It's as antiquated as the idiocy of anti-Muggle-born theories. The Ministry serves Wizarding Britain, so *serve* them! Don't cast them out! Get rid of the Werewolf Capture Unit and remove laws that prevent witches and wizards infected with an illness from seeking treatment. If the stigma did not exist, then I believe werewolves would eagerly sign the registry. Help them."

Many were swayed, but others were still clearly torn by their fears or prejudices.

"There needs to be some regulation," Flint said. "Some control and security. Even if it is an illness, as you claim, we wouldn't just let a student infected with Dragon Pox or Spattergroit walk right into Hogwarts where they could pass it on to others."

"Then meet with the werewolves. Let them organise themselves. It used to be in the original Werewolf Code of Conduct that the lycanthropes had a representative in the Wizengamot." Mia produced the relevant parchment with that proviso and tossed it at Kingsley, who caught the papers mid-air with an exhausted look on his face.

Fudge scoffed loudly, tilting his head to look at the minister as the man glanced over the parchment. "You seem to have forgotten, Miss Potter—"

Mia scowled. "*Lady Black* to you, Mr Fudge."

Fudge bristled and then cleared his throat. "The last werewolf that had any sway over their group was an unofficial Death Eater named Fenrir Greyback! A monster! And he is dead."

"Yes, he is," Mia said with a grateful smile that was tossed in Draco's direction, "but he was *not* the last werewolf that could lead."

"Oh shit," Remus muttered from the audience. "I knew I should have stayed home today."

"Remus Lupin is not only an established Alpha wolf, but he spent two wars fighting for the side of Light. He put his life at risk countless times to work as a spy within the werewolf community at the request of wizards who didn't even think twice about his safety. But he did it while obeying every ridiculous law that came under the hand of Dolores Umbridge. He taught Harry Potter how to duel. Should we be reminded *why* it was incredibly beneficial to us all that Harry Potter was well equipped to duel another wizard?"

Parkinson, Flint, and Fudge all glared at her.

"For the record, he taught *me* how to duel as well," she said threateningly. "So, keep that in mind before anyone even *thinks* about saying anything insulting that I might know is illegal and against the ancient laws of magic. I've already set one witch on fire today, and I didn't even break a sweat."

No one insulted Remus and—though they all agreed that Umbridge's work at the Ministry needed to go under a severe investigation—by the end of the hour, werewolves, at least, could go to St Mungo's for medical treatment and to visit family members who were ill or injured.

There was still much that needed to be done, and a tolerant and accepting Wizarding Britain—like Rome—was not built in a day. Not even Mia with all her threats and political advantages could save werewolves in a few hours.

Eventually, Remus was pulled up to the front of the floor and offered a job as Lycanthrope Liaison within the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

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The session broke for lunch, and Mia soon found herself requesting a table for nine at a Muggle restaurant down the street from the Ministry. She was surrounded by a number of wizards that included her pack, two Weasleys, Damocles Belby—who was very eager to speak with Remus about the effects of Wolfsbane Potion—Draco, and Theodore Nott. Nott came because he said he wanted to hear more about Mia's ideas regarding Azkaban regulations and property reinstatement for purebloods related to Death Eaters.

"Draco's situation will be different since Voldemort had set up camp in his home for a time. While it's offensive," Mia said with a frown, "there is a way to reinstate confiscated properties. Are you opposed to marriage, Theo?"

He smirked at her. "Are you asking?"

Draco scowled. "What's wrong with you?"

"Apologies," he said to them both, grinning at Sirius, who was busy securing his arm around Mia's waist to assert himself. "I spent the summer in Italy with Blaise. His personality is a bit contagious. I am not opposed to marriage. Are you suggesting an arrangement?"

Mia inclined her head. "Depending on the bonding ceremony used—which the Ministry has no control over—a witch bonded into a House is given the same rights as her husband, including that of his accumulated wealth. If you married the daughter of someone who *wasn't* a Death Eater, the Ministry would then be subjecting her and her family to the punishments bestowed upon you and yours. It would be a public relations disaster. The media would have a field day."

Sirius grinned deviously. "And it just so happens, we have an in when it comes to the media."

"That's it?" Theo asked, shocked. "All I have to do is marry a non-Death Eater daughter, and I can stop sleeping on the sofas of friends?"

Draco raised a brow. "Are you *really*? Which of your remaining friends, myself excluded, doesn't own a manor as large or larger than the one you're trying to reacquire?"

Theo waved Draco off. "Metaphorical sofa."

Mia laughed. "Do you have any witches in mind, Theo?"

He shook his head. "Looking to secure one for me?"

"I'll ask around and see about making introductions for you. I do have one idea, actually. Tell me, do you know what nargles are?"

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When the Wizengamot session resumed, those who previously had doubts that it was being led by Mia had them put to rest when she put forth another stack of papers in front of Kingsley, Arthur, and Hyperion Greengrass with the Gringotts seal on them.

"When I went missing in 1979, I was presumed dead. Prior to my disappearance, I added Remus Lupin to my vaults and left him everything. I was recently informed that when my brother, James, went to settle my estate prior to the birth of his son, the goblins had been told that werewolves were no longer allowed vault access that wasn't strictly their own." She smiled dangerously before adding, "A small note at the end of a vault regulation and taxation bill, written by—"

"Umbridge," Kingsley groaned. "Have the goblins returned the money?"

"Yes, but I request interest. That money was supposed to keep my beneficiary in a comfortable life in my long absence. Nineteen years to be exact. The lack of that money,

in addition to difficulty finding employment thanks to Dolores's anti-werewolf legislation, caused some long-term problems that I worked very hard with the goblins to try to avoid. They, for the record, are not very happy to know that they were manipulated by a witch to be used against another group of beings," she added, knowing that the threat of the goblin horde was not something to be taken lightly. "Luckily, I have a friend who works with them and was able to speak on behalf of wizards and werewolves in order to prevent, you know, another war."

Hyperion sighed. "And the goblins aren't willing to pay interest, I assume?"

"No, why should they? Nor are they willing to cover reparations that I'm . . . *demanding*," she said, speaking carefully. "However, as Dolores Umbridge is on her way to Azkaban, I can't imagine what the Wizengamot plans on doing with her vaults."

"You want us to just seize the woman's vaults?" Fudge shouted in shock.

"Why not? It's for reparations. Isn't that what the Ministry has seized Death Eater vaults and properties for? To make amends for wrongs done to victims across Wizarding Britain? I am not asking for everything in Dolores's vault go to Remus, that would be ridiculous. But the interest should be paid off. And perhaps the rest should be donated to the Werewolf Support Services to help fund actual aid that will be provided to lycanthropes who can't afford the Wolfsbane Potion."

Damocles spoke up. "That won't be necessary. I've decided to release the patent to several local Potions Masters in order to keep the price as low as possible. Though, I'd like to create a programme that offers it for free to those who can't afford to pay at all. That money could instead be put to good use by purchasing the ingredients."

Mia smiled at her old friend with genuine gratitude.

"Put it in the notes," Kingsley said to Percy.

"Speaking of reparations and Death Eater properties." Draco stood up. "As many of you know, I've been waiting for quite some time for Malfoy Manor to be returned to me, and there appears to have been a bit of a holdup."

Parkinson glared at Draco, clearly holding a personal grudge against the young wizard who had somehow worked his way out of a betrothal contract to his daughter, Pansy. "Malfoy Manor is being set aside to cover the costs of reparations for the victims of Lucius Malfoy, known Death Eater."

"*Dead* Death Eater," Draco amended. "And the reparations to his victims will be covered from *my* personal vaults. I believe there was a statement about it in the *Daily Prophet* next to my betrothal announcement to Astoria Greengrass," he threw in with a grin as he stared down Pansy's father. "Then again, if I remember there *was* a bit of a media problem that day." His focus turned to Mia, who laughed at him. "The Ministry has no right to hold my home hostage."

Parkinson rolled his eyes and whispered something to Flint.

"Minister," Draco said more solemnly. "My mother and I have worked tirelessly over the past several months and have decided that when Malfoy Manor is returned to us, it will be demolished to make room for several new constructions. A smaller home for my family, of course, but considering the property is so large, we thought to build an orphanage to help the children who've been affected by the war," he said, pushing forward the detailed plans. "There will be an announcement in tomorrow's *Daily Prophet*, actually, and I've procured two early copies."

He handed over two front-page copies of the following morning's paper with two very different headlines.

The first read:

*MINISTRY APPROVES MALFOY FAMILY'S DESIGNS FOR ORPHANAGE*

The second, however, read:

*ORPHANS OF WAR STARVING. WHAT IS THE MINISTRY DOING?*

Kingsley's eyes widened, and he turned to look at Mia, who smiled innocently up at him.

"This is ridiculous, Shackbolt!" Fudge stood up. "The little Mudb—" He stopped himself as his eyes widened at Mia's grin, eager to have another round on the floor with a new opponent. "She's trying to manipulate the entire Wizengamot! She's behind it all! Next, she'll be asking for money for herself!"

"Now that you mention it," she said, "I *was* personally tortured by Bellatrix Lestrange. I'm curious as to what's happening with *those* vaults."

Kingsley pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I *could* file a claim," Mia offered.

"Mia—Miss Potter, you have your own vaults and inheritance from the Potter family, which I know for a fact was one of the wealthiest families in Britain, third if I remember correctly," Kingsley said, looking at Draco, who clearly stood as the Head of House for the *first* wealthiest, "and you're soon to marry into the second wealthiest family."

Kingsley turned his attention to Sirius, who sat in the audience, smiling politely at the Minister, his dragonhide boots kicked up on the pew in front of him.

Dropping formalities, Kingsley sighed. "Mia, what would you even do with the money from the Lestrage vaults?"

"That's really no one's business but mine. I was assaulted; a victim of war," she said clearly. "Did the Ministry have plans for the Lestrage vaults? Perhaps raises for the employees? Or a Wizengamot bonus?"

Some members suddenly averted her gaze.

*Thought so*, she told herself.

"If we're all chatting up about paybacks for unfair treatment in a time of war, I have some suggestions."

All eyes turned to see a glaring Sirius Black.

Kingsley turned to look at Mia and Draco, noting immediately their lack of shock over Sirius's outburst. Had Mia not called in his life debt, the Minister for Magic would have likely ended the sessions immediately, perhaps to scold the lot of them. As it was, he was bound to serve until the debt was repaid.

"How much, exactly, would twelve years' worth of room and board in Azkaban cost?" Sirius asked pointedly.

Parkinson sneered. "And who would pay the reparations, Mr Black?"

"*Lord* Black," Sirius corrected.

Draco and Theo snickered from their Wizengamot seats like a couple of third years who giggled during Quidditch practice any time their captain said *balls*.

"As for who would pay me what's owed," Sirius began and then narrowed his eyes, "and it *is* owed, and expected to be paid, the arresting Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement would be responsible, wouldn't he?"

"Everyone knows that Bartemius Crouch is dead; killed by his son," Parkinson said, rolling his eyes before casting a brief look at Draco as if to make a point about patricide. The blond Slytherin did not even blink at the silent accusation and attached insult.

"What was done with the Crouch family vaults?" Mia asked.

"They were put into Ministry funds," Percy answered after looking over some of his notes.

"So the Ministry should then pay," she suggested, ignoring the gasps around her. "Unless, of course, the Wizengamot would prefer to put the blame of sending an innocent man to prison for twelve years on someone else? Wasn't there a *second* department head involved in the fact that my fiancé never received a fair trial?"

Cornelius Fudge turned green at that, and all other colour drained from his face when his fellow Wizengamot members suddenly seemed eager to turn on him because of money. *A lot of money.*

"I . . . I . . ." He struggled to find words. "This is madness! Shackbolt, the rest of Britain will hear about this! Hear that the new Minister for Magic is being manipulated by money-grubbing, greedy children! Perhaps we need another election!"

Some agreed.

Mia put a quick stop to it.

"If that's how you feel, Mr Fudge. It sounds to me like *I'm* not very welcome here."

Fudge dipped his head firmly. "I would say so!"

"Sirius, Harry, how would you feel about moving to France?" she asked them. "It's clear we're not wanted here in Britain. Perhaps we should close out our Gringotts vaults as well."

A few members of the Wizengamot began to stir in understanding.

"Draco, would you care to accompany us since you're apparently nothing but a dirty Death Eater to half of these people and a tool for manipulation for the others?" she asked with a tender smile that widened when Draco stood, silently assented, and reached for his cloak as though ready to leave.

"I wonder what the goblin horde will do once the vaults of the Black, Potter, and Malfoy families have left them," Mia thought aloud. "Don't they make up the majority of Gringotts? Hmm . . . what do you think that would do to the economy of Wizarding Britain?"

Fudge was instantly faced with the wrath of the *entire* Wizengamot.

Voldemort had taken their dignity, their lives, their rights, and their freedoms.

Mia threatened to take their *money*.

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"Profit is sweet, even if it comes from deception," she told Remus as they took the Floo home from the Ministry, each with a stack of papers to go through in regards to the many laws and pieces of legislation that they had proposed themselves and others they had requested to be rewritten or banished entirely.

He laughed, not as loudly as Sirius had done in the middle of the Wizengamot chamber when Peneus Parkinson outright asked Mia if she were holding the Wizengamot hostage. She had replied, "Of course not. I'm purchasing it in exchange for your own money, with interest."

It made her a target, of course, but with Death Eaters all dead or in Azkaban these days, apparently no one in actual power was willing to go up against a woman who held family connections within the three wealthiest families in Wizarding Britain. Never mind that she was marrying a supposed madman, was the sister of the Chosen One, and somehow had the Death Eater Malfoy heir in the palm of her hand.

When Kingsley confronted her after the session ended—after she *allowed* it to end—he had asked what the hell she had been thinking.

Mia had smiled at the man, shook his hand in thanks for all he had done for her that day, and simply said, "I'm going to help you rebuild the Ministry, Kings. Rebuild our entire community. I'm the bad guy that they're all afraid of now. You're the good guy who will let them keep their Galleons by placating me from time to time by passing laws granting rights to magical creatures, banishing stigmas, and granting fair trials to everyone. Oh, don't pout, Kings. You'll get wrinkles."

## Chapter One Hundred Forty-Eight

### *Mistress and Masters*

---

*For one so small,  
You seem so strong  
My arms will hold you,  
Keep you safe and warm  
This bond between us  
Can't be broken  
I will be here  
Don't you cry*  
(You'll Be In My Heart - Phil Collins)

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**January 30th, 1999**

"Over my dead body!" Mia yelled at Sirius as Remus walked into the drawing room to find them arguing.

He dropped himself on the sofa, his eyes heavy and red-rimmed. "What are you two rowing about now?"

"I'm sorry, love. I know the moon's tomorrow. We didn't mean to yell. Do you need a Pain Relief Potion?"

Remus replied by holding up an empty phial.

"We're arguing about where to have the wedding ceremony," she quietly told him as she took the small glass bottle from his hands and vanished it.

Sirius folded his arms and shrugged. "Molly and Arthur can put together a nice spread. That's all I'm saying."

"I don't want to get married at the Burrow," Mia insisted stubbornly. "I love Molly dearly, but I am not going to let her control my wedding. I was there when she put together Bill and Fleur's. It was a nightmare, and that was on top of dealing with a war, bringing you back from the dead, and making plans to hunt down Horcruxes. With free rein and no impending Dark Lord, Molly Weasley would lose complete control and drive me to St Mungo's."

"Minerva's offered Hogwarts grounds as long as we can wait until July."

"Absolutely not. I want to get married on the Summer Solstice. Plus, it'll fall a week before the full moon, which gives us enough time to have a short honeymoon and be back in time to be with Remus."

He craned his neck to glance up at her, the effort to do so looked painful. "Please don't schedule your honeymoon around my needs. I can be alone."

Sirius scoffed incredulously. "Over my dead body."

Mia dipped her head in agreement.

They still argued constantly about their relationship, their living arrangements, future careers, money, and who did the dishes last, but the one thing they never argued about was taking care of family. It was a silent agreement that, after leaving Remus alone for so many years, the pair of them would never abandon him on the full moon again as long as they lived.

"We'll *both* be dead if we can't find a place to get married." She took a seat on the sofa beside Remus, scooting closer and closer until he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and she cuddled into his chest, pouting. "I wish the manor still . . . Wait. I've been meaning to ask for months. What happened to the manor? I don't know why but I always just assumed it was destroyed in the war."

Sirius shook his head. "No way. James put up blood wards. Only Potters could get in and out of that thing once he moved to Godric's Hollow permanently."

Her eyes widened with delight as she sat up straight. "We could get married at the manor! Like Jamie and Lily did!" She threw an apologetic smile to Remus when he cringed at her volume.

"What's going on?" Harry asked as he walked into the room, likely summoned by all the shouting and shrieking.

"We're getting married at Potter Manor," Mia declared with a grin. "I can't wait to show it to you, Harry. It's the most beautiful place in the world, and there are gorgeous orchards out back, and a river that cuts through the land—"

"We have a manor?" Harry asked, confused.

Mia's smile faded as she stood up, walking across the room to smack Sirius on the arm. "What the hell have you spent the last few years telling Harry about regarding the family?"

Sirius recoiled from her smack, laughing as he said, "Mostly embarrassing stuff about Prongs."

"You're impossible." She rolled her eyes and tugged on the sleeve of his shirt. "Come on. I want to go and see it. It's been twenty years, and I'm sure it'll be in serious need of a good cleaning."

"Could just hire some house-elves to do it," Sirius said, and when Mia turned around to look at him with a horrified stare, he sighed. "What? I said *hire*, as in *pay* them."

"I didn't . . ." Mia shook her head and whispered, "Tilly. Another casualty I couldn't protect and haven't even thought about . . . Where is she buried?"

Sirius scratched at the stubble on his face. "Umm . . . I don't know."

Mia looked over to the sofa. "Remus?"

"No idea."

"What do you mean? Where is my house-elf buried?"

Remus shrugged and looked to the Sirius for help.

Sirius shook his head. "I didn't see her body at Godric's Hollow," he said quietly. "She wasn't staying with Prongs and Lily."

"Where the hell was she?" Mia snapped.

"Potter Manor," Sirius replied. "Prongs had her staying there."

Mia gasped in horror at what that could possibly mean for her house-elf. "You mean to tell me that when my brother died and blood wards activated, no one thought to maybe use *Harry* to check on Tilly?"

"Well, I was a little preoccupied, kitten. Azkaban. Remember?" Sirius said coolly.

All attention turned to Remus.

"Don't look at me," he said, hands up in surrender. "I didn't even have a say in the funerals. Dumbledore did everything."

"Shit," Sirius said under his breath. "If she's . . . Okay, all we need is Harry, and we'll Apparate outside the manor and get through the wards. Kitten, I swear if I'd have known there was a chance that she was . . . I would have broken into the manor long before this. But I'm not a Potter and can't get inside."

"Everyone up," Mia insisted, reaching for Remus's hand and then tugging Harry forward as well. She looked at Sirius, shaking her head. "You are an idiot."

"You're terrible at flirting," he said.

Mia growled at him and took hold of the silver chain around his neck, staring at him incredulously.

"Oh," Sirius said, cringing as understanding apparently hit him. He nodded in agreement. "Yeah, idiot."

"Everyone hold on tight," Mia instructed, placing Remus's and Harry's hands on the silver chain as she reached for her wand. "*Portus!*"

The emergency Portkey dumped them all into the centre of the drawing room of Potter Manor, right in front of the fireplace as it had done with Sirius many years ago when he had escaped Grimmauld Place for the first time. Despite the travel making her slightly nauseated, Mia was the first to her feet, followed by Harry, who stood and looked around the room in awe.

"It looks just like Gryffindor Tower," he said with a large smile.

The large windows were draped in crimson and gold crushed velvet curtains. All of the furniture was made of a dark wood, and the sofas and chairs were covered in pillows.

"And it's huge! Hermione, this place is yours?"

"Yours, technically. Jamie left everything to you."

"I don't . . . This is too big," he said, suddenly looking very, very small. A manor was much different than a cupboard under the stairs, after all.

"Get used to it," Sirius said as he stood up, helping Remus to his feet in the process. "If this place is habitable, we're out of number twelve. I say we burn it to the ground, but the connecting Muggle homes might take issue with that.

"Tilly!" Mia shouted down the hallway. "Tilly!" She turned back, tears in her eyes. "I swear to Merlin, if something happened to her, I'll—"

There was a soft pop in the corner, and they all turned to spot a small, spritely-looking house-elf wearing a clean tea towel. Her bright blue eyes stared up at Mia's face with awe and wonder before a large smile overtook her face. "Mistress?"

Mia gasped and fell to her knees in front of the little elf. She pulled her into a tight hug that Tilly reciprocated without hesitation.

"Tilly has waited a very long time to see her Mistress again," she whispered softly, stroking the back of Mia's hair like she used to do when she was little.

Mia pulled away and laughed, wiping the tears from her face. "Tilly, I'm so sorry. If I'd have known that you'd . . . that you were here, I would have come as soon as possible.

I didn't even think," she said and finally took a good look around the house. "Mother of . . . Tilly, the manor looks just like it did twenty years ago."

The elf shrugged. "Tilly keeps busy."

Mia frowned, noting that the elf had aged but not very much. Unlike Kreacher, who had been left to his own devices for years, Tilly was clean and looked sane. "You've been here all this time alone? Tilly, you should have left."

Tilly shook her head. "Master told Tilly to stay," she said firmly, emphasising her statement by pointing at the ground.

"Oh hell . . . Jamie."

Tilly narrowed her gaze and growled. "Mistress must not curse Master," she insisted, patting Mia on the head like an obedient pet when she looked contrite. "Everyone knows who Mistress is now? Tilly can speak of it?"

Mia nodded, smiling as she felt the elf's relief. "Yes, Tilly. You can do whatever pleases you."

"*Anything* that pleases Tilly?" she asked nervously, twisting her tea towel in her fingers.

When Mia silently assented, she grinned and turned to look at Sirius and Remus. Holding out her hand, a rolled up copy of the *Daily Prophet* appeared in it. Stepping forward, she began whacking the wizards on the legs with the paper. When she could not reach their heads, she levitated the paper upward and used her magic to thwap them repeatedly.

"Ow!" Sirius shouted, covering his head with his arms. "What the fuck!?"

Remus winced. "Tilly! Stop!"

"Bad boys! Tilly watches them yell at each other, makes Master and Mistress Lily sad! Mistress said to trust each other! They's bad wizards! Needs be punished! Tilly spansk them!" While the paper continued to hit them over the heads repeatedly, Tilly made her way around to firmly smack Sirius on his arse.

"Careful Tilly, I might like—Ow!" Sirius jumped away from her, grasping his backside with both hands. "Not so fucking hard!"

"Tilly does as Tilly does!"

Remus had the grace to at least seem apologetic. "We're very sorry, Tilly."

She smiled up at him sweetly and vanished the paper. "Tilly makes Master Remus his favourite chocolate cake," she promised before turning to look at Sirius with narrowed eyes. "You . . . is getting nothing!"

Mia grinned, her heart feeling years younger at the sound of Tilly's voice. "I've punished Sirius quite a bit since I've returned."

The house-elf nodded in approval and gestured between Mia and Sirius. "Tilly sees the bond. Very strong. Lots of *practice*," she said knowingly, offering Mia a coy smirk. When her focus fell on Mia's hand, she smiled brightly and gasped. "And he gives Mistress her grandmother's ring. She was a bad witch, but now a good witch wears it. Mistress brings honour to the House of Black. Makes it noble again."

She turned to look back at Sirius, perhaps finally in approval, but her attention was drawn to a head of messy black hair and bespectacled green eyes. Tilly let go of Mia's hand and slowly approached, her mouth open and her eyes soft. "Oh. Harry Potter," Tilly said the name with sweet reverence.

Harry smiled awkwardly. "Umm . . . nice to meet you, Tilly."

"Meet? Tilly does not *meet* Harry Potter," she insisted as she walked up, taking his hand in both of hers and stroking the back of it, petting him affectionately. "Young Master Harry was Tilly's baby. Tilly takes care of him when he was very small."

"What?" Harry said. "You . . . You did?"

She bobbed her head, her ears flapping with the motion. "Tilly changes nappies and makes food even when Mistress Lily says not to. But Tilly doesn't pick up the toys. That be Master's job. Mistress Lily says so."

Mia frowned, dread filling her. "Tilly, you know that Jamie and Lily—"

"Tilly knows," the elf said quickly, cutting her off. "House of Potter strong once more. Has a new Master now."

Harry cleared his throat, looking like he wanted to take his hand back but not offend Tilly in the process. "I'm not . . . Tilly, I'm not your Master," he said and looked up at Mia in a panic. "Hermione, should I give her clothes?"

Mia laughed in amusement. "She'll bite you if you even try."

Harry grinned wryly.

"She's not joking, Harry," Sirius insisted.

"Tilly knows who Tilly belongs to." The elf looked over at Mia with a lovingly devoted smile. "Mistress and . . ." She turned and glared at Sirius, pointing at him. "That one."

"I'm 'that one'? Remember when she used to like me?" Sirius asked Remus.

"Tilly likes him again when he marries Mistress like a good boy," the elf promised, releasing Harry's hand to walk over to Mia, taking her hand instead and admiring the opal ring there. "Mistress Dorea insisted."

"My mother was . . . ?" Mia began to ask but stopped and rolled her eyes with a put-upon sigh. "*Of course*, my mother had planned our wedding. Why wouldn't she?"

Tilly grinned and snapped her fingers. A large stack of rolled parchments appeared on the table, all sealed with crimson wax and tied with a green ribbon. "Tilly kept all the plans!"

A thought suddenly occurred to Mia. "Tilly, how old were we when Mum started planning this?"

"Mistress went to Hogwarts for the fourth time."

"Fourth year?!"

Remus frowned, his mouth falling open. "You started dating *me* fourth year. That's kind of insulting that your mother started planning your wedding to Sirius while you were dating me."

"Mistress Dorea knew many things," Tilly said. "Knew Master Remus would find his true mate. Tilly sees the bond. Tilly wants to see the baby."

Remus laughed at that and reached for his pocket where he kept a small photograph of Teddy.

"Mum knew about me being from the future," Mia explained to Harry. "She knew who you were, who Remus was, and what Sirius was to me, even back then."

"So let me get this straight . . ." Sirius looked down at the elf. "I'll be your Master when I marry Mia?"

Tilly nodded. "Like Mistress Lily."

"What about Harry?"

She rolled her eyes dramatically. "Tilly is a *Black* elf. She passes from Mistress to Mistress. Tilly served Mistress Lily because Mistress Mia says so. Young Master Harry not need Tilly. Has his own elf."

"I do?" Harry blinked in confusion, cringing when he asked, "You mean Kreacher?"

"Tilly not say *that*. Kreacher is a bad elf! Crazy elf. Kreacher been knocked in the head too many times. Tilly meant Dobby."

"What?" Harry's eyes flew wide open. "Dobby?"

"Tilly, Dobby isn't Harry's house-elf," Mia said softly, suddenly worried that perhaps she had been left alone for far too long. "Harry freed Dobby from Lucius Malfoy years ago."

"Tilly knows this." She waved Mia off impatiently.

Mia could not help but feel like her intelligence was being called into question. "How?"

"Dobby is Tilly's brother," the elf said to the shock of everyone in the room. "Dobby visits. Tells Tilly all about brave Harry Potter, who fights Dark wizards. Dobby protects Harry Potter. Tilly says so."

Harry's jaw fell open. "*You* told Dobby to protect me?" he asked, kneeling down in front of Tilly in gratitude.

"Dobby do it anyway." Tilly shrugged and smiled at him. "He loves his Master Harry."

"I don't understand. I'm not his Master," Harry insisted. "I don't—I *wouldn't* own a house-elf."

"Young Master is cute," Tilly said, leaning forward to pinch his cheek. "Thinks he has choice. Dobby does as Dobby does. He bond with Harry Potter right away, sock still in hand. You wizards, you not know what free means. Clothes not make us free."

Obviously shocked by the new information in regards to something that happened over six years ago, Harry stood up and called out, "Dobby!"

The small elf appeared with a loud crack, looking immediately to Harry with a bright smile. He wore a purple scarf around his neck, three sets of mismatched socks on each foot, and a crooked hat that only covered one of his bat-like ears. At the sight of Harry, Dobby removed his hat respectfully.

"The great Harry Potter calls for Dobby? Dobby loves—" Tilly stepped in front of him. His ears flattened against his head and his eyes widened. "Uh, oh."

She folded her arms and looked at him sternly. "Dobby?"

"Tilly," Dobby responded anxiously.

Frowning, Tilly smacked Dobby on the head. "Dobby is a bad elf! Dobby lies to his Master abouts being free!"

"Ow!" Dobby covered his head and growled, reaching up and swatting at the other elf as she continued to hit him. "Tilly lies to her Mistress abouts being Mistress!" he said, pointing at Mia.

"Tilly knows better than Dobby!"

Dobby scoffed. "Tilly likes to *think* so."

"This might be the funniest shit I've ever seen in my life," Sirius said with a grin.

"Tilly is a bad elf!" Dobby shot back at her. "Tilly not tell her Mistress who she is! Young Miss grows up thinking she's Muggle!"

"Tilly not *supposed* to! Dobby not even supposed to know about Mistress, but Dobby nasty snoop!"

"Dobby, did you know who I was this whole time?" Mia asked him.

The house-elf turned, worrying his hat in his hands as he faced her, slowly nodding his large head. "Dobby knew."

"Did you know that giving elves clothes wouldn't free them? All throughout Hogwarts, all those hats and scarves I knitted."

"Clothes is . . . complicated," he said quietly with a shrug. "Elves pass down in families. Clothes free elves from bad wizards. Then elves goes back to good wizards. Young Miss liked to knit. Dobby likes to wear hats and scarves. Hogwarts house-elves not know better."

"You let Dumbledore pay you," Mia pointed out.

Tilly's eyes widened in absolute horror. "Dobby did what?"

Dobby flushed and ran to hide behind Harry.

"Dobby!" Harry looked down at him. "Did you . . . ? Am I your Master?"

The little elf bit his lip anxiously. "Dobby is always happy to serve Harry Potter, sir."

Harry sighed in clear frustration. "Dobby, I don't want you to serve me. I thought . . . I thought we were friends."

Dobby's large eyes widened further and tears prickled the edges. "Harry Potter thinks . . . thinks that Dobby is . . . his friend?" He sniffled once before he started crying.

As he wept, dripping large tears onto the hardwood floor, he made his way toward the fireplace and reached for the poker.

"Oh, no," Tilly said, rolling her eyes.

"Dobby, stop!" Harry yelled just as Dobby gripped the poker tightly in hand. "I forbid you to punish yourself!"

Dobby halted immediately.

"Young Master Harry is a smart Master," Tilly said affectionately. "Young Master saved Dobby from bad Malfoys. Dobby belonged to Young Miss Cissa. She give husband gift of house-elf. He a bad wizard."

"He's also dead," Mia snarled.

"Suffer much?" Tilly asked.

"His son basically cut him in half when he threatened Narcissa," she replied casually.

Tilly raised her head regally. "That be the Black blood. Good blood, bad tempers." Her attention turned back to Harry and she spoke clearly. "Harry Potter freed Dobby; Dobby bond with Harry Potter."

"Dobby, aren't you supposed to *ask* before starting a bond with a new Master or Mistress?" Remus inquired.

The little elf shrugged, toeing the ground sheepishly. "Dobby does as Dobby does."

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"Can you feel the magic?" Mia asked with a smile as she slipped out of her shoes to dig her toes into the grass outside in the orchards, beneath the mass canopy of trees.

"Is that normal?" Harry asked as he walked up to stand at her side, looking over the large expanse of land.

"Two sealed bondings took place right here. Your parents were married just over there—" She gestured with a bright smile, the memory in her mind as though it were only months ago—which for her, it was. "—and the Pack Bond was sealed over there. I wouldn't be surprised if the residual magic didn't stick around for a hundred years. Especially after Sirius and I are married here."

Harry smiled at her. "I think it'll be beautiful, Hermione. Out of curiosity, how is a Pack Bond sealed?"

Mia grinned lasciviously. "Don't ask questions you don't want to know the answers to."

"Is it that bad?"

"Ginny would want to know *every* detail," she replied with a knowing grin.

Harry grimaced, holding out his hands in supplication. "Understood."

"I want to move back," Mia said, changing the subject and bowing her head. "Immediately. I don't think I ever want to step foot in Grimmauld Place again."

"I should probably tell you, then, that when you said you were going to take a walk around the orchards, Sirius and Remus were transfiguring boxes so they could go and pack everything up. Dobby went with them. I still don't know how I feel about owning a house-elf."

"I don't think Dobby has given you much choice. Cherish him and the bond. I can't tell you how happy I am to know that Tilly survived."

"Mistress call for Tilly?" the house-elf said as she popped into the orchards between Mia and Harry.

Mia chuckled affectionately. "No, Tilly, you're fine. Why don't you take a few days off?"

Tilly glared at her, offended. "Mistress thinks she's very funny. Tilly has . . . has something for Mistress. Young Master can see if he wishes," she said, glancing up at Harry, anxiously tugging on the end of one ear as she removed a sealed envelope from out of thin air and slowly handed it up toward Mia.

Mia recognised the handwriting on the envelope immediately, and her heart caught in her throat. "What is this?"

"Mistress Lily leaves it," Tilly whispered and then Disapparated away.

"My mum left you a letter?" Harry asked, his brows furrowed.

The writing on the envelope had *Mia Potter* addressed on the front in crimson script. The back had been sealed with gold wax with the sigil of the House of Potter. Mia broke the seal immediately and, hands shaking, removed a folded piece of parchment, opening it to reveal more of Lily's handwriting.

"Mother of Merlin . . ." she whispered in awe, cleared her throat, and began reading aloud:

*"My dearest Mia, sister, sister-in-law, and favourite Marauder wrangler,*

*How strange it is to write a letter to someone who is supposed to be dead. You've been gone for almost two years now, and it still doesn't feel like it's real. Which, I suppose it's not because you're not really gone, are you? Are you? I learnt some funny things about house-elves this week. First, house-elves call their Masters and Mistresses only by that title, referring to others by their titles followed by names to differentiate. Did you know that even though Tilly calls James, 'Master', she refers to me as 'Mistress Lily'? My curious nature got the better of me, and I asked our favourite little elf why that was, and she informed me that a house-elf only takes on a new Master or Mistress when it is either freed or its previous Master or Mistress dies. Surprised, I asked, 'But Tilly, even though I don't care to be your official Mistress if you don't want me to be, you do know that Mia died, don't you?' And do you know what our favourite little elf told me? A fantastical story about a witch I once knew, a Time-Turner, and a letter from a werewolf.*

*Oh, Mia. Is it true? I want it to be true. I asked Tilly for proof because it seems just insane. She said she didn't know where the supposed letter was, but that she had read it before and recited it to me from memory. I asked her why she hadn't said anything to any of us before now, and she says that, dead or not, people needed to mourn you because you were gone, even if one day you would come back.*

*I want you to come back. I'd like to wait for you to come back. But I don't think I'll see you again, will I?*

*The letter Tilly recited to me from memory never mentioned James or myself. Remus wrote it, but he only talked about Sirius, so I can only assume that sometime between now and then, we die. I think . . . I think I'm okay with that. Do you know why that is, dear sister of mine and fellow descendant of the magically disinclined? Because Tilly says that Harry lives.*

*Oh, Mia. I can't even begin to tell you how worried I've been. This war is horrible, and I've been nothing but a mess of nerves, forcing myself to try and enjoy motherhood as I'm supposed to, but instead I feel like an anxious lioness, hovering over her cub and searching in the shadows for predators. Knowing that he makes it out of this war has taken the weight of the world from my shoulders."*

Mia tore her focus away from the letter briefly to wipe at the tears that were obscuring her vision, fearing they would drip onto the parchment and smudge the ink of Lily's familiar handwriting. She smiled when she felt Harry's hand on her shoulder.

"Keep reading," he pleaded.

*"Mia, I wish you could see this little boy. The Potter hair and the brightest green eyes in the world. He looks so very sweet and innocent when cuddled in my arms or riding James's shoulders, but you know the very moment that Sirius walks into the room, Harry's eyes light up, and I can just see trouble. The*

*pair of them are impossible to deal with, but I love it. I wish Sirius came by more, but he, Remus, and Peter are always away on missions.*

*Mia, they are such a mess without you. Remus has lost the sparkle in his eyes, and Sirius is an empty shell of a man. Tilly and that letter assured me that everything will work out for you all, and that brings me relief. To know that you'll come back to them and pull them out of this horrible darkness. To know that the war will be over one day and that our side will be victorious. To know that Harry will have you as a friend and, speaking as someone who grew up with the privilege of such an acquaintance, I can say that my little boy is in for a treat.*

*Take care of my sweet boy for me, Mia. He's the most precious thing in the world. Take care of Remus and Sirius, and yourself as well. Mostly, be happy.*

*Dorea once told me that it was the quality of years, not the number that we're all given, so if you really are still alive somewhere just waiting to come home, please fill your life with quality. Fill it with love. It's a powerful kind of magic, isn't it?*

*Love,*

*Lily."*

## Chapter One Hundred Forty-Nine

### *Red Letters*

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*So you wanna play with magic  
Boy, you should know what you're falling for  
Baby do you dare to do this?  
Cause I'm coming at you like a dark horse  
Are you ready for, ready for  
A perfect storm, perfect storm  
Cause once you're mine, once you're mine  
There's no going back  
(Dark Horse - Katy Perry)*

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**February 14th, 1999**

Despite Mia's desire to never return to Grimmauld Place, the transition was slower than she had hoped. They had to make sure every item that left number twelve was not cursed or possessing any lingering Dark Magic. In addition to settling back into Potter Manor, Grimmauld Place needed to be secured so no one ever accidentally stumbled upon it. Remus, Bill, and Sirius set to work on protective wards, permanent Muggle-Repelling Charms, and making the site unplottable. By the time they were done, the location of the place that had tried to swallow Sirius whole was only known to himself—a secret he swore he would carry to his grave.

They left Walburga's portrait in the basement.

When Valentine's Day rolled around, Harry seemed prepared to be miserable. Inclement weather, in addition to repairs still being made in Hogsmeade, meant that the students at Hogwarts were confined to the castle for the holiday, and Harry would not be able to see Ginny. Draco, likewise, was prevented from visiting Astoria but, being adequately prepared for a pureblood courtship, he was not as affected as Harry clearly was.

Mia, due to the boys' loneliness and her own distaste for the holiday, decided to have a small housewarming party at the manor. She invited everyone over for an early lunch, giving them all a chance to visit with one another while still leaving time for the couples to go out later that night. She insisted that she and Sirius had no plans and were more than happy to help Harry look after Teddy so that Remus and Tonks could have a night out on the town.

Unlike the Burrow, Potter Manor had plenty of room to spare for a large crowd. The dining room was opened up, and Tilly set to excitedly making a feast. When Molly arrived and headed for the kitchen, everyone could overhear her arguing with the elf over the proper temperature to cook a treacle tart.

Laughing, Mia carried several bottles of wine to the table and handed them to Sirius for approval and distribution.

He tugged at her until she collapsed onto his lap, rolling her eyes as he wrapped his arms around her. He looked content that she remain exactly where she was as they drank wine and ate whatever Tilly and Molly decided to put in front of them—should the elf and witch actually come to an agreement.

Mia smiled and kissed his lips gently, ignoring the way that Fred and George, who were sitting to Sirius's right, were grinning at them. When she pulled her attention away from Sirius and took the seat to his left next to Harry, she noticed he was looking a bit anxious.

"You all right?"

Harry silently bobbed his head and took an impressive gulp from his glass of firewhisky.

*That can't be good,* Mia thought to herself.

She had little time to ponder the thought as Teddy cried out from the other side of the table between his parents, sobbing as Tonks refused to let him have a sip of her wine. Large tears dripped down his plump cheeks as he reached out for her. "Mi! Mi! Mi!"

*Juice,* Mia mouthed to Remus, who sighed dramatically and waved his hand over Tonks's wine glass, transfiguring the fermented liquid to plain grape juice. He looked back at her with devoted appreciation, and she winked at him in reply as a grateful Tonks lifted the glass of purple liquid to Teddy's mouth.

Arthur sat beside Harry, eagerly exchanging Ministry and Gringotts gossip with Bill. Fleur leant back in her chair miserably, glaring at her glass of water as though it had offended her. She occasionally glanced down at her swollen abdomen before raising her gaze to her husband, looking like she was mentally fighting the urge to steal his small tumbler of firewhisky.

At one end of the table, the Slytherins all huddled together. Narcissa and Laurel were giggling over the wedding plans for Draco and Astoria. Though the event was more

than a year away, it was already halfway planned down to the crystal stemware and silver-rimmed plates. The future groom in question was speaking heatedly, though respectfully, with his future father-in-law over the permits required to use Fiendfyre to burn Malfoy Manor to the ground, whether or not they needed to hire out an expert for such a situation, and which Potions Masters would benefit the most from the ashwinders and eggs that would be left behind in the wake of the flames.

At the other end of the table, Fred was whispering to Sirius, which was never a good sign.

"The question is, can they be traced?"

"Eventually, sure," Sirius replied quietly, his gaze darting across the table to the Wizengamot members present. "I don't think you should sell them in the shop, though, boys. She always said she was joking, but a part of me really thinks she fed one to the giant squid."

*Oh, great*, Mia groaned internally. The last thing the world needed was for Fred and George Weasley to have access to Tele-Portkeys.

George grinned. "Brilliant."

Fred beamed at her as she eavesdropped. "Love that girl."

"Platonically, of course," George insisted.

"Unless . . ."

Mia pointed a reproaching finger at Fred. "No flirting with me in front of Sirius."

George winked at her. "Does that mean we can flirt with you in private?"

"Boys, you couldn't handle me."

"You certain about that, 'Mione?" Fred waggled his eyebrows, taking a brief glance at Sirius to gauge his mood, which seemed to be entertained. "Maybe *you* couldn't handle *us*?"

"Double your pleasure," George said.

"Double your fun."

Mia smiled at them as though they were baby kneazles first learning how to walk. "Oh, so adorable," she said with a patronising chuckle before turning her attention away from the boys, who looked mildly put out. She reached for her glass of wine and took a sip, eyeing the door that led toward the kitchen, wondering if Tilly had hogtied Molly yet. "Arthur, what are you and Molly going to do for Valentine's Day?"

At first, it had clearly been awkward for Arthur to think of her as anything but Hermione Granger, the best friend of his two youngest children, but after a few get-togethers, she did her best to remind him of who *exactly* he was dealing with.

Wagging his eyebrows, he gave an implicating chuckle and said, "All the kids are out of the Burrow. What do *you* think?"

"Arthur!" Molly called from the other room.

He jumped in his seat and looked up toward the sound as though he had been scolded, innocently blurting out in a louder tone, "Oh, just a quiet night in, I think! Early to bed. Might read a book. What's that, dear?"

Molly stepped into the room, eyeing him suspiciously. "Can you help me with some of the plates?"

Arthur moved to stand.

"*Tilly* does it!" The house-elf stormed up beside Molly. With her hands on her hips, her large blue eyes narrowed up at the witch.

"We can manage, Tilly, thank you!" Molly said sternly as she moved back into the kitchen to be followed by both Tilly and Arthur.

Mia chuckled, wondering how long before her house-elf cracked and bit Molly. "What about you, Fleur? Is Bill taking you out dancing?"

"In these feet?" Fleur laughed, rubbing her ankles and swatting Bill's arm when he tried to help her. "I think not! I am the size of a dragon."

All the women chuckled, Fleur included.

"You are not," Bill insisted, rolling his eyes at her theatrics.

"*Non?*" She looked at him, eyes blazing, and he cowered slightly at the sight of her pent-up rage. "I fought a dragon in the Triwizard Tournament. Have *you* seen one that close?"

Bill took a breath and spoke slow and soft. "I'm not arguing with you, love. I'm just saying, you're beautiful."

"Yes, well . . . I know that!" she snapped and drank down half of her water, yelping when a small burst of Accidental Magic shattered the glass in her hand. She sighed in frustration as Bill was quick to clean up the mess and repair the glass. Fleur looked over at Mia and Sirius apologetically. "*Pardon*. The hormones."

Molly walked into the room carrying nothing in her hands, looking bothered by it. A very smug-looking Tilly walked behind her and Arthur, levitating a parade of dishes out to the table.

"It's perfectly fine, dear," Molly said, assuring Fleur by patting her gently on the shoulder before she took her seat next to her daughter-in-law.

"'Perfectly fine', she says," Bill muttered. "*She* doesn't have to bloody live with her."

Molly and Fleur glared at him, clearly having heard his quip.

"It's absolutely normal," Molly insisted. "I imagine I was a bit unpleasant during six pregnancies myself."

Arthur smartly shook his head. "Absolutely not, dear. You were nothing but a delight each and every time."

"All witches are delightful when pregnant," Hyperion chimed in, raising his glass in a commiserating toast to all of the fathers at the table.

Laurel snorted. "For a Slytherin, you're a shit liar."

"Tonks wasn't so bad," Remus said honestly, rocking a contented Teddy in his arms and smiling when the boy's hair turned a sandy shade of blond. Only the ends of his locks were the typical turquoise, indicating that it was almost nap time, and the child was fighting the inevitable.

Tonks smirked. "That's because *you* were the hormonal one."

Remus rolled his eyes in objection to the statement.

"Lily was a fucking six-eyed, acid-spewing, bollocks-kicking, hate monster," Sirius declared.

"That's my mum, thank you." Harry teasingly glared at his godfather.

"Yeah well, your mum was a *beast* when she was pregnant with you. Do you know how I know? Because I have this scar to remind me," Sirius said and tilted his head backward to reveal a small silvery-pink line just beneath his chin.

"What happened?" Harry asked, shocked.

"She bloody *attacked* me is what happened. I asked if she could see her feet over her belly, and she hit me with a Tripping Jinx. When I fell, I knocked my chin on the kitchen counter."

Mia laughed at her fiancé's misfortune, hoping he would not begrudge her if she asked to see the memory eventually.

"You got it easy," Remus said with a smile. "You stood at the foot of the bed when she gave birth, while James and I held her hands. The grip on that witch was tear-inducing, and that says something coming from me."

"Are all witches . . . ?" Harry began. "Well, er . . . *mental* when they're pregnant?"

Sirius and Remus laughed loudest, pulling Teddy from his drowsy state.

Mia smiled deviously at Harry. "We don't have to be pregnant to need a reason to hex you wizards if we're so inclined."

Everyone shared a chuckle and then tucked into the meal presented to them by an overly proud house-elf and an appreciative Molly.

"Now," Arthur said when the final bite of treacle tart was gone, "I know that we all agreed no talk of Valentine's Day, but I happened to have a small token of my affections for my Molly." He smiled as he looked at his wife, removing a rolled-up parchment from his pockets and waving his wand, transfiguring it into three, long multi-coloured tulips.

"Oh, Arthur. They're beautiful."

"Not to outshine the lovely couple," Hyperion said, reaching into his pockets. Beside him, Laurel was sitting up straight and bouncing in her seat. "But I've a gift for *my* sweet wife as well."

Before he had a chance to present the gift to her, she snatched the box from his hand and tore it open to reveal a pair of emerald earrings. She grinned at the sight and held them up next to the emerald necklace that hung around her throat. She smiled and kissed his cheek. "I'll soon have a matching set," she said, waving her naked wrist in front of his face as a hint.

Hyperion shook his head at Laurel's audacity but smiled all the same. When no one was looking, save for Mia at the other end of the table, he winked at her.

"Wait a minute," Harry huffed. "How many of you brought Valentine's Day gifts?" One by one, every wizard save for Fred and George raised their hands. He pouted and then waved his hand in dismissal to them all. "All right, get on with it."

Mia reached over to tuck his pouting lip back in his mouth with her finger. Harry glared at her, and she laughed loudly.

Bill presented Fleur with a beautiful silver pendant, spelled with Protection Charms and Anti-Theft Hexes built right into the goblin-made piece. Remus handed both Andromeda and Tonks homemade biscuits that Teddy clearly had a hand in decorating;

both witches cooed in delight at the gift. Draco, despite not having Astoria there to shower in jewels, presented his mother with a diamond brooch that she smiled sweetly over and kissed his cheek in gratitude.

Mia turned to look at Sirius. "Where's mine?"

He looked up at her, seeming confused. "Where's your what?"

"My gift, you prat. I know you bought me something."

"For Valentine's Day?" He looked offended at the suggestion. "I would never."

"Hand it over, mongrel."

Sirius smirked and stood up, walking into the other room and returning moments later with a long red box topped with an obscenely large bow. He made his way toward Mia but stopped halfway there to place the box down in front of Remus, who was rolling his eyes.

"Moony, my love," Sirius gushed dramatically. "Happy Valentine's Day."

Mia giggled, and everyone save for herself, Remus, Sirius, and Tonks looked at the scene strangely.

"You shouldn't have," Remus said sarcastically as he opened the box, snatching up two pieces of chocolate and handing one to his wife.

Sirius re-joined Mia on the other side of the table to receive a kiss for all of his efforts.

"Not that this hasn't been a hoot," Fred said as he and George stood. "But we have to get home to the flat. Katie and Angelina are coming over, and we're supposed to cook them dinner."

"Right." George nodded, delicately dabbing the edge of his napkin against the corners of his mouth. "Anyone want to teach us how to cook?"

Fred bowed graciously before Sirius and Mia in gratitude for lunch. George stopped to kiss Tilly's hand, much to her shock and annoyance. The twins fled to the fireplace before the little elf could swat their backsides.

"Did you boys send something off to your witches at Hogwarts?" Mia asked Draco and Harry.

"What do you take me for, Potter? Of *course* I sent something. A sapphire bracelet that will make Astoria the envy of the school." Draco smirked proudly. Narcissa, Laurel, and Hyperion all looked at him with approval.

"Harry, what did you get Ginny?" Mia asked.

He frowned. Clearly, it was *not* a sapphire bracelet. "Umm . . . broom polish?"

No one said a word in reply, but Mia smiled and reached up to affectionately run her fingers through his messy hair.

When the silence became awkward, Harry pushed Mia's hands off of his head, and he cleared his throat loudly. He stood and reached into the pocket of his robes, withdrawing a cream-coloured envelope with crimson and gold lettering, handing it over to Arthur, who looked at it with curiosity, as though he had never seen an envelope before in his life.

"But umm, speaking of . . . of Ginny. Mr Weasley, Mrs Weasley . . . I have, umm, for . . . for you."

"What is it, son?" Arthur asked as he broke the seal on the back and removed the parchment from within.

Fleur was sitting up straight, leaning over Bill to get a good look at the envelope and parchment. "Is that . . . ?"

Bill laughed and shook his head, reaching for his drink. "Oh, this should be good."

Arthur frowned as his eyes looked over the parchment. "Son, is this what I think it is?"

"A Letter of . . ." Molly was whispering to herself as she read over the words. When the realisation hit her, she squealed in delight. "Oh! Oh!" She jumped to her feet and wrapped Harry in a tight embrace, kissing the side of his head repeatedly. "Oh, you dear sweet, sweet boy!"

Arthur was smiling at the sight, but the letter in his hand was certainly an unexpected gesture from a half-blood wizard who had been raised by Muggles. "Sirius, did you put him up to this? It's very old-fashioned."

Mia smiled joyfully. "Sirius gave one to Harry when he asked me to marry him."

Arthur inclined his head. "Well, it's very honourable of you to ask our permission, Harry—"

"And we say yes!" Molly cried, only stepping back when Arthur tugged at her dress. "You may *absolutely* court and marry Ginny! Not that you haven't been already, or that you'd even need to ask for such a thing, though permission to marry her . . . oh." She wiped at the tears that were building up in the corners of her eyes. "Such a polite young man."

Arthur nodded in agreement. "That being said . . ." He cleared his throat nervously. "Normally when a letter is sent, the witch receives one as well if she's not present for the presentation to her parents."

"*Please* tell me you sent a copy to Ginny," Bill said, grinning at Harry. "I will be so happy."

Harry looked offended. "Of *course* I sent one to Ginny! I would never ask permission to marry her without informing her of my intentions first."

Bill chuckled into his crystal tumbler. "Oh, this is fucking priceless."

"Owl!" Teddy cried in delight as he pointed a chubby finger to the tall window in the corner, where two large brown owls flew in. One landed in front of Mia, and the other, carrying a large red envelope, dropped the post in front of a suddenly-petrified Harry Potter.

"Is that a Howler?" Draco asked, looking the happiest Mia had ever seen him.

"Uh, oh." Harry reached for it slowly.

He had not put more than a finger on the edge of the envelope before Ginny's voice spoke loudly from within it:

*"Dear fancy pants Lord Harry James Potter of the famous fancy pants Potters! The lovely Lady Ginevra received your delightful letter this morning. At breakfast. In the middle of the Great Hall. Where everyone could see . . ."*

Harry winced and covered his face with his hands.

*". . . She was sitting beside her brother, who has given you the honourable and esteemed title of 'Supreme Prat and King of the Gits', and has decided to send you a Dungbomb, so be prepared for that. In addition to the Lady's red-faced brother, also present for the presentation of your letter were several irritating chits, who decided to squeal with delight at the sight. Ginevra is sadly now deaf. That being said, your simpering Lady love has sent her reply to your Head of House."*

Harry's cheeks were pink as he looked up, glaring at Bill, who was laughing the hardest. "My Head of . . .?" Harry asked in confusion before he looked next to him, where Mia was holding up a cream-coloured envelope with red and gold lettering.

*"Thank you for your consideration, Lord Potter . . ."* Ginny said, dragging out each and every vowel. Her voice snapped back to its normal tone as she added, *"and thanks for the broom polish. I was running out, and my Nimbus has been flying like shit lately."*

Both Molly and Fleur were scolding Bill, and Mia had fixed a glare at Sirius as he tried to contain his mirth at the plight of his poor godson, who *dared* use an old-fashioned proposal on Ginny Weasley, of all witches.

Harry groaned, looking over at the letter in Mia's hands. "What does she say?"

"Well, it appears that Ginny has decided to reply to *your* Letter of Intent, by sending one of her very own. She's asked for *my* permission to court *you*."

Draco burst into unapologetic laughter.

Harry sighed, threw his hands in the air as a sign of giving up. "I thought you said I should know all this pureblood nonsense, Hermione."

"I never said to use it on *Ginny Weasley*. Are you mental? I'm surprised she didn't Apparate here and Bat-Bogey you for this." Mia giggled and handed him Ginny's Letter of Intent. "Put this somewhere safe. Poor Harry."

"Owl!" Teddy cried again as a third owl flew in through the window and dropped a piece of post down in front of Hyperion and Laurel.

"What . . . is this?" Hyperion hissed, eyes wide as he opened the letter to read.

Laurel, leaning over his shoulder, blue eyes staring at the parchment, let out a loud squeal of excitement. "Excellent! I get to plan *two* weddings!"

Molly's face paled. "What?!"

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Quite possibly in response to Molly's outrage over Ron's decision to request a pureblood courtship and betrothal to a Slytherin, Hyperion and Laurel eagerly signed their permission in regard to the Letter of Intent that he had owled them.

Molly pouted, lamenting over the fact that all of her children were growing up—and likely no longer listening to her counsel—and the rest of the table began chattering about weddings. Draco glared across the table at Mia, presumably because he knew she was to blame for his unfortunate and sudden relationship by marriage to his Weasley rival.

Hours later, the guests were gone and only Sirius, Mia, Harry, and Teddy were left in the manor. She smiled as she watched her best friend carry the sleeping baby off to his room—James's old room—disappearing into the shadows. She expected to feel the guilt pool in the pit of her stomach when she looked at Harry walking away with Teddy in his

arms. At the sight, especially from a distance or in low lighting, she often mistook him for her brother, and it always set her emotions back to square one. However, since reading Lily's letter, Mia felt like she had a piece of closure on that chapter of her life, and now she was eager to spend the next bit of it with Sirius, Harry, Remus and his family.

"Are the little ones off to bed?" Sirius asked, leaning casually against the doorframe of the drawing room where Mia was situated in a large armchair, book in hand.

She smiled, rolling her eyes at him. "Little ones. Harry's an eighteen-year-old man."

Sirius chuckled. "Man?"

"Do you think it will be weird?" she asked, not fighting when he walked over and picked her up into his arms, prying the book from her fingers. "That ours and Remus's children will be so much younger than Harry? It shouldn't have happened like that."

"I think," Sirius murmured as he kissed the tip of her nose, "that it doesn't matter. Harry *should* have had James and Lily, but instead, he got a broken godfather, a used werewolf, and a time travelling witch." He laughed. "He *should* have had siblings, but instead he got a second-hand Weasley and a time travelling—"

"Time travelling witch, yes, you're right," Mia said, laughing at his simplification of their overly complicated lives. "Where is it, exactly, that you appear to be taking me, Mr Black?"

"Why, Miss Potter, I am taking you to bed."

"Sirius, our bedroom is back that way," she said, gesturing around his broad shoulders.

"Oh, well, when I said 'I am taking you to bed,' that was my way of romantically saying that I'm looking for a place to fuck you," he elaborated and winked at her.

"Well, look at me, all starry-eyed over your sweet words." She laughed when he pinched the back of her thigh in response. "'You are the one I am lit for. Come with your rod that twists and is a serpent. I am the bush,'" she whispered against the shell of his ear, stopping her words only to lightly nibble on the lobe there. "'I am burning. I am not consumed.'"

Sirius grinned as he pushed her through the door leading to her old bedroom. "Kitten," he said, his pupils dark and dilated. "You know reading me poetry makes me think of Moony."

Mia threw back her head and laughed. "Whatever gets you going, love." She shrieked when he lightly dug his fingers into her ribs. "Put me down, you filthy mutt! Wait! Where are we going?"

"To see your Valentine's Day gift."

"Wait, you *actually* got *me* something?"

"Kitten," Sirius said with a sigh. "I hate to be the one to tell you this, but if I gave Remus chocolates whenever I wanted to smother you in presents, we would have a very fat werewolf on our hands. Now, while that image may be hilarious, and I might fatten him up regardless, you will have to indulge me every once in a while when I simply need—yes, *need*—to wrap shiny things in bows and give them to you."

She furrowed her brows. "How shiny?"

"Very shiny." He stepped into the large bathroom and turned to face her toward the bathtub, which yesterday, had been ceramic, but today was a shiny copper clawfoot.

Mia's mouth dropped. "Fred and George really still had it?"

"Fuck, no. Someone ripped the thing out years ago, I guess," he said, setting her feet down on the marble floor. "Someone like Dung probably stripped the place bare of anything worth a few Galleons long before the twins bought the place. I purchased this one last week."

Mia slowly approached the large tub, already filled with hot water and bubbles. Her smile widened when she felt Sirius at her back, pressing his erection against her arse as he pulled at her robes, revealing shoulders that were bare save for the thin, black strap of a bra.

He placed a gentle kiss against her Pack Mark and then ran his tongue down the splinching scar that cut through her shoulder blade, breathing hot against her skin until he was kneeling with his cheek pressed against her lower back. Rough, callused hands pulled at the soft fabric of her bra, tugging it down her arms and tossing it aside. Without a word, he ran his hands up the front of her legs, reaching for the zipper of her jeans, slowly pulling on it and parting the denim from her skin, revealing black lace knickers.

He crawled around to face the front of her and leant forward, placing a soft kiss to the tattoo on her inner thigh, moaning when she raked her fingers through his hair in response.

"Nope," he said, pulling away from her. "Tonight's not about that."

"You just said you were looking for a place to fuck me," Mia said, narrowing her eyes at him.

"Kitten, get in the tub."

She grinned slyly, not usually one to obey orders from him, not unless he was asking her in that husky voice he used when he took complete control of her. Then again, it was Valentine's Day—maybe *her* gift to *him* would be compliance.

Slipping out of her knickers and bra, Mia slid into the steaming water and hissed as she lowered her body down. She closed her eyes and sighed in relief as the mild stress of the day melted off of her skin and into the water; any remaining traces were washed from her body by Sirius's hands.

He knelt at the edge of the tub, dipping his arms in the water and running his palms gently over her skin: up her calf, circling her knee, along the outer expanse of one thigh and across her stomach. He stopped to pay special attention to her breasts, gently palming them, brushing his thumb over each peak.

She lifted her arm out of the water to reach for him, but he pulled away from her, tutting.

"This is your gift, kitten," he insisted as his fingers dipped between her legs, parting her folds and slowly, torturously, slipping inside of her.

She let out a soft whimper at the welcomed intrusion and tilted her hips forward to grant him better access as he stroked her from within, going straight for the spot he knew made her see the heavens part.

When Mia opened her eyelids again to see him staring at the apex of her thighs, watching his fingers move in and out of her through the fading bubbles, she pursed her lips at the far too smug look on his face. She reached for him again, testing the proverbial waters only to have him make a *tsk* sound and push her hand away once again before rubbing her clit with the pad of his thumb and grinning at the way she bucked in response.

*Oh, that won't do*, she thought to herself. "Sirius, I need you."

"I'm here, love," he said with a lascivious grin.

"No," she said, breath heavy, eyes heated as she stared at him, "I need to touch you."

He shook his head, but she could see his resolve beginning to crack. "This is about you. My gift to you."

She hid the scowl behind an expression of pure pleasure, which was not hard considering the talented things his hands were capable of. But she would not give up that easily. He thought he could go out and buy her an expensive tub, call it a gift, and get away with celebrating Valentine's Day? The naive prat.

"Baby," she whispered, her tone pleading, "I need you in my mouth."

Mia grinned at the echo of his downfall, which sounded an awful lot like a mixture of pained groaning and the clanging noise of a forehead repeatedly knocking against the side of the bathtub. She smiled in triumph knowing that she could come from his touch and words any day of the week, but it was Valentine's Day, and she felt like getting off on his complete and utter defeat.

# Chapter One Hundred Fifty

## *Details*

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*Where do we go from here?  
Where do we go from here?  
The battle's done  
And we kind of won  
So we sound our victory cheer  
Where do we go from here?*  
(Where Do We Go - Once More with Feeling)

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**May 2nd, 1999**

The Memorial Gala to celebrate the one year anniversary of Voldemort's downfall took place a month before the graduation at Hogwarts. Most of Wizarding Britain were cheering and setting off fireworks. Those who were closest to battle, who had seen it all up close and been in the middle of the fray, gathered together on the grounds of Hogwarts to remember those they had lost.

"My . . . My sister, Hermione," Harry said with a soft smile when Kingsley dragged him up in front of a large crowd to make a speech, "likes to remind me that the war wasn't about me. That it wasn't my fault so many people fought and died. It's taken me a long time to agree with her. I'm nobody special. I was just a wizard looking to protect his family. Like everyone else. Like all of you. I think we did a good job. But lives were still lost, and even as we celebrate freedoms that seemed impossible a year ago, we shouldn't forget that while *we* fought to be the victors, others died as heroes."

And, like the Marauders and Mia had promised twenty years earlier, they mourned them all.

A memorial garden had been planted west of the Black Lake in an enclosed area, in memory of all those that had fallen during the war. One by one, people came and planted flowers and herbs in honour of their fallen loved ones.

"For Alastor Moody, Rufus Scrimgeour, Edgar Bones, Benjy Fenwick, and all the many Aurors that gave their lives," Kingsley said as he held his wand aloft, casting a light of magic into the garden.

Minerva—with a stubborn Aberforth standing a ways away—wiped tears from her eyes and whispered, "For Albus Dumbledore."

Others came representing family members of the fallen. Bathilda Bagshot, Charity Burbage, Cedric Diggory, Florean Fortescue, Bertha Jorkins, Dorcas Meadows, and many more were honoured specifically by name. One by one, the crowd fell away, leaving behind the members of the pack and their extended family.

"For Fabian and Gideon Prewett," Molly said, sniffing and leaning on Arthur for support. Fred and George made their way to her side, taking their father's place and squeezing their mother tightly. Soon, Molly was joined by all of her children.

Mia smiled at the sight from where she stood next to Sirius.

"For Edward Tonks," Tonks said, raising her wand in honour of her father, joined by Andromeda and Narcissa.

Remus smiled softly, wand in one hand and Teddy in the other. "For Hope Lupin."

Ron re-joined Daphne once Molly insisted that she was just fine. Behaving politely for the occasion, he nodded his head at Draco, who was standing next to Astoria on Daphne's other side.

Draco returned the gesture and then gave a quick nod to Harry as he raised his wand. "For Severus Snape."

Mia smiled at the sight, knowing that Snape would be annoyed with so many people thinking fondly of him in that moment.

Neville stepped forward with Alice on his arm, Frank walking behind them with the assistance of a cane, and Hannah Abbot helping him find balance on the grass. Neville kissed his mother's hand, watching as his girlfriend honoured the members of her own family that had died in the war.

Alice had been chosen to raise her own wand and whisper, "For Mary Macdonald."

Mia wiped the tears from her eyes as relief washed over her; they were finally able to properly honour her fallen friend. Before she started crying in earnest, she stepped forward. "For Charlus and Dorea Potter," she said with a proud smile on her face, and then she sighed softly as she tried to follow James's request for forgiveness, adding, "and Marlene McKinnon."

Remus smiled at her, his eyes full of pride.

Sirius slowly stepped up, chestnut wand in hand, his eyes closed as he reached his empty hand out to Mia for support. "For . . . for Regulus Black." Breathing heavy and struggling with his words, he exchanged Mia's hand for Remus's. Sirius visibly warred with himself until he finally, and very quietly whispered, "And . . . Peter Pettigrew."

*"I want you and Sirius to be happy,"* Jamie had said through the power of the Resurrection Stone. *"To let go of all that anger. I want you to learn to forgive Dumbledore, Snape . . . and Peter. The war is over. Put us all to rest."*

Mia smiled sweetly at Sirius and Remus, who were both obviously struggling with their emotions. She knew they were not mourning Peter, the traitor, nor regretting Wormtail's inevitable demise. But Peter had once been their friend—a scared boy who made all the wrong choices. His life had been stolen by a Death Eater; that Death Eater just happened to be himself.

She took a breath as she tried to follow Sirius's shockingly good example, searching inside of herself to see if she could, at the very least, release all the hate. Hating enemies, especially the dead ones, was a heavy burden, and she was ready and eager to be relieved of it.

"Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that," Remus said softly.

"Martin Luther King Jr," Mia said quietly, merely out of habit. "Muggle."

Finally, Harry walked forward, Ginny's hand clutched in his, their fingers intertwined to show each of them wearing a Potter family ring. Harry's, the symbol of his authority; Ginny's, the engraved, ruby engagement ring that once belonged to another redhead besotted with a messy-haired wizard.

Smiling through his tears, Harry said, "For James and Lily Potter."

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### **May 31st, 1999**

When Sirius and Mia told Remus they planned on building him a new home, they were not lying. What they failed to mention was that in addition to a small, four-bedroom cottage, they had wrapped a large, stylish, brick wall with wrought iron gates around the

entire border of the land belonging to Remus—as well as the two neighbouring plots which Sirius purchased in his name. The wall that enclosed the ninety acres of land, moving through the woods behind the new Lupin cottage, was imbued with security wards and protections rivalling that of Hogwarts. This time, instead of keeping just unwanted visitors *out*, it also kept everyone *in*.

It had taken some esoteric research, but Bill was more than happy to assist Mia when she had asked if he needed a break from Fleur and baby Victoire. The eldest Weasley son was delighted to leave Shell Cottage, taking Victoire with him to be left in Tilly's care so his exhausted wife could rest. He and Mia paired together and poured over numerous tomes in the Potter Manor library until they found the spells that they were looking for: lunar wards.

Every other day of the month, The Den was a small cottage home to the Lupin family. However, on the night of the full moon, Tonks and Teddy would leave to visit either Potter Manor or Andromeda's home, while the werewolf population of Wizarding Britain would arrive to visit Remus. After receiving their final dose of Wolfsbane Potion, they all would prepare themselves to be locked within the moon-triggered security wards on the grounds where they could run free with other wolves under the protection of an Alpha and a few new Animagi friends.

When she could, Madam Pomfrey joined Mia and several St Mungo's interns at the aptly named Lupin Lycanthrope Sanctuary to learn Healing Spells specific to werewolf injuries.

"I could be a Healer," Mia said to Remus one post-moon morning while she helped Molly fix a massive breakfast for the extended werewolf pack members.

Remus smiled at her as he always did, eyes full of love and devotion spanning decades. "You could be anything you want to be, love," he said and kissed her forehead, snatching a plate of streaky bacon and eggs from her hands.

"She can be a bachelorette for one last night, is what she can be," Tonks said as she interrupted the pair, stealing a piece of bacon from Remus's plate and watching in amusement as he narrowed his eyes at her. "You sure you're up to babysitting Sirius?"

"The additions Damocles has been making to the Wolfsbane, plus being around so many other werewolves without fighting, makes recovery a lot easier. Besides, someone

needs to make sure he doesn't drink himself into a stupor. Are you sure you're all right with this?" Remus asked Mia.

"I told him years ago, he's not allowed to have a *veela* stripper," Mia said, picking a piece of bacon from Remus's plate, lips quirking as he struggled to not growl at either woman for thieving his food. "I already know that Draco's paid for some poor Muggle girl. Let the boys have their fun, I'll have some fun of my own."

Remus groaned. "I don't like that smile."

Mia chuckled. "I may have some stipulations to Sirius being allowed a *proper* stag night."

---

Ginny stared across the round table inside Potter Manor's drawing room where the large gathering of witches sat. Empty flutes of champagne, recently filled shots of firewhisky, and their wands were set out on the table in front of them.

"I really don't think a wand oath is necessary, Hermione."

"Do it or we don't play." Mia shrugged her shoulders as she gave her friend the choice. "I don't even like this game, to begin with."

Someone snorted to Mia's left, and she turned to glare at Tonks, who was smirking. "What?"

"You just don't want to play because *I* know all of your secrets," Tonks replied with a grin.

Mia was not ashamed to admit, "That, too."

Her hen night was a bit larger than Lily's had been. Though she suggested they all get together to brew some potions, her friends and family members were adamant about drinking and games instead. Truthfully, though, *Ginny* was adamant about drinking and games; with Tonks backing her up, Mia's vote apparently no longer counted. She had assumed that Narcissa and Andromeda would be on *her* side, but the Black sisters were apparently eager to dip their toes back into the fountain of youth by telling dirty stories, gossiping, and drinking with girlfriends.

The idea of Narcissa Malfoy teaming up with Ginevra Weasley against her had been what sparked the idea of a wand oath. Secrecy. She required secrecy, especially since Laurel

was there and had been known to talk unabashedly while intoxicated. She was a female Sirius, who tossed back firewhisky after firewhisky, barely taking a pause in her never-ending chatter, which usually revolved around telling everyone how amazing she was—at drinking and in general—and showering them with affection.

"A wand oath, though? What deviant things could you have gotten up to in your youth?"

Mia scoffed at Ginny. "I'm marrying Sirius Black," she answered to a round of nodding heads of understanding. "Make the oath or I say nothing. Everyone else has done it."

The redhead rolled her eyes but gripped her wand regardless, meeting Mia's stare as she spoke, "I, Ginevra Molly Weasley, swear upon my wand and magic to never speak again, outside of those present," she amended the original oath, grinning when Mia narrowed her stare, "of what I learn here tonight."

"Fine."

Without a moment's hesitation, Ginny shouted, "Never have I ever had sex inside Hogwarts!"

Mia rolled her eyes and threw back her shot of firewhisky, watching with amusement as the other guilty witches followed suit. "That one wasn't even daring."

Astoria gasped as Laurel drank her shot. "Mother!"

Laurel looked completely unashamed. "Don't judge me."

When eyes fell on Narcissa as she lifted the small glass to her thin lips, she glared and threatened everyone, "Not a word of this to Draco."

"Gets pretty cold in the dungeons?" Ginny asked, waggling her eyebrows and looking far too much like her twin brothers when she grinned suggestively.

Narcissa, with delicate grace, lowered the shot glass to the table and shrugged her slender shoulders. "I suppose. It's quite warm in Ravenclaw Tower, though," she said with a teasing grin.

Luna, who was sitting behind Mia on a stool with her legs crossed, braiding the bride-to-be's hair, smiled serenely at everyone. "She is right. It's very warm," she said, and then reached over for a shot glass to the shock and awe of everyone present.

Andromeda drank next, and Tonks laughed at her mother before throwing back a shot of her own, followed by Fleur, who winced at the burn as it slipped down her throat.

"Wait," Ginny interrupted the game. "Fleur, you didn't even *go* to Hogwarts."

The blonde shrugged in indifference. "So? The hospital wing is very private."

"Bill?!" Ginny gasped in disgust. "He was still injured!"

Fleur grinned. "And *very* happy to have me tend his wounds."

"That's horrifying." Ginny grimaced and drank a shot of her own. "I didn't have sex in Hogwarts. I'm just trying to erase the idea of my brother shagging in the hospital wing."

"You did too shag in Hogwarts!" Mia pointed out loudly.

"What?" Ginny stared at her friend, shocked at the accusation. "I never!"

"Last May."

"Oooh . . ." Ginny bobbed her head thoughtfully. "Well, I meant like . . . during school, not after battle."

"I never did it in the hospital wing," Mia said, looking up at Fleur with a bit of appreciation for the woman's sense of spontaneity. "The cots always looked uncomfortable."

Tonks snorted. "And the Shrieking Shack's a downy bed, is it?"

Every set of eyes turned and stared at Mia, who was glaring at Tonks.

Ginny's grin nearly split her face. "Shrieking Shack?"

Mia sighed irritably. "Among other places."

"Like where?"

"Gryffindor Tower, obviously," Mia answered, knowing that there was little need to hide the fact that she had shagged Sirius all over the school while they dated, and as for Remus, well, Tonks outed her there due to the Shrieking Shack. "The shack, the prefect's bathroom, Room of Requirement, and the library."

Ginny laughed. "I *knew* you were Library Girl! Naughty Professor Lupin."

Tonks smiled lasciviously. "You have no idea," she said as she refilled her shot glass.

Narcissa raised a pale eyebrow. "Excuse me? I have apparently missed something."

"He wasn't a professor *then*; we were both students," Mia grit out, narrowing her eyes at the red-headed instigator. "Think before you speak, Ginny."

"Never have I ever been caught shagging by my parents!" Tonks declared proudly.

"And I thank you for that," Andromeda said.

Laurel, however, threw back a shot as Astoria and Daphne watched on in horror.

"Never have I ever . . ." Narcissa began, clearing her throat, "had sex outdoors."

All too quickly Tonks, Mia, Fleur, Luna, Laurel, and Ginny drank.

"Never have I ever had sex," Astoria blurted out and watched as everyone drank around her, Daphne included, though the elder Greengrass sister did so as slyly as possible while Laurel looked the other way, clearly pretending not to notice.

"Slags."

"Ginny, you drank, too," Mia pointed out.

"Meh. I think we're forgetting the purpose of this little game. We're supposed to dig up dirt on *this* dirty witch," she said, pointing at Mia, "and I have some questions. Never have I ever had sex in public."

Despite Laurel and Tonks drinking, all eyes remained on Mia as she swallowed a mouthful of firewhisky.

Ginny grinned. "Which one?"

Mia shook her head. "Not how the game works."

"Fine. Never have I ever had sex with *Remus Lupin* in public."

Tonks and Mia both drank, the combination of firewhisky and champagne from earlier finally taking effect as Mia stopped caring about letting go of some of the details. "Black Sabbath concert, 1977."

Fleur joined in on Ginny's plan and announced, "Never ever have I had sex with *Sirius Black* in public."

Mia drank again. "New Year's Eve, 1977."

Narcissa quietly chuckled. "1977 appears to have been a good year."

"Out of curiosity, was the Black Sabbath concert *on* New Year's Eve?" Ginny jokingly asked, waggling her eyebrows suggestively. "Because that would make this story a lot more interesting."

"No," Mia insisted.

Tonks giggled.

"What was that?" Ginny asked, her brown eyes widening as she picked up on the silent looks that Mia was tossing toward Tonks, whose hair had suddenly turned magenta.

"Nothing," Mia hissed.

"Oh!" Laurel squealed as she picked up on the conversation. "Oh! I know! I know! Never have I ever—"

"Laurel—" Mia cautioned her old friend.

"—had sex with two men at the same time!"

Everyone turned to stare at Mia, who was glaring at her big-mouthed friend. Silence filled the room until the sound of a glass scraping against the wooden table broke through the quiet, and a snickering Tonks pushed Mia's firewhisky closer to her.

Sighing in defeat, she drank.

Gasps and cheers echoed through the room.

"Mother of Merlin!" Ginny squealed in delight. "Game's over, I want to know every detail!"

Mia gaped at her friend. "You realise one of those men is basically going to be your father-in-law, right?"

Ginny waved her off. "Don't change the subject."

---

"My Galleons are on Lupin," Draco insisted, adding his coins to a growing pile in the centre of a table where Neville was collecting bets.

Ron scoffed nearby, haphazardly holding onto the pint in his hand as he stared at Draco. "Are you mental? Harry and I have been Hermione's best friends since first year."

"So has he, technically." Draco gestured to Remus, who sat across a small, square table in the middle of their private room at a Gentlemen's Club, rented out for the night for the boys.

They had been drinking for hours, and when Draco and Ron came to a standstill playing wizard's chess, Sirius suggested a new, less boring, game. It was Neville's mild curiosity about the differences between Hermione and Mia that sparked the idea, and soon Remus and Harry faced off against one another in a game of who was the witch's *best* best friend.

"And a lot can change in eight years," Draco reminded Ron with a smirk.

"What is Mia's favourite gemstone?" Sirius asked, holding a set of questions written on cards that he had put together while Harry and Remus drank down several shots of tequila.

"Sapphire," Harry said proudly, "her birthstone."

Remus grinned smugly. "Aquamarine. Her birthstone."

"Really isn't fair that she gets two birthdays," Ron complained. "She doesn't even like getting presents."

"You're both wrong," Sirius said. "She loves emeralds because I refuse to buy them. What is Mia's favourite colour?"

"Red," Harry replied.

"Green," Remus said.

"You're both wrong again. She clearly loves Black," Sirius said and winked at them all.

Harry stood up and reached for the cards, stumbling only slightly. "Is that actually what it says?"

"Don't call into question my honour. Who was Mia's first kiss?"

Remus rolled his eyes and reached for his half-empty pint. "You're just asking questions all about you, you idiot. Why don't we see who knows *you* the best?"

Sirius scoffed, hand to his chest as he pretended to be offended. "Ask away, Moony my friend. I am an enigma. Nobody knows me completely."

Remus quirked his lips, and for some reason, the look sent a shiver of actual fear through Sirius. "Anyone here know who *Sirius's* first kiss was?"

"Moony . . ." Sirius warned his friend, eyes wide.

"Hermione?" Harry answered questioningly.

"Wrong!" Remus shouted, grinning. "Sirius Black first locked lips with none other than James Charlus Potter!"

Harry turned and stared at his godfather. "What?"

Ron and Neville's mouths fell open.

Draco snorted indignantly and sipped at his drink. "Were Potters on a two for one sale?"

"How . . . ? Why . . . ? How'd that even happen?" Harry asked.

"Where's the stripper?" Sirius questioned, looking around the room and eventually under the rug to distract from the situation. "I was promised a stripper."

Remus turned to Draco, who had orchestrated the majority of the night. "You heard the man, give him his stripper."

Draco grinned smugly and left the room only to return several minutes later, dimming the lights behind him as he joined his fellow wizards in a half circle of chairs and

sat down begrudgingly next to Ron, who was staring at the paper Muggle money in his hands, trying to figure out which denomination was which.

Music began to play through speakers installed in the corners of the room, and all eyes widened as a curvy, blond Muggle stepped in wearing an incredibly short, grey pleated skirt, a tightly-fit, white button down top beneath an equally tight grey jumper.

Every man was grinning save for Sirius, whose mouth fell open at the colours of the tie the woman was wearing: bronze and blue.

One look at Remus told him exactly what had happened. "Oh . . . that meddling, manipulative, brilliant witch," he said in awe at the sight of the Ravenclaw-clad Muggle stripper who sauntered close to him, swinging a leg over his lap, straddling his waist.

Sirius grimaced and turned his head away from her as though she were infected with Spattergroit.

Remus looked like he could barely breathe as he watched Sirius struggle not to accidentally touch the woman, who tried—with great enthusiasm—to dance for him. When she finally gave up, saying what a sweet and loyal man he was, she made her way over to the younger men in the room, eagerly accepting Ron's folded notes in the waistband of her blue knickers.

Sirius put his head in his hands and leant forward, laughing.

Remus laughed and patted him on the back. "You don't even want to *look* at her anymore, do you?"

Still chuckling into his palms as he kept his vision completely obscured, Sirius said, "My future bride is a Legilimens, what the fuck do you think?"

---

When the men all returned to Potter Manor, they found a note written in sloppy penmanship and stained with spilt firewhisky that read:

*Boys,  
Went dancing.*

Neville went home early, needing to start his internship the next morning with Professor Sprout. Harry, Ron, and Draco were sitting in separate large chairs in the drawing

room, having transfigured the sofa into individual seats so that Ron and Draco did not have to touch. All three were in a heated argument over the best way to brew a Hangover Potion, and Draco was getting increasingly irritated considering he apparently knew—*knew!*—that Harry and Ron were terrible at brewing.

Remus shook his head, shocked that the two Gryffindors were able to purposely goad the Slytherin into the argument without him knowing that they were faking it all for fun.

The flames in the fireplace turned bright green, and suddenly five drunk witches spilt out onto the floor, giggling as they struggled to stand. Mia was leaning heavily on Tonks, Astoria was desperately trying to support her sister's weight, and Ginny was unconscious, snoring on the rug.

"Harry, Draco, Ronald, Remus," Mia said as her heavy-lidded eyes stared at the men, "I've brought you back your brides."

Harry rushed to his fiancée, pushing sweaty clumps of red hair out of the way so he could make sure she was breathing. He cringed when he saw the puddle of drool she was creating between her and the carpet. "What's wrong with Ginny?"

"She's smashed out of her mind right now. We played a lot of drinking games."

Astoria let out a loud scoff of frustration and released Daphne into Ron's awaiting arms. She gracefully made her way toward Draco, tilting her head to the side so that he could kiss her cheek in greeting. She blushed when he pulled her down into his lap and began toying with the ends of her hair. She smiled at Draco, perching herself with poise on his thigh.

"How are you, pet?" he asked with a smirk.

"Perfectly fine," she said, clearly sober. "I know how to hold the small amount of liquor I consumed."

Daphne, on the other hand, looked to be attempting to fit herself and Ron in the same skin. He was desperately overpowered by the witch, evidently not at all prepared for her strength and willpower as she pushed him into the armchair behind him and made to straddle his waist.

"Uh . . . Daph?" Ron mumbled, his ears turning maroon as he looked over his witch's shoulder to see most everyone staring at him. "Daph!"

Daphne pulled away from him and covered his mouth with her palm. "Shh . . . don't let Mum see . . . I'll have to take another shot if she catches us!"

"You!" Tonks said, pointing at her husband when she finally realised where they were.

Remus looked taken back by the accusatory tone in his wife's voice. "What'd *I* do?"

"You," she said again, tripping several times as she made her way into his arms, clinging to his shirt for balance when she finally got there, "Remus Lupin, have been holding out on me!"

Almost instantly, Remus turned and looked at Mia. "What did you do?"

"We played drinking games where the girls asked me *a lot* of questions. Many details. I made them make a wand oath before we played so they can't talk about it."

Remus tensed uncomfortably. "How many details?"

Mia giggled. "Oh . . . so many."

Tonks attempted to climb Remus like a tree in order to put her lips on his ear as she whispered, far too loudly, "We're going home right now. Up against *all* the walls."

Remus groaned when everyone laughed. "Dora, in my defence, I'm no longer a teenager. My knees creak and pop."

"No excuses!" She pulled him toward the fireplace, knocking the bowl of Floo powder on top of a still-sleeping Ginny in the process.

Mia turned and grinned at Sirius, who was amusing himself by watching the chaos in front of him unfold. "Hello, love. Did you have fun tonight?"

He chuckled, reaching out and grabbing her by the hips and yanking her forward. She squealed at the motion, letting out a soft moan as he ground himself against her, his back to the rest of the occupants in the room. He leant forward and ran his tongue against the shell of her ear, whispering, "You're wicked."

"Am I?" Mia asked innocently. "Tell me, what's in fashion these days for Muggle strippers?"

Sirius chuckled. "I'm going to punish you for that."

Mia bit her bottom lip, trying to contain the grin that was threatening to break free. "I'm really looking forward to it."

## Chapter One Hundred Fifty-One

### *Sealed*

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*So close no matter how far  
Couldn't be much more from the heart  
Forever trusting who we are  
And nothing else matters  
Never opened myself this way  
Life is ours, we live it our way  
All these words I don't just say  
And nothing else matters*  
(Nothing Else Matters - Metallica)

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**June 21st, 1999**

Mia pried open her tired eyelids on the morning of her wedding as the light of dawn broke through the windows of her old bedroom. Despite living together, Molly insisted that the manor was large enough that Mia and Sirius could at least spend the night before the wedding apart—"for tradition." How the pureblood witch was so well-informed of Muggle wedding traditions, Mia would never know. Sirius had pouted, but Mia conceded to Molly's request, not wanting to fight about one more stupid wedding issue.

Unlike James and Lily's wedding, which had gone off without a single hitch, Mia and Sirius had struggled throughout the entire planning of their ceremony. Once the location had been decided, Molly predictably tried to commandeer everything else. She fought with Tilly on a daily basis over the menu, insisting that she be allowed to, at the very least, make the cake. She then begged to take Mia shopping for a gown, only to frown when they ended up at Twilfitt and Tattings to meet with Narcissa and Laurel as Mia was fitted for black ritual robes, similar to the ones Dorea used to own, instead of a large poofy white wedding gown.

When Molly suggested roses and daisies for the floral arrangements, Mia finally had to put her foot down.

*"Molly, I'm so sorry that almost everything is already planned," she said as politely as possible. "I'm sure Ginny and Daphne would love your help planning their weddings."*

She felt slightly guilty about throwing her friends under the bus, but she was willing to live with that guilt as long as Molly was no longer forcing her ideas into the plans that

Dorea had written out. Though Molly still was not happy with the idea of Ronald marrying a pureblood, society witch, she was clearly overjoyed at the prospect of having a wedding to distract her.

Now that everything was ready and all that was left was to actually get married, Mia was more than happy to remain in her old bedroom for a quiet lie-in before everyone arrived and things got hectic.

Unfortunately, a lie-in was apparently not on Sirius's mind as he sneaked into her bedroom and slipped beneath the sheets, pressing his naked body up against hers.

"You are supposed to be in your own room," Mia said with a smirk as she tried not to make a single movement when he lifted her thigh, his hardness seeking out her centre from behind her.

She was strangely reminded that it was rare for her and Sirius to ever sleep separately, and for good reason.

*"Hermione?" Remus whispered when he stumbled upon her sleeping in the hallway, wand gripped tightly in hand. "Hermione, are you okay?"*

*She blinked a few times, looking up at him. "Professor?"*

*"Hermione, is there a reason you're sitting outside of Sirius's bedroom?" he asked, poking his head inside the cracked opening of the door to see Sirius snuggled up on his bed, an arm slung over Crookshanks.*

*"I . . . I heard noises. He . . . He was shouting."*

*"Oh, I'm sorry, Hermione. He normally puts up Silencing Charms."*

*"Normally?" Her eyes widened. "This happens often?"*

*"He was kept in Azkaban for twelve years. That much exposure to dementors should have rendered him either completely insane or powerless. I hate to say it, but he's lucky to walk away with only nightmares and memories. I try to help when he lets me." He looked back in the bedroom and sighed. "He's a very stubborn man."*

Mia smiled, glad that Sirius was in her bed with her and not in his own if what he was left to face was something horrible like a nightmare reminding him of Azkaban, especially the day of their wedding.

Sirius pulled the hair away from her shoulder and kissed her skin, licking a trail up to her ear where he nibbled on her lobe, whispering, "When have I *ever* followed rules?" He surged inside of her, deep and hard like she wanted—always wanted.

Gasping, still sleepy and unprepared for the intrusion, she reached her arm back to grasp at the back of his neck. She moaned when his arms snaked around her waist, his left hand moving south as he rocked in and out of her.

When he sank his teeth into the place where her neck met her shoulder, she whimpered wantonly, feeling like a grazing gazelle that had been set upon by a mighty lion. His black hair brushed against her skin, and she smiled and amended her thoughts: *Panther, maybe*. Either way, he was all teeth and strength, overpowering any struggle she could put up, though the notion of struggling had not even occurred to her.

When he moved his left hand away from her clit to clutch at her hip in order to get better leverage as he thrust into her, Mia replaced his hand with her own. First, she teased herself, body shaking as the feel of him was overpowering, and then she reached further south to touch where they connected, moaning at the sensation.

"More," she said in a breathy voice. "Harder."

When he refused to comply, she growled. "Sirius . . . fuck me harder."

He chuckled softly, and she could feel the vibrations in his chest against her back. "Such language. Aren't you supposed to be a virginal bride, wrapped in white for me to deflower later?"

Mia laughed loudly. "I'll be *your* witch—experienced and wrapped in black."

"Aren't you always?" he asked, and finally relented to her needs, snapping his hips fast and hard, and panting against her neck.

Mia cried out when he hit a particular spot inside of her. "Sweet fucking . . . Sirius! There! Right there!"

Her body shattered, and her vision blurred as a tense pleasure washed over her. Sirius roared his own climax against her neck when her body squeezed his cock violently, milking him of his release.

"If . . ." She struggled to find a breath. "If you've left a mark on my neck, Sirius Black, I will hex you."

Sirius chuckled and slipped out of her body with a hiss through his teeth, rolling off of the bed quickly and reaching for his robe before she had a chance to find a mirror.

"I'll see you later, kitten." He winked at her and tried to leave the room.

From the other side of the door, Mia heard Harry say, "And *I'm* bad at Silencing Charms?"

"Learn a few things, did you?" Sirius asked in an amused tone.

Ginny laughed loudly and shoved Sirius into the hallway, taking his place. "Get lost, both of you. I have to help our *virginal* bride," she said sarcastically, "get wrapped in *black*." The redhead quirked her lips and shut the door behind her, effectively dismissing them both. "Ugh, Hermione, it smells like sex in here," she said, waving her hand in front of her face. "You know you're not supposed to consummate the marriage until *after* the ceremony, right?"

Mia chuckled and pulled herself out of bed, wrapping a thin, red bathrobe around her body. "Tell that to the wretched creature that sneaked into my room to defile me on the morning of my wedding."

"I'm sure Harry's doing just that," Ginny said with a grin. "Now get your arse into the bath. The other girls will be here soon."

Eventually, Luna, Laurel, and Alice made their way to Mia's bathroom, all sitting around the copper clawfoot tub discussing the events of the day. The witches, as per old traditions, had been chosen to bathe the bride and prepare her for her robes, which would be placed on her by family. While Ginny tended to Mia's hair and Laurel to her nails, Luna filled the tub with cloves ("It drives away negativity and blibbering humdingers."), lemon oil, ("To purify the body and soul."), and daffodil petals ("They're traditional," Luna insisted, "for fertility.").

"I feel like a cup of tea," Mia said with a laugh, and Luna smiled at her.

Alice sat by, watching everything and telling old stories about Mia and Sirius growing up together. Ginny replied by telling everyone what she and Harry had almost walked in on earlier. "Oh, that's nothing," Alice said. "By the time we all graduated Hogwarts, I think every Gryffindor in our year had walked in on the pair of them. It was practically a rite of passage. Honestly, I don't know how Remus lived with you both."

Once she was dried, Mia kissed Alice, Ginny, Laurel, and Luna on their cheeks and exchanged their company for Narcissa, Tonks, and Andromeda.

"Why," Narcissa wondered, pausing before continuing, "does it smell like lemons and cloves in here?"

Tonks snorted. "I imagine it's to cover up the stench of Sirius."

"Harry told you?" Mia asked.

"Remus did. Your deviant little groom got a good scolding from Molly, and my dashing husband had to break it up before she hexed him. Speaking of spells, though, Aunt Cissa, you're best at charms. You should get that mark on her neck off."

Narcissa frowned at the bite-shaped bruise. "Something is severely wrong with that man. And perhaps something is equally wrong with you for indulging him."

The bodice of Mia's robes was etched in a subtle silver and embroidered in a deep blood-red. The bust dipped strikingly low, but Andromeda put a Sticking Charm in place to keep everything covered. Her Pack Mark, however, was on full display, as were both of her upper body tattoos. The back of the robes was cut to expose her skin, and the sleeves that began at her shoulders opened up briefly around her upper arms, only to close again above her elbow with silver stitching, leaving the words of the House of Potter on display.

"You'll be barefoot?" Andromeda asked.

"Of course," Mia answered as though offended.

Narcissa grinned proudly. "Despite the status that your pureblood adoption has given you, you'll still be seen as a Muggle-born to the populace. I think that you bringing back these beautiful old traditions will do a world of good in uniting everyone." She toyed with Mia's curls, wrapping them around her wand to set the shape and then letting them fall gently down the bride's back.

"Thank you, Cissa." Mia smiled at her. "Thank you all for being here."

There was a soft knock at the door. "Is it safe to come in?"

"Enter if you dare," Tonks teased.

"Wow." Remus gasped as he entered, stopping to kiss his wife before making his way to the bride, surrounded on either side by her cousins. "Mia, you look . . ."

She grinned at him. "Think he'll faint?"

Remus laughed, looking just a bit misty-eyed. "I think he's certain to make a fool of himself at the sight of you, yes."

"Good."

"We'll leave you two alone," Tonks said, kissing Remus's cheek and hugging Mia tightly before leading her mother and aunt through the bedroom door, shutting it closed behind them.

Mia flung herself into his arms and held on tight.

"You're still mine," he said softly.

She could feel his breath on her Pack Mark. Pulling back, she smiled as his eyes reflected gold in the light, indicating the wolf within him reaching out for her. Mia drank in the possessive words and smiled as she remembered the first time she heard the sentiment from him.

*"You're mine too, you know. You belong to me. It's like . . . if I were an alpha wolf, you'd be my beta."*

*Mia chuckled, calming down at his words, always happy when he referenced his wolf without words of self-defamation. "What about Sirius, James, and Peter?"*

*"They're in the pack too, but you're . . . I don't know. Is there a word that means soul mate but doesn't?"*

*"Ever the poet." Mia beamed up at him. "You're thinking of a kindred spirit."*

*"Yeah. You're mine. It's like you're my heart, but not . . . my soul. Does that make sense?"*

"You're still mine, Remus. Both of us are. Pack." She chastely kissed away his frown when he looked guilty. "Oh, stop being such a Muggle," she teased him, chuckling when he bristled at the insult. "Not everyone will understand how we work, Remus. But we do, Sirius and Tonks do, and everyone that matters does. I'm not going anywhere, but it's okay if you want to look a little sad over giving me away."

Remus sighed in obvious relief. "I just . . . You're sealing your Soul Bond today. That's more important than the Pack Bond."

"But not less essential. To *both* Sirius and me," she said, knowing that Remus was likely feeling equally pushed aside over the prospect of losing them both. "Did you have this same talk with him?"

Scoffing, he rolled his eyes. "I actually tried. I was told by your doting husband-to-be that if I was jealous he'd be happy to take me in a broom cupboard and show me how much he still loved me. Arsehole."

Mia threw her head back and laughed, not wanting to make him even more anxious by admitting how hot she thought that would be. "I love you, Remus. Thank you for doing this."

Remus kissed her forehead. "No one else is giving you away but me. You're mine to give."

Another knock at the door came, and Harry, Ron, and Draco entered. They were strangely well-behaved, which she assumed was for her benefit only. No one dared to mess with a witch on her wedding day.

"Wow," Harry said with a bright smile, his eyes sparkling with what she hoped would not be tears. If Harry cried, she was sure to completely lose it. "Hermione, you're beautiful."

Ron swallowed as he stared at her robes. "Will Daphne be wearing something like that at our wedding?" he asked, looking hopeful.

"Not with *your* mother involved," Draco said. "I see seven layers of white lace and chiffon in your future, Weasley. Daphne will look like a bloody cake when she reaches the end of the aisle. Then again, you're a fan of cake."

Ron narrowed his eyes at his future brother-in-law.

"Careful," Mia teased. "Keep this up and people are going to start to think the two of you actually like one another."

They both blanched at the thought.

Harry nervously ran a hand through his hair and adjusted his dress robes. "We have some things for you," he said and reached into the pocket of his robes, pulling out a familiar piece of jewellery and taking her wrist in his free hand. "This is for you."

"Harry, this is Ginny's bracelet. I gave this to her," she said as he clasped it.

He smiled at her. "Borrowed. Something borrowed."

Mia tried to blink away the forming tears.

Draco looked to each of the wizards in the room and shook his head in clear disapproval as he pulled a silk handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her. "Savages," he said under his breath as Mia thanked him with a smile and dabbed at her eyes.

"I believe this goes in your shoe," Remus said with a smirk and handed over a shiny Sickel. "But it seems you're not wearing any."

Mia accepted the coin gratefully, slipping it into a pocket instead. "I assume Sirius has taken care of the blue once more?"

"He's a sucker for tradition," Remus said sarcastically.

"And naturally, I took care of the new." Draco brandished a small, black velvet box, opening it to reveal a silver-chained necklace with a goblin-made pendant hanging at the

end. When Mia gasped at the Black family crest engraved on it, Draco flipped the pendant to show the Potter family crest on the opposite side. When touched, the chain and pendant turned from silver to gold.

"It's beautiful, Draco, thank you." She pulled her hair to one side of her neck as the Slytherin slipped the necklace around her. As he clasped it, she looked at Ron with a grin. "Are you old, then?"

"I uh . . . didn't know what to give you, really, but Mum found this," he said, pulling a long, red ribbon from his pockets. At the end of it was a simply stitched letter "G". Mia's breath caught in her throat at the sight of it. "When we went on the hunt, you left behind a bunch of books at the Burrow. Mum found this in one of them. I told her I remembered you used to use it as a bookmark way back in—"

"First year," Mia whispered as she reached out to touch it. "This . . . It belonged to my mum. My Muggle mother. She gave me about twenty of them when I went off to Hogwarts. Said that I'd be reading so many books I would need to keep track. I thought I'd lost them all over the years," she admitted, pulling Ron into a tight hug. "Thank you."

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Sirius watched as Harry, Draco, and Ron made their way across the grounds to join the circle beneath the orchards. He smiled at them all, glad when they jumped right into place rather than dawdled.

Ron made his way to Daphne's side with a smile, cagily avoiding Hyperion's gaze as he stood beside his daughter with Laurel on his arm. Astoria, standing next to her mother, smiled sweetly as Draco approached to kiss her cheeks in greeting before doing the same to his mother as he stepped between them.

Andromeda and Tonks were next to Narcissa, both witches were being entertained as Luna explained to Theo Nott how she would like to follow in her mother's family tradition by wedding in the nude. The Slytherin did not even bat an eye at the suggestion of his future bride, though he did manage to contain his grin to something somewhat appropriate. Next to Luna, Neville and Hannah were discussing their own future, both quite adamant about the idea of getting married while fully clothed, which seemed to please

both Frank and Alice, who stood beside them, chuckling at the pink cheeks their son was sporting.

Kingsley stood between Frank and Minerva, who chatted with Molly, though he all but ignored the witches in favour of Bill and Fleur Weasley, discussing the latest changes in werewolf rights. Next to Fleur, Charlie, Fred, and George were attempting to weasel out of Percy the name of his new girlfriend, whom he had not invited to the wedding, as it was too soon in their relationship to expose the poor girl to the discomfort she would surely feel around his family. Ginny was egging them on but broke away when Harry took his place between her and Ron.

"All set?" Ginny asked him.

Harry dipped his head, casting a reassuring glance at Sirius that was appreciated. "Can't believe this is going to be *us* soon."

Ginny winked at him. "I'm all for eloping if you are."

Harry looked at her with a level of love and devotion that almost had Sirius bursting into laughter. "You're perfect."

Arthur smiled, having overheard the conversation, and patted Sirius on the back. "Let's not tell Molly about that just yet."

"I don't blame them," Sirius muttered, fidgeting with his dress robes until he eventually shrugged out of them. Ignoring both Andromeda and Narcissa's objections, he removed the tight-fit shirt as well and tossed it to Harry. Once feeling a bit less constricted, he pulled the robes back on and left them hanging open, exposing his chest.

"She'll like it better this way," he insisted as Arthur stared at him.

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"Are you nervous?" Remus asked Mia as they stood together at the end of the long red carpet that led down toward the circle awaiting them, lined with floating jars filled with bluebell flames. Beyond the circle, Tilly and Dobby were taking care to make sure Teddy did not attempt to handle baby Victoire too roughly.

"Nervous about marrying Sirius?" Mia asked, grinning. "Were you nervous about marrying Tonks?"

Remus shook his head. "Not once I decided that it would happen. Granted, with the Mate Bond already sealed, the wedding was really just for show. Did I ever tell you that *you're* the reason I finally did it? That I finally got over my issues and just . . . ran to her."

"No, but I'd love to hear it," she said with a smile as they began their walk toward the circle, ignoring the many eyes that turned their way.

"I thought I'd screwed up, you know. When Sirius went through the veil, I thought something had happened, and the future was broken. I figured Tonks would be better off without me, and I spent the better part of a year fighting her advances. And then Dumbledore died, and I found you up at the Astronomy Tower."

"I remember. I told you that you should be with your mate."

He nodded, squeezing her hand. "I figured that I'd spent a year trying to make my own decisions and I screwed it all up. I was going to listen to anything you had to say from that point forward. Not only that, but I remembered that night. You showed it to me in the Pensieve. I didn't understand because I thought the future had been ruined, but that memory gave me hope, and I . . . I decided I *liked* hope."

"I like hope, too," Mia said softly.

Just then, Sirius broke away from the centre of the circle, and all of the guests gasped at the sight, some more than likely worried that he was making a run for it. Mia braced herself at his speed, eyes wide, but she laughed when he tore her out of Remus's gentle grip, spinning her around in his arms and kissing her thoroughly.

*"I know I've only said it casually, and never with the intention you deserve." He took in a slow and deep breath and then stared into her eyes. "But . . . I love you. It's bloody terrifying and painful," Sirius said, putting a hand over his bare skin where her name was visibly inked into him over his heart—a drunken joke turned permanent romantic gesture. "And most days when I look at you, I feel like my chest will cave in on me unless I say something, but I still usually choose not to say anything."*

*"Why?" she asked with a frown, tracing the edges of his lips with her finger, smiling softly when he paused to kiss the tip.*

*"Stubborn pride?" Sirius suggested.*

*"I love you too, Sirius."*

*"More than Remus?" he inquired in a light, teasing tone.*

*"Prat." Mia rolled her eyes, slapping his chest.*

"Merlin, you two are dramatic," Remus muttered, shaking his head in quiet laughter as they engaged in an awkwardly intense snogging session in the middle of the orchards, halfway down the aisle.

After at least half a minute, and when Sirius's hands had relocated to Mia's backside, Remus loudly cleared his throat. "Can we?"

Sirius grinned as he pulled away. "Couldn't help myself. Look at her." He kissed her swollen lips once more and reached for his wand. "One thing, though."

Frowning, Mia asked, "What's wrong?"

Sirius said nothing as he touched the tip of his wand to her neck, whispering, "*Finite*," and revealing the love bite he had placed there earlier that morning. He waggled his eyebrows at her and then turned, skipping back toward the circle.

Mia sighed irritably. "How bad is it?"

Remus looked at her neck. "Pretty obvious."

"Was it just me, or was he not wearing a shirt?"

"Still time to change your mind," he jokingly offered.

Mia chose to laugh, and she wrapped her hand around Remus's arm. "Never."

When the circle parted to allow them inside, Mia glared at Sirius. "Prat."

"Ladies and gentlemen," Arthur began, grinning at the annoyed look on Mia's face. "We are gathered here today to celebrate the marriage of these two wonderful people. Sirius Black and Hermione Potter come today to bind their lives and their magic together, to seal a Soul Bond that has withstood the test of time—" Several people chuckled. "—a love that has, quite literally, spanned more than three decades, two wars, and several lifetimes of difficult choices that have brought them here to this moment.

"Fortunately, for many of us, we've been able to watch their love grow and see the wonder that they bring out in each other. I think I can speak for everyone when I say that we are so very happy to be here, and we are thrilled that you both wish to share this beautiful day with us all, your family and friends. Who presents this witch?"

Remus stepped forward, holding his head high and proud. "I do," he said firmly, gently brushing his thumb over Mia's knuckles as her fingers held onto his arm. "She's always been mine to give." He pulled both of Mia's hands into his, kissing the inside of her wrists before reaching out for Sirius's hand, and giving one best friend over to the other.

Arthur leant forward, tying Sirius and Mia's hands together with a golden cord before asking, "Does this couple come today with the blessings of their Houses?"

Immediately Harry and Tonks stepped forward, each with a different coloured cord in their hand.

"I . . . *Nymphadora* Lupin—" Several people in the circle had a chuckle at Tonks's expense, much to the annoyance of Andromeda. "—blood cousin of Sirius Black and chosen representative of our family, give my blessing for my cousin to forever bind the House of Potter to the House of Black." She stepped forward, grinning as she tied the black cord in her hand around Sirius's wrist and then secured it to Mia's.

Harry stepped up and spoke. "I, Harry Potter, bonded brother of Hermione Potter, give my blessing for my sister to forever bind the House of Black to the House of Potter." He then tied the red cord in his hand around Mia's wrist and secured the opposite end to Sirius's, stopping only to kiss Hermione's cheek.

"Sirius and Mia, these cords are symbolic of the vows you will each take, tying you to the same House, uniting your families as friends and allies from this moment forward, and in the process binding together your hearts and your magic, sealing the Soul Bond that has been prepared and provoked for many years. As your hands have been bound together, so shall the rest of your lives be bound together. Do you each come here this day of your own free will?" Arthur asked.

"We do," they said together.

"Do you swear upon your magic to be faithful partners throughout your lives?"

"We do."

"Do you swear upon your magic to establish between yourselves a lifelong friendship?"

"We do."

"Do you swear upon your magic to love one another without reservation?"

"We do."

"Do you swear upon your magic to stand by one another, in sickness and health, in plenty and in want, in times of joy and sorrow, in years of peace and in war?"

"No," Sirius blurted out. "No more sorrow. No more war."

"Hermione Potter," Arthur said with a smile. "Turn to your new Lord Husband and make your vow."

"I, Hermione Potter, give to you, Sirius Black, my love, my friendship, my support, and my protection. I take your name as my own and uphold it with honour and respect. I pledge to you our firstborn child to serve as your heir, who will carry on the legacy of our Houses so that our courage and our craft will always be pure." She smiled as she spoke their combined House words, noting that Narcissa and Andromeda were dabbing at the tears in their eyes. "I willingly bind myself to you until death separates us, when our souls will wait for one another in the afterlife to be united once again. I swear this vow upon my magic. *Suscipiam illud vinculum.*"

The red cord around her wrist turned silver.

Mia smiled and mouthed, *I love you.*

Sirius sighed, wondering how in the hell he ended up so lucky.

"Sirius Black, turn to your new Lady Wife and make your vow."

"I, Sirius Black, give to you, Hermione Potter, my love, my friendship, my support, and my protection, though you'll hardly need it," he said with a sly grin. "I willingly bind our Houses together knowing that you will help me cleanse my own of all darkness, and reignite the magic of yours. I pledge to you my wand to serve and defend you, and my life to be given for any purpose you have need, to give you as many children as your heart desires, and to raise them to know that our courage and craft will always be pure. I willingly bind myself to you until death separates us, when our souls will wait for one another in the afterlife to be united once again. I swear this vow upon my magic. *Suscipiam illud vinculum.*"

The black cord around his wrist turned silver, intertwining with the single gold cord wrapped between them.

Mia and Sirius gasped simultaneously as the physical cords tying them together glowed, physically representing the Soul Bond between them sealing itself together. Sirius could feel as magic seeped inside the thread, filling every break, tear, hole, and gap.

The bond briefly felt as though it were on fire, like metal being put into a forge to be reshaped, only to be plunged into water a moment later, solid as unbreakable steel. Their hearts beat rapidly—and in sync—as the magic settled over them.

"Holy shit," Sirius whispered, his skin still vibrating as he stared at Mia.

She was shaking, too, but she smirked at his words and muttered, "Poet."

Arthur laughed at the couple and joyfully announced, "I now declare you bonded for life!"

Unlike the way he kissed her halfway down the aisle, Sirius stepped forward gently, reverently. He remembered the moment he opened his eyes after being pulled back from the veil, fully expecting to meet his maker, only to be faced with the sight of chocolate eyes—now once again amber—as they stared down at him with worry. The worries were long gone, he realised, and all there was left to do was live.

So he kissed her with that in mind.

When he pulled away, deaf to the sounds of cheers around them, he smiled at the sight of a gentle blush on her skin.

"One day you won't do that anymore," he whispered, touching her cheek.

Raising a curious brow, she asked, "Do what?"

"Be embarrassed about how I make you feel."

Mia laughed, the sound sweet and light and full of endless possibilities.

Sirius grinned and kissed her again, drinking in the taste of her: his witch, his wife.

*She tasted how firewhisky felt.*

# EPILOGUE

## Part One

### *Family*

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*You're gonna fly with every dream you chase  
You're gonna cry, but know that that's okay  
Sometimes life's not fair, but if you hang in there  
You're gonna see that sometimes bad is good  
We just have to believe things work out like they should  
Life has no guarantees, but always loved by me  
(You're Gonna Be - Reba McEntire)*

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**June 21st, 1999**

With the ceremony over, everyone went inside to the ballroom that had been opened for the first time in over thirty years; Dorea and Charlus had rarely used it. Sirius and Mia walked in to the sound of applause as guests grinned at the newlyweds. Though the ceremony itself had been small, the reception was open to everyone, and soon Wizengamot members and old Hogwarts professors graced Potter Manor, now considered the Noble and Most Ancient House of *Black* since Harry had decided to rebuild the cottage in Godric's Hollow so he and Ginny could move in once *they* were married.

Round tables were set all around the room, covered in black tablecloths with red accents. Delicious food prepared by Tilly was served on silver plates with gold chargers. Each charmed centrepiece, provided by Fred and George, was a large hourglass that poured champagne instead of sand through the middle. Beautiful vases of pink lilies decorated the room. While family members—which included the Greengrasses, Malfoys, and Weasleys—sat at the large tables near the front, the high table was reserved for Pack.

Mia leant over Sirius to ask Harry, "How long did he wait before he took the shirt off?"

Ginny smirked. "He did it just as the boys re-joined the circle."

"Shit." Mia reached into a small bag that she had stored in the pocket of her robes, withdrawing a few coins and passing them down the table to the redhead. "I was sure he would have it off before the circle even formed."

Sirius, in mock protest over being used as a prop for a bet between witches, stood up and took Remus's hand, predictably dragging his protesting friend onto the dance floor.

Mia and Tonks sat side-by-side watching in amusement.

Tonks flung up a Muffliato to prevent eavesdropping. "Can I tell you a secret?"

Mia's eyes widened expectantly, and a grin broke out across her face. "You're . . . ?"

Tonks smiled, bobbed her head, and then winced anxiously. "How do you think he'll take it?"

Mia looked over at Remus, who finally had given up the struggle, dancing with Sirius in earnest. Both men seemed to be confused as to who was leading.

"I think that even if he freaks out, he'll have us all to fall back on and remind him of how great family is."

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### **October 31st, 1999**

Harry and Ginny had a surprise wedding at Potter Manor one weekend in late August. They told their family and friends that neither wanted the publicity of a large wedding—especially so soon after the first anniversary of the end of the war—but they did not want to leave everyone out of their special day by eloping.

Molly had been a bit put out that she was not allowed to plan a great big celebration, but she was thrilled to officially welcome Harry into the family. Everyone was happy that Ginny was able to enjoy the small celebration that they *did* have because, up until days before the wedding, she apparently had caught Tonks's bout of "stomach flu."

It turned out that Harry, like his father before him, could not only be consistent in forgetting Silencing Charms when in the heat of the moment but *other* important spells as well. That and, despite Harry's brief status as a Potions prodigy during sixth year, neither he nor Ginny were adequate enough at brewing to make a Contraceptive Potion.

Mia teased Ginny and Harry relentlessly for months until she woke up Halloween morning with a new reason to dislike the thirty-first of October: morning sickness.

Sirius brought her ginger tea for her stomach and peppered her face with kisses, speaking endlessly of her brilliance before he sent a hasty Patronus off to Remus and Harry, allowing the two to duel over the title of godfather.

Remus, overjoyed for his friends and finally having calmed down over the news that he, too, would be expecting a new arrival, relinquished the position of godfather to Harry, who eagerly accepted it.

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### **December 5th, 1999**

Much to Hyperion and Laurel's annoyance, their eldest daughter married the youngest Weasley son in the orchards of the Burrow.

Draco's prediction had come to pass: instead of ritual robes such as Mia had worn, Daphne was covered by layers of white that Molly was pleased to note puffed out a good metre all the way around.

Ron, back in training to become an Auror and passing his exams on his own merit, wore proper dress robes and stood with Harry by his side.

Mia, followed by Ginny and Astoria, led the way for Daphne down the aisle where she met her groom, and the two were joyfully bound together.

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### **January 1st, 2000**

The pack rang in the New Year together at St Mungo's when, after going into labour and refusing to allow Andromeda and Narcissa to deliver her second child, Tonks was ushered to the hospital by an achy Mia and Ginny, both largely pregnant and fussing over their shared pains.

Hope Hermione Lupin came into the world with sandy blond hair that did not change.

Remus held his daughter in his arms with Teddy on his lap and declared that it had all been worth it: Greyback's original attack, thirty-five years of lycanthropy, over four-hundred full moons, and two wars. Every scar on his body and life was worth it at that moment.

Sirius and Narcissa picked a fight with one another outside Tonks's hospital room when they could not agree if godfather or godmother would hold the baby first. It didn't matter, of course, as Remus passed the baby into Mia's waiting arms, and she grinned smugly.

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### **April 15th, 2000**

Unlike Tonks's labour with Hope, when Ginny started having contractions, she was stuck at Shell Cottage, surrounded by witches and a Floo Network that had been temporarily closed for repairs. Patronuses were sent across Wizarding Britain and soon, the entire Weasley clan, followed in by the pack, were at Bill and Fleur's door.

Tilly was there to watch over Teddy, Victoire, and Hope, while Dobby looked on with wide, anxious eyes, overly eager to welcome in the first Potter baby born in over nineteen years.

When complications arose and Molly kicked everyone out except for Harry, the large family sat outside of the small cottage, hands gripping tightly as they waited for news.

"It's a boy!" Harry shouted as he stepped through the door, announcing the birth of his son to an expectant crowd of family and friends. "Hermione, Ron," he called to his two best friends and godparents of his heir and invited them in to see the baby first, followed behind by Arthur and Sirius, who were the closest thing to fathers that Harry had.

Mia nervously stood in the corner while the baby passed from Molly to Arthur to Ron and eventually to Sirius, who grinned at the mop of hair that was almost as black as Harry's, just as messy certainly, but with a tinge of red marking him a Weasley.

"James Sirius Potter," Harry named his son proudly, and Sirius blinked away tears before gently placing the child in Mia's waiting arms.

Her bottom lip quivered; unlike her husband, she did nothing to stop the flow of tears that cascaded down her cheeks as she smiled down at the little boy in her arms. She brushed her fingers over his mess of hair, unsure if her heart was breaking all over again or being permanently repaired.

Placing her lips gently against the baby's forehead, she whispered, "Hi, Jamie."

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**July 12th, 2000**

Summer had been busy.

Between the second year anniversary of the end of the war, attending Neville and Hannah's small wedding ceremony in a church outside Godric's Hollow, followed by Theo and Luna's *very traditional* ceremony in the middle of the Forbidden Forest (unknown to Minerva), Mia and Sirius were so exhausted that they did not even bother celebrating their first wedding anniversary.

After a much-needed game of Quidditch, Sirius, Remus, and Harry found Mia lying in bed with a sleeping Teddy curled up against her side, his hair a sandy blond to match his sister's, and a cooing Jamie in her arms, perched perfectly on her swollen stomach.

"I think you both have been replaced," Sirius said to Remus and Harry with a smug grin.

Mia looked up at her boys and chuckled as she played with a random curl on Teddy's head. "Give me another week and I'll have a miniature Sirius to complete my set. Younger, cuter, sweeter versions of all of you. I can start from scratch."

Her miniature Sirius surprised them all by arriving late that same night, black hair and grey eyes like his father's. The couple lay in bed, exhausted despite the surprisingly quick birth, their newborn son sleeping between them.

"Leo," Sirius suggested, "or Rigel."

Mia shook her head. "Regulus. Regulus Charlus Black."

Sirius closed his eyes, sighed in what felt like closure, and kissed her forehead in gratitude.

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**August 20th, 2000**

"This is obscene," Ron stated as he sat next to Harry, watching Astoria marry Draco Malfoy at the newly finished manor in Wiltshire.

Despite being smaller than the original Malfoy Manor, the home Draco built on the freshly cleansed property was larger than Potter Manor, with a ballroom twice as big. The new mansion had been constructed a few miles away from the Malfoy Children's Home. He could properly monitor the care of the orphans while still keeping a bit of a private life for himself, Narcissa, and now Astoria, who was in charge of the management of the orphanage and ran the place quite well.

Draped in a gown that looked to be constructed of actual emeralds and diamonds, Astoria met Draco at the end of the aisle. She stood beside Daphne and Mia, who happily wore dark green, opposite Sirius, who stood beside Draco with Theo next to him. He was aching to get out of the colour as though it were staining his very soul. He did not complain, though, having been told to be a good example for Teddy, who stood near Sirius's feet in tiny dress robes, his hair stuck on Draco's shade of silvery-blond, which just made Narcissa cry all the harder, the prospect of grandchildren seeming nearly in sight.

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**July 28th, 2002**

When Scorpius Hyperion Malfoy was born on the second of September, 2001, Draco lost fifty Galleons to a gloating Mia, who told him that his son would grow up with a Potter and a Weasley in tow.

Thankfully, Astoria had been pregnant months before Ginny and Daphne, so the prospect of more "Golden Children" as the media—apart from the *Daily Prophet*—had taken to calling Harry, Ron, and Mia's children, did not overshadow the birth of the Malfoy heir.

"I'm just saying—"

"You named your son *Regulus*," Harry pointed out, and Mia crinkled her nose at him. "You didn't give Malfoy hardly this much trouble when he named his kid *Scorpius*."

Mia huffed indignantly. "You leave my godson alone."

A head of dark auburn hair peeked from around the corner, followed by a matching head of hair that quickly changed to honey-brown. "Are you talking about us, Aunt Mia?" a four-year-old Teddy asked, holding onto Jamie's hand.

Mia smiled at the boys. "No, I'm talking about Scorpius."

"Brother!" Jamie yelled. "Aunt 'Mione, you see my brother?"

"I did, sweetie." She knelt down and pulled Jamie into her arms. "He looks just like Daddy, doesn't he?"

"Daddy's eyes. Nana Lily's eyes."

Mia nodded and kissed the boy on his forehead. "You're so smart."

"His name is Albus Severus."

Harry grinned at his son and then turned to smirk at a cringing Mia. "You'll get over it."

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### **May 3rd, 2007**

"You okay, kitten?" Sirius asked, reaching up to feel Mia's forehead. "You're looking a little green."

"Fine, just tired from the full moon last night," she said, not yet ready to tell him that she was pregnant again. Looking around, she noticed that there were shockingly no children underfoot. "Where are the kids?"

It had been the first Memorial Gala that they all missed due to the full moon falling on the anniversary of the final battle. Instead of some big to-do at Hogwarts, the pack spent the night together at the Lycanthrope Sanctuary, while their growing brood had one of their monthly slumber parties at the manor. Ginny and Tonks drank wine and let Tilly unabashedly feed sweets and cakes to their children.

"Out in the orchards," Sirius told her. "Don't worry, Tilly and Dobby are with them, and I made sure the wards around the river were secure."

After Regulus had nearly drowned in an unfortunate accident, only to be saved by the quick thinking of Teddy and Victoire, Mia had insisted that magical barriers be erected all around the manor.

"You off to work?" she asked him, and he silently confirmed that he was. "Before I forget, I don't think it's smart to bring Reggie to the shop with you anymore."

Sirius whined, "He loves watching me work on the bikes, though."

Mia kissed his pouting lips. "I know, love, but he's displaying accidental magic more and more these days, and we've talked about this. You bought a *Muggle* motorbike shop. Where *Muggles* are the majority of your customer base. I'm not going to have a situation like Ron and Daphne got in when Rose accidentally set a clothing rack on fire in the middle of a shopping centre."

"Fine," Sirius grumbled, "but *you* have to be the bad guy and be the one to tell him."

Mia rolled her eyes. "Have a good day—Oh, remember my shift at St Mungo's changes next Tuesday, and then there's the Wizengamot meeting on Wednesday and—" She stopped speaking when a silvery Patronus flew in through the window.

The large dragon perched itself on the nearby table, and when its mouth opened, Draco's voice spoke: "*If you have a few minutes to spare, I'd like for you both to come down to the orphanage.*"

"I don't like that tone," Mia said looking up at Sirius.

"I can open the shop an hour late." He tapped his wand on a charmed set of keys to the shop, triggered to magically adjust the sign out front when hours needed to be changed due to family emergencies.

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"Aunt Hermione!" A red-headed boy launched himself into her arms the moment she and Sirius stepped out of the fireplace and into the Malfoy Children's Home.

Mia held him tightly and kissed his head. "Hugo, where's Uncle Draco?"

"Upstairs with Aunt Tori," he answered. "There was a splosion."

"An explosion?" Mia's eyes widened in shock, wondering why Draco had not sounded more worried. As a Healer, she expected to be called in by Draco—and had been often over the years—when there were accidents at the orphanage.

"Is everything all right, Daphne?" Sirius asked as Hugo's mother came to fetch him from Mia's arms, five-year-olds Rose and Scorpius lingering behind her.

Daphne nodded as she pulled Hugo into her arms. "One of the kids had a bit of an accident. We had some visitors stop by to meet with some of the kids and . . . no one decided to meet with her for a second interview. She got upset, and then a little boy was mean, and she shattered some of the windows in the house. I've never seen anything like it."

"Merlin," Mia gasped. "Is everyone okay?"

"No one was hurt, just a little scared," Daphne answered. "Tori and Draco are sitting with her right now. You can go on up."

Sirius and Mia blinked curiously at the blonde but began their way toward the stairs, followed by an anxious-looking Scorpius.

"Uncle Sirius? She's not going to be in trouble, is she?"

"Course not, Scorp," Sirius told his young godson, patting the boy on his head. "No little witches get sent to Azkaban."

"And if she does, you'll break her out, right?" Scorpius asked nervously, clutching a stuffed dragon tightly in his small hands.

Sirius grinned at the boy's question and bobbed his head before following Mia up the stairs.

Draco was standing outside his office, waiting for them. "I'm glad you could come."

"What's going on?" Mia asked him. "Daphne said a little girl showed accidental magic and broke all the windows?"

"I was at home preparing for the meeting next week when Tori sent me a Patronus," he told her. "She's a little thing, too. Same age as Scorp, Rose, and Albus."

Sirius's eyes widened. "And she blew out all the windows? That's *some* accidental magic. Who is she?"

"Just another child without parents. She got here a few weeks ago and hasn't so much as spoken to anyone except for Scorpius and me. Her father had blond hair. From the information Potter was able to get from the Muggles, we've placed him as a half-blood wizard from France. Her mother was a Muggle. They died in a boat crash about three years ago. She was with the mother's second cousin or something when it happened. The girl dropped her off at an orphanage when she started showing signs of magic and the family

went mental. She had been in the Muggle system for a few years before Aurors caught wind, and Weasley brought her here."

"Poor thing." Mia frowned, clutching her hand to her chest. "What can we do? Is she injured? Does she need a Healer?"

Draco shook his head as he opened his office door. "Just . . . I thought of you . . ."

Astoria smiled at Mia and Sirius and whispered to a small girl who had her head buried in her arms. "Sweetie, I want you to meet some friends of ours. This is Mr and Mrs Black. They're Draco's cousins."

Mia knelt down to get on the girl's level and Sirius was right behind her. When the child turned around, she struggled to contain a gasp as she was met with a pair of grey eyes and a head full of long black hair. "It's nice to meet you."

The girl frowned nervously at Mia before her focus fell on Sirius. He smiled at her and then stepped out of the room quickly only to return moments later as Padfoot, large tongue lolling out of the side of his mouth.

"Puppy!" the girl squealed with delight, all signs of worry gone from her face as she wrapped her arms around the dog—like most children did at the sight of Padfoot—and giggled when he licked her face.

Mia stood and looked from Draco to Astoria. "I take it you're suggesting something?"

"She would fit in with little Regulus," Astoria whispered. "I think it would be good for her to not stand out."

Draco smirked at Mia. "And no one's more familiar with magical adoption than you, Granger."

"Black," she corrected him out of habit.

"Potter," he said, settling on one of her many names.

"What's *her* name?" she asked impatiently.

Astoria grinned excitedly. "That's the best part. It's like fate."

Pursing her lips, Mia sighed. "Fate and I have an on again off again kind of relationship."

"Carina," Draco said to the little girl, "do you want to take the dog downstairs and see if he'll play fetch outside? I bet Scorpius would like to play, too."

The girl nodded, looking brightly up at the adults, and she pulled Padfoot gently by the ear and led him out of the room.

"Carina?" Mia asked, eyes wide.

"Constellation name," Draco said knowingly.

"Not just that," Mia laughed at the coincidence—at fate. "The constellation Carina contains the star Canopus. It's the *second* brightest in the sky."

"What's the first?" Astoria asked.

Mia and Draco shared a grin. "Sirius."

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### June 10th, 2007

"This is a very special necklace," Mia said as she handed it to Regulus, who observed each side of the pendant with interest, noting both the Potter and Black family crests. "Draco gave it to me the day I married your father."

The seven-year-old nodded thoughtfully, looking focused as he was likely trying to remember what his parents had told him to say to Carina. He had taken to her immediately, tugging on her hair the same way he did with Hope. The way he *tried* to do once with Lily before Ginny had told him that unless you were siblings, pulling on a girl's hair meant you wanted to kiss them.

But Carina was different.

She had been living with them for weeks, and, despite Tilly tucking her in her own bed in the room that used to belong to Mia, she crawled out each and every night, finding her way into Regulus's room and tucking herself in beside him. When Teddy, Hope, Jamie, and Albus spent the night a week earlier, the adults woke early the next morning to find all of their children piled together in one large bed, curled around Carina.

It was that night that Sirius and Mia had taken Regulus aside and told them of their plan to adopt her.

Regulus stepped forward, trying to appear formal, but his stark resemblance to his father made that nearly impossible as far as Mia was concerned. He looped the necklace

around Carina's neck and smiled at her. "Our courage and our craft will always be pure. You're my sister, and now that makes you a Black."

## Part Two

### *Ever After*

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*No wonder your heart feels it's flying  
Your head feels it's spinning  
Each happy ending's a brand new beginning  
Let yourself be enchanted, you just might break through  
To ever ever after*  
(Ever Ever After - Carrie Underwood)

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**August 31st, 2013**

Sirius woke to the smell of bacon cooking downstairs and the sound of children running in the hallways. There was also the feel of something slightly heavy on his back and a tickle of hair on his skin. When he cracked an eye open to turn his head and look, he found himself staring at a tiny face, black hair, and chocolate-coloured eyes.

"Daaaaaddy . . ." the little girl said with a low growl.

"Has anyone told you lately that you sound like a troll when you use that voice?" Sirius mumbled sleepily.

The tiny witch jumped once, her knees landing on Sirius's lower back. "Daddy, wake up!"

"Ow, fuck!" He rolled over, pulling his daughter into his arms and off of him. "Princess . . . those are Daddy's kidneys," he told her, still wincing from the pain.

"Galleon in the swear jar!" she said with a greedy grin. "Mummy says so."

Sirius growled under his breath. *Fucking swear jar.* "What's Daddy's swearing buying this month?"

The almost six-year-old cuddled up beside him, toying her fingers through his hair the way her mother still often did. "Uncle Remus is going to take me and Lily to Chocolate Week in London! Swear jar pays for tickets."

Sirius chuckled, rubbing his forehead. "And why, my teeny, tiny kitten, doesn't Uncle Remus pay for the bloody tickets himself?"

"Jar!" she said excitedly and then added, "because Mummy said so."

Sirius faked a pout down at his youngest child. "Sometimes I think Mummy likes Uncle Remus more than me."

Pandora put her tiny hands on his cheeks and mimicked his stuck out bottom lip before saying, "I know."

Sirius laughed loudly.

Despite the trouble he often caused, Regulus had turned out more like Mia in the end, or really . . . *Hermione* if they were being specific. He was studious, well-read, and soft-spoken compared to his cousins. Teddy and Jamie, thankfully, had Hope there to boss them around when they got out of control. Remus's daughter was just as intimidating as her father when in a mood, and just as clumsy as her mother, which made for a dangerous little witch.

Carina, much like her mother who also had been adopted, developed Slytherin tendencies to rival those of her grandmother. When asked if she wanted to take the name Black during her adoption, Carina had asked if she could have a middle name as well, and then personally chose "Dorea." It should have been a sign. The girl held everyone in the palm of her hand—Sirius being the biggest sap of them all. Only the mothers ever caught on to her antics, which had settled a bit once she had been legally adopted. Her accidental magic had become well-controlled over the years, especially now that she had her own wand and was off to Hogwarts the following morning.

Sirius held his youngest tightly, using her as the healing salve of the open wound that Carina's departure would soon be leaving behind. He was thankful Pandora would not go to Hogwarts for several more years.

"Miss Pandora Mary Black, what should Daddy do to make Mummy like him more? Should I swear less?"

"No!" Pandora insisted. "Swear jar bought Christmas and birthday presents last year!"

He chuckled at the look of fear in her eyes. "You are aware that we're wealthy, yes? Pandora, you do know that even if we didn't have the swear jar that you'd still get Christmas and birthday presents, right?" he asked, suddenly concerned that perhaps her siblings or cousins had actually told her that his swear jar paid for everything they owned. He certainly would not put it past Jamie.

"But what about Chocolate Week?"

He sighed, planning on doing something horrible to Remus later for this. "If we didn't have the swear jar, Uncle Remus would stand on a corner and dance for Muggles,

and they would give him money," he promised her, grinning when she broke out into a fit of giggles. "Why did Mummy have you come wake me up?"

Her laughter stopped, and she smirked. "She says that *you* have to punish the boys."

Sirius frowned, dread pooling in his stomach. "Which boys?"

Pandora grinned, looking too much like her mother for Sirius's nerves. "Mawders," she said, mispronouncing the word.

He sighed, knowing exactly whom she meant: Teddy, Jamie, and Regulus. "What did they do?"

"Took your bike."

"What?!" He sat up quickly, reaching for his jeans that were sitting in the armchair near the bed. He stood up, slipping the jeans on and throwing a t-shirt over his head before picking his daughter up around the waist and throwing her over his shoulder as she laughed at him.

"Regulus Charlus Black!" Sirius shouted once he had stepped into the hallway.

A head of black hair peeked out from an open door. "I didn't do it! Teddy did!"

Another head of black hair came out of Regulus's room. "It was *your* idea!"

Jamie stepped out from behind his cousins, approaching Sirius with a happy grin. "Can I just say how very young and handsome you're looking today, Uncle Sirius?"

"Nice try, Jamie. Which of you touched the bike?" Instantly all three boys turned and pointed at the other two, pushing the blame off of themselves. Sirius rolled his eyes. "How can I make this clearer? When the three of you get busted at Hogwarts for shit like this—"

Pandora squealed and clapped her hands together. "Jar!"

"—you either take the fall yourself or deny everything. You do *not* turn on one another."

Regulus slowly let a grin cross his face. "Does this mean we're not in trouble?"

"Did you break the bike?"

Jamie shook his head. "It wouldn't even start. Teddy said we had to push while he steered and eventually it would turn on."

Sirius turned and looked at a snickering Teddy, whose hair shifted green. "Well, your cousin is a very good liar."

"What?" Jamie turned and glared at Teddy. "You suck!"

"I put a Stasis Charm on the engine. Something your Aunt Hermione taught me," Sirius told Jamie. "Honestly, don't touch the bike. When you're old enough, I'll teach you all how to drive it."

"Really?" Regulus asked, hope in his eyes.

"How mad is your mum?" Sirius asked.

Regulus took a moment to think about it. "Umm . . . stronger than a Stinging Hex, less than a Cruciatus?"

Sirius winced. That did not bode well. Her Stinging Hexes hurt like a bitch, and sometimes she shot them at tender areas and pretended she had a terrible aim. At least it was the *boys* in trouble this time and not *him*. "You finish packing your trunk?"

"Yes, Dad."

"You help your sister with hers?"

Jamie answered for him. "Al's helping her. Hey, Uncle Sirius, you want in on the bet?"

"What are we betting on?" Sirius asked, shifting Pandora from his shoulder down to the floor.

Teddy chuckled, shaking his head. "Whether or not Albus ends up in Slytherin."

Sirius frowned at their mirth. "I know you boys are a happy little lion pride, but don't cut your siblings out just because they get sorted into Slytherin. I'm serious about that."

"Aren't you Sirius about everything?" Teddy snickered.

Sirius ruffled Teddy's green hair until it turned yellow. "I like you, kid."

"Mum already gave us the lecture," Regulus chimed in. "Grandma Dorea was a Slytherin."

"So was your Uncle Regulus," Sirius pointed out.

His son nodded and smiled. "And he was a hero."

"Yes, he was."

"So is Uncle Draco!" Pandora said loudly.

"He's not our uncle, munchkin, he's our cousin," Regulus said, pulling his sister into a hug and looking up at his father. "Is he still coming?"

Mia walked around the corner. "Yes. He, Astoria, and Scorpius are meeting us all in Diagon Alley for some last minute shopping; at least that was the plan as of last night,"

she said as she watched the children scatter away from them, save for Pandora, who was back at a small table in the corner with glitter and glue already all over her hands. Mia kissed Sirius and smiled. "Morning, love. Did you deal with them?"

Sirius nodded. "Absolutely. Properly scolded. Rotten boys. Where are all the bloody adults around here?" he asked when he heard Hope and Lily giggling down the hallway.

"Ginny will be here for lunch. Harry said there was a dispute at the Burrow during a friendly family game of Quidditch, and she stuck around to make sure Ronald knew his place," Mia said with a chuckle. "Remus and Tonks went over to Shell Cottage to help Bill with something."

"Shell Cottage?" Teddy rushed back around the corner, looking eager and red-faced. "Can I go?"

Mia rolled her eyes. "Straight there?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Aunt Mia!" He grinned and rushed to the fireplace, abandoning Regulus and Jamie.

From her little table, Pandora hissed, "I *hate* Victoire."

Mia quirked her lips at Sirius and folded her arms across her chest. "Ask *your* daughter what she's been making this morning."

Sirius cringed. Specifying which children belonged to whom like that always meant trouble. Regulus was *his* son when he broke things or letters were sent home from Hogwarts. Carina was *Mia's* daughter when she convinced the boys to do something horrible. Pandora usually could go either way.

He knelt down next to his youngest and smiled at the pile of glitter and glue. "Got something to show me, teeny, tiny kitten?"

Pandora grinned proudly and pulled out a piece of cardboard that had been broken and glued back together, looking like two misshapen funnels hooked together by the narrow ends, then filled with glitter. "Look, Daddy. It's a Time-Turner."

"That it is. And a beautiful Time-Turner," he said with wide eyes, smiling at her and trying to avoid Mia's stare.

"Ask her *why* she's making a Time-Turner," his wife insisted.

"Pandora?"

"So I can flip it like this," Pandora said, turning the creation upside-down and sending glitter all over the table and floor. "And then I'll go back in time and, before Teddy

can kiss Victoire, I will punch her in the nose and make her ugly so he won't like her anymore."

"That's—" Sirius stared at his five-year-old with mild shock. "—really fucking disturbing."

"Jar!"

"Why would you want to do that, love? Victoire likes you," he assured her. "And you have to be nice to her. She's—"

"Pack," Pandora said, interrupting him and rolling her eyes. "I know. But if I go back in time and make her ugly then Teddy won't like her, and then *I* can marry Teddy. Like how Mummy used her Time-Turner to go back and marry you."

Shocked silent, Sirius kissed the top of his daughter's head and stood, walking away from the situation entirely, only to be followed by Mia. "Why do all the women I love prefer Lupins over me?"

"Don't be dramatic. I told you she was too young for that story. Didn't I tell you?"

Sirius bowed his head. "You told me."

"Now she's making a Time-Turner."

He turned and grinned at her. "Maybe she and Teddy will be very happy together," he suggested and ducked as she tried to punch him in the arm.

"You're a bad influence," Mia insisted, pointing at him.

He grinned and caught her finger in his teeth. Pulling her forward and against him, he released her finger to capture her lips, ignoring the echoing sounds of "Ewww!" around the house. "We going to be infested with Weasleys soon?"

"Ron, Daphne, and the kids are staying at the Burrow, but they'll be here for dinner tonight along with everyone else."

"And the Slytherins?"

"Notts or Malfoys?" she asked. "Be more specific."

"Both."

"Malfoys are meeting us in Diagon Alley in an hour. Luna and Theo and the twins are coming by tonight for dinner with everyone."

"Do we have time to . . . ?" Sirius waggled his eyebrows at her.

"Are you kidding me?" She laughed and patted him gently on the cheek.

Sirius sighed as she walked away. He made his way back to Pandora's glitter-covered table. "Teeny, tiny kitten? Can Daddy borrow your Time-Turner? He just needs an extra hour."

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Draco and Mia sat down in front of Florean Fortescue's for their traditional ice cream date, now shared with their entire family—something that was much less peaceful and calm than when the pair used to go out right after the war to commiserate over battle, dead Death Eaters, and nosy reporters. Now, however, they were surrounded by screaming children, the majority of whom did not belong to either of them.

"Sweet Salazar," Draco groaned, "were *we* this loud and awful as children?"

Mia snorted. "*You* were."

"I was charming and brilliant. Where's everyone else?"

"That's a long list, don't make me go through it all."

"Fine," he relented. "Where're Potter and your husbands?"

She raised a daring eyebrow. "Plural?"

"Everyone knows you and Nymphadora share," Draco teased her.

"Yes. All the responsibility of two wizards and none of the benefits," Mia said dramatically, and they shared a laugh, though Draco's was much more subdued as he was in public and could not be thought of as undignified by any passersby. "Grown boys are all in the Leaky, little boys are all in the broom shop."

"Dad, can I go?" Scorpius pleaded from behind his father.

Draco appeared anxious, a look on his face that most would interpret as anger, but Mia knew better after all these years.

"He'll be fine, Draco," she promised him as turned around to spot one of her nephews. "Albus!" The eleven-year-old broke away from the crowd of cousins to rush back to their table. "Take Scorpius with you to look at brooms. If anything happens you come straight here, got it?"

"Yes, ma'am." Albus nodded and gestured for the other boy to follow. "C'mon, Scorp."

Draco watched his son rush down the street, and he finished his last bite of ice cream before peering into Mia's half-eaten dish.

"I'll stab you if you try," she threatened.

"So, what's the pool up to?" he asked when he looked up to check on the children, still in sight thanks to Scorpius's beacon-like head of hair.

Mia grinned wryly. "Three hundred Galleons."

He laughed. "For *one* Sorting?"

"He's got four Gryffindor grandparents, two Gryffindor parents, his godfather is a Gryffindor, and all of his aunts and uncles are Gryffindors," she said with a smile, glancing over her shoulder to watch as Albus and Scorpius looked to be in a friendly argument over one broom model versus another. "Plus he's a Potter, and my dad always said Potters get sorted into Gryffindor."

Draco smirked. "But?"

"Well, his godmother is a Ravenclaw," she said, as though Luna's influence had anything to do with Albus's Sorting that would take place the following evening.

"Don't let Lovegood fool you. Theo tells me what she's *really* like. That witch can be cunning when she wants to be . . . and pretty filthy. She does things to Theo that Astoria would hex me if she knew I was thinking about. You know where the kid's going, don't you?"

Mia shrugged. "Why should I tell you insider secrets?"

"Because I'll toss in fifty Galleons of my own and split the winnings with you."

"Albus is going to be a Slytherin," she said quietly.

"How do you know that?"

"Because Blacks get sorted alphabetically before Potters," she said while grinning. "And *my* daughter is a Slytherin. Carina and Albus are attached at the hip. She gets sorted, and the second that hat gets tossed on his head, he's going to *beg* it to put him with her."

"Malfoy," Harry said as he approached the duo, Lily on his arm, looking like a mirror image of her grandmother but with Ginny's eyes.

Draco gave a nod in greeting. "Potter."

"Been a while. How's the wife and kid?"

"Wife's with her sister and the Weasel, kid's just run off with your son."

Harry paled and his eyes widened as he turned to Mia. "Which one?"

"Albus," Mia said, and Harry let out a sigh of relief. "Don't worry."

"Kids are going to put me in St Mungo's," Harry exclaimed, taking a seat beside her and pulling Lily up next to him, kissing her head. "Not you, love, you're the good one."

Lily stared at him with a single lifted eyebrow. "For now."

"That's . . . frightening," Draco commented to the little redhead. "You might be my favourite."

Mia chuckled as Lily preened under the compliment while simultaneously trying to look like she neither needed nor wanted his approval. "Don't let Pandora hear you say that."

"I think she's got eyes for someone else," Draco said, gesturing over Mia's shoulder.

They all turned to watch Sirius and Remus leaving the Leaky Cauldron with Teddy, Hope, Victoire, and Pandora. Teddy and Victoire were trying to subtly hold hands, but every time they attempted it, Pandora reached up and tugged on Teddy's shirt to gain his attention. Sirius and Remus looked like they were trying—unsuccessfully—to ignore what was happening.

Finally, when Pandora growled audibly at Teddy's girlfriend, Sirius picked her up and moved her away from the young couple. "Pandora! Leave Teddy and Victoire alone and come over here and . . . say hello to Draco," he said, dropping Pandora in the seat next to the blond.

"Draco, you're looking well." Remus smiled in greeting as he took the seat beside Mia.

"Daddy," Hope said as she settled in next to him, "can I go into Flourish and Blotts?"

"Take one or two of your cousins and get their school books so we don't have to be here all day."

Hope smiled and kissed his cheek, standing up and looking around for any number of her cousins. When her eyes fell on a head of long, straight, black hair she called out, "Carina! C'mon!" and then ran off, grabbing Carina's hand and dragging her toward the bookshop. By the time they got there, several of the others were heading in that direction like a large herd, or . . . rather pack.

"Come on," Mia said, tugging on Remus's arm as she stood up. "I want to go get a new copy of *Lies About Lycanthropy*."

"You've got at least eleven copies," he complained.

Sirius laughed. "You know she just likes to pretend that she doesn't know you when she buys the book and then asks you for an autograph in the middle of the store."

"I know," Remus whinged, and Mia laughed.

They approached the bookshop several paces behind their children, only to stop short at the sight of a skinny woman with shoulder-length black hair and an angry expression.

"Persius! Hurry up!" Pansy Flint shrieked loudly at the burly boy who was struggling to keep up with her. "Your father has to be back to work in an hour, and I'm tired of walking around. This place is filthy!" she said when her eyes fell on Mia and Draco.

When the witch turned to smugly walk away, they all rolled their eyes and nearly missed it when Pansy's son rammed into Carina, knocking her harshly to the ground.

"Watch where you're going, loser!"

Sirius stepped forward growling, but Mia's hand flew out, pressing against his chest to stop him. "Wait," she insisted when she noticed the children descending on the young Flint boy.

"Hey!" Albus was the first to shout as he ran forward, followed by Jamie and Regulus. "Don't talk to my cousin like that!"

Flint glared at Albus. "Piss off, blood-traitor!"

"Did you just push my little sister, you git?" Regulus snarled, looking more like Sirius when he was angry than any other time.

Hope, flanked by Regulus and Jamie, looked just as enraged as her cousins as she walked up and stood right in the younger boy's face, causing him to step back quickly and trip onto his arse. "You like running about shoving little girls, do ya?"

"You okay?"

"I'm fine," Carina huffed bitterly, glaring at the bleeding scratch on her elbow. She turned and glanced up, her eyes meeting a matching grey stare, and she smiled sweetly. "Thanks, Scorpius."

"Careful," he said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a black and green handkerchief embroidered with a silver "M" and handing it to her. "You're bleeding there."

She blushed and accepted the handkerchief in addition to his hand.

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**September 1st, 2013**

"What's wrong with those two?" Mia asked Ginny as she kissed her cheek hello when they met up in front of the Hogwarts Express. She gestured to Lily who was sniffing, and Albus who was shouting at Jamie, with Harry trying to separate the boys.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Jamie has been teasing Al all morning long about the Sorting. I've never been happier to ship them all away. And *this* one," she said, looking down at a teary-eyed Lily, "is upset that she can't go with them."

Mia smiled and brushed a strand of red hair from Lily's eyes. "Pandora's sad, too," she told her niece. "Why don't you go over there, and the two of you can make plans for all the fun things you're going to do this year."

Lily seemed to be slightly mollified by the suggestion and made her way over to where Pandora was sniffing in Remus's arms, while Sirius walked Carina and Regulus over to meet up with Harry, Jamie, and Albus. Ron and Daphne arrived beside Draco and Astoria, and soon Hugo joined the younger children who were sad to not be going to Hogwarts.

"Rosie, you'll be loved just as much if you end up in Slytherin," Daphne promised her daughter while Ron grumbled behind his wife's back. The poor girl looked absolutely terrified, and Mia was tempted to have all of the children taken aside to have a pre-Sorting pep talk.

However, Harry already had Albus covered, as he was kneeling in front of his son with Sirius leading the rest of the children away from the duo. Mia smiled and ran her hand affectionately through Carina's hair before her daughter walked over to say hello to Scorpius. She looked up and smiled at her husband, who seemed annoyed. "What's wrong, love?"

"You should hear the shit Harry's telling Al. '*Bravest man I've ever known*,'" Sirius said in a mocking tone.

"Hey!" Jamie approached them with a jaw-splitting grin on his face. "Teddy's . . . back there," he said breathlessly, gesturing to a section of columns past the billowing clouds of steam coming from the train, "snogging Victoire!"

Regulus was suddenly right beside him, laughing hysterically. "He had his tongue in her mouth!"

Pandora, overhearing her brother, growled viciously, and Remus had to hold on to her before she rushed off to push Victoire in front of the train. He glanced apologetically over at Bill, who was groaning miserably at the overheard news from the boys, and he and Tonks walked off to find their children and put a stop to the public indecency before it got completely out of hand.

"Do you think Teddy and Victoire will get married?" Lily asked. "Then we'll all *really* be a family," she said with a dreamy look in her eyes.

"We're already related too much, dear," Mia told her niece with a chuckle.

"Not me. Technically I'm not blood-related to any of you," Carina said, her grey gaze falling on Scorpius, an action that was caught by a not-at-all-amused Regulus, who stepped in between his sister and the young Malfoy.

Sirius did his best to ignore the commotion and allow his son to handle what he was apparently not at all ready to acknowledge. He turned around and smiled as Harry brought Albus over, looking much happier as he joined Carina and Scorpius: the other future Slytherins.

"Everything okay?" Mia asked, and Harry bobbed his head with a smile.

"It's nearly eleven," Sirius shouted. "You'd better all get on board!" He kissed the top of Regulus's head and pulled Carina in for a tight hug, clearly reluctant to release her.

Remus put Pandora in his arms instead before walking forward to lecture Teddy and kiss Hope goodbye.

"Don't forget to give Neville our love," Ginny told Jamie as she bid him farewell with a kiss on his cheek.

"Mum! I can't give a professor love!" he whined before being dragged onto the train by his robes by Teddy, Regulus, and Hope. The adults watched through the windows as Remus's daughter pointed at her brother and cousins, directing them to the back of the train.

"They ever remind you of—?" Remus began.

"Far too often," Sirius confirmed. "Stresses me out a bit."

Behind their siblings and cousins, Albus, Carina, Rose, and Scorpius stepped onto the train with an equal mixture of nervousness and excitement. Their parents stood on the

platform and watched, misty-eyed, as the clock struck eleven and the train pulled out of the station.

"They'll be okay," Mia said, swallowing down her building emotions.

"You sure?" Sirius asked.

She nodded and smiled when Remus took her left hand in his and Harry took the right. Sirius wrapped his arms around her from behind, and she closed her eyes. She sighed happily when she could feel—even if she could not see—Ginny link with Harry's arm, and Tonks take Remus's. No one was left behind. Family.

Soon the Malfoys and Weasleys joined them, talking about grabbing lunch—and a drink—to "celebrate" the kids being sent off. Those who were parting with their children for the first time were hesitant about the meal but looked forward to a glass or two of firewhisky.

"You doing okay?" Mia asked Draco, who was still staring off in the direction that the train left.

"I don't know how the rest of you have done this before. He's my only son."

"It gets easier," she said thoughtfully. "When they write home and tell you about all of their classes and the friends that they've made."

"She's lying," Sirius said.

Remus chuckled beside them all. "It never gets easier, and you worry about them constantly. You just have to smother them even more when they come home."

"My kids hate that," Harry said with a grin.

"Doesn't matter," Sirius insisted, "it's your job."

Mia smiled. "*Our* job."

**THE END**

# Where Are They Now

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After fighting alongside Mia and Draco in the Wizengamot as the official representative for the werewolves, Remus finally finished his book, *Lies About Lycanthropy*, that Sirius and Mia had been begging him to write for years. The Lupins remained at The Den, continuing to work with other werewolves within the Lycanthrope Sanctuary. Tonks rose up in ranks alongside Harry, eventually becoming Head of the D.M.L.E. Edward Remus Lupin aka Teddy (godparents: Harry and Mia), born April 1998 was Sorted into Gryffindor when he first attended Hogwarts in 2009 (yes, I know this differs from later released canon, but as with a lot of this story, some of new Pottermore canon was released after this story was originally written). His sister, Hope Hermione Lupin (godparents: Sirius and Narcissa) born January 2000 was Sorted into Gryffindor in 2011.

Draco and Astoria married shortly after she graduated Hogwarts in 2000 and set to work on the Malfoy Children's Home to help repair the damage done to families because of the war. Astoria managed the home quite well with assistance from Narcissa and Daphne, while Draco worked hard in the Wizengamot to repair the Malfoy name. They welcomed their son Scorpius Hyperion Malfoy (godparents: Sirius and Mia) in September 2001 and he was Sorted into Slytherin when he attended Hogwarts in 2013.

Neville married Hannah Abbot and took over for Professor Sprout, becoming the youngest Professor at Hogwarts. Hannah bought the Leaky Cauldron, taking over for old Tom.

Theo married Luna, reclaimed his family estates, and worked beside Draco in the Wizengamot to repeal old prejudiced laws against Muggle-borns. Luna, to Mia's pleasure, took over the operations of the *Daily Prophet* until she gave birth to twin boys in 2009, thus breaking the family tradition of Seer witches who would lose their mother at nine years old.

Ron stuck with his Auror career, specialising in Muggle related incidents and worked alongside the Obliviation squad, determined to have his own career separate from Harry's. He and Daphne welcomed Rose Laurel Weasley (godparents: Draco and Astoria) in April of 2002, who was Sorted into Gryffindor when she attended Hogwarts in 2013. Hugo

Arthur Weasley (godparents: Harry and Ginny) arrived two years later in April 2004, and was Sorted into Gryffindor when he went to Hogwarts in 2015.

Harry was named Head of the Auror Department at the young age of 27. Ginny, in between pregnancies, refused to let motherhood keep her from pursuing her dream of being a Chaser for the Holyhead Harpies. Dobby was overjoyed that Ginny and Harry trusted him to look after the kids. James Sirius Potter (godparents: Ron and Mia) was born February 2000 and Sorted into Gryffindor when he attended Hogwarts in 2011. Albus Severus Potter (godparents: Neville and Luna) was born July 2002 and Sorted into Slytherin (as Mia predicted) in 2013. Lily Luna Potter (godparents: Sirius and Tonks) was born August 2004 and Sorted into Gryffindor when she attended Hogwarts in 2015.

Mia eventually went back to Hogwarts to speak with the portrait of Albus Dumbledore. He apologised for his mistakes and, because of Jamie, she forgave the man, though her occasional visit with the portrait of Severus Snape was much more pleasant.

Cornelius Fudge, bankrupted by Mia's actions in the Wizengamot, was forced to seek refuge in the Muggle world where he took on a job as a grocer in the same shop that Remus once worked at.

Mia and Sirius paid regular visits to Petunia and Vernon Dursley until they felt the couple had finally paid for their actions against Harry. Their memories of their time in the cupboard under the stairs was Obliviated, and they were allowed to retire in peace.

Dudley Dursley, thanks to Mia and Sirius's help, graduated from University where he met and married a young girl and raised a family of three.

Dolores Umbridge spent fifteen years in Azkaban due to her crimes and, half-crazed, attacked Mia in the middle of Diagon Alley when she was released. Mia fulfilled her promise by burying her . . . in the Black Lake. Charges were not filed against Mia in the disappearance of Dolores Umbridge, but anytime she visited Hogwarts, she stopped by the lake to pet the Giant Squid in thanks. She took to feeding him chocolate galleons instead of the real thing (which, despite her threats, she only fed to him once).

Mia worked hard to fight for werewolf and house-elf rights in the Wizengamot, but stepped aside to become a Healer for the Lycanthrope Sanctuary, working every other day of the month at St Mungo's in the newly opened *Dorea Hope Ward, for Muggles*.

Sirius purchased a Muggle motorbike shop and spent his days enjoying life and ignoring Narcissa and Andromeda's pleas for him to act as a proper Head of House. Mia did his job just fine *for* him.

Tilly helped to raise Sirius and Mia's children, occasionally overstepping to tell Dobby how to *properly* bring up Potters.

Regulus Charlus Black (godparents: Harry and Ginny) was born August 2000 and Sorted into Gryffindor in 2011 to join his fellow Marauders James Potter, and Teddy and Hope Lupin—Marauder's Map and Invisibility Cloak in tow.

Carina Dorea Black (godparents: Draco and Luna) was born in January 2002 to a wizard father and a Muggle mother. After an accident killed both of her parents she was put into the Muggle system until a bit of accidental magic had the Obliviation squad sent to clean up her mess. Ron, seeing her, immediately brought her to Draco and Astoria. Sirius and Mia adopted her in 2006, and when her brother Regulus gave her the Black/Potter family necklace, it provoked a Familial Bond, making Carina officially a Black. Carina was Sorted into Slytherin alongside Albus and Scorpius in 2013.

Pandora Mary Black (godparents: Remus and Tonks) was born in December 2007 and Sorted into Slytherin when she eventually attended Hogwarts.

# Thank You

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When I started this story, I never imagined it would become what it has. Fluffpanda and I would joke in the early days of writing and say, "Wouldn't it be crazy if we got up to like 75 chapters!?" Our notes on GoogleDoc would likely take someone who'd passed their N.E.W.T. in Ancient Runes and Arithmancy to properly decipher and organise.

A big thanks to all those who have helped to Beta this story over the last several years. Whether you helped to edit one paragraph or the whole story eighteen times over, you are amazing, and I am forever grateful.

Thanks to the people who have created beautiful fanart, videos, playlists . . . The people who have sent me things (most especially thank you letters telling me how the story helped you in a time of need, because that's the whole reason I keep writing). And to the crazy people who have even gotten DoT tattoos (I count myself amongst you, you beautiful inked weirdos). It may not be a published book or something you can buy in a store, but you all helped to fulfil a dream of mine of writing a story that could make such an impact.

Thank you.

*You're* the song.

*Shaya Lonnie*