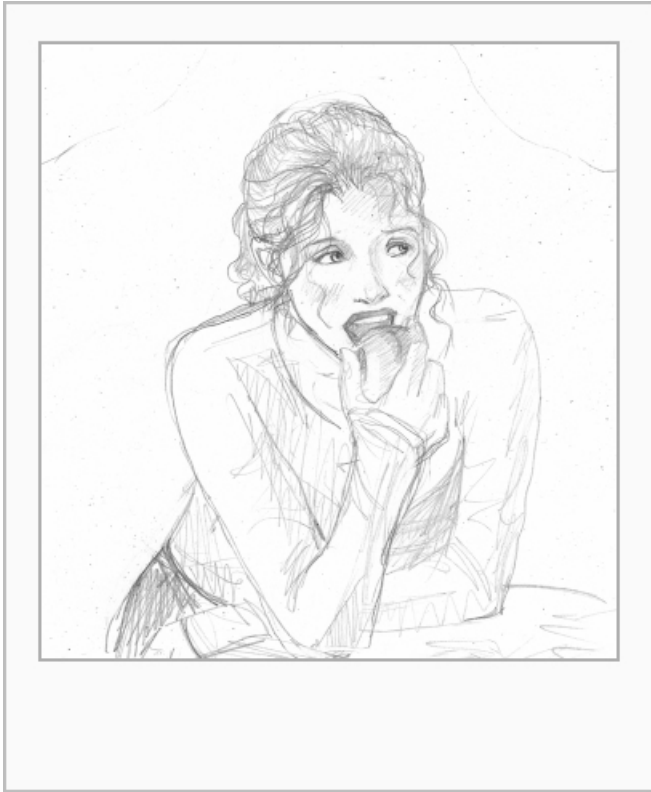
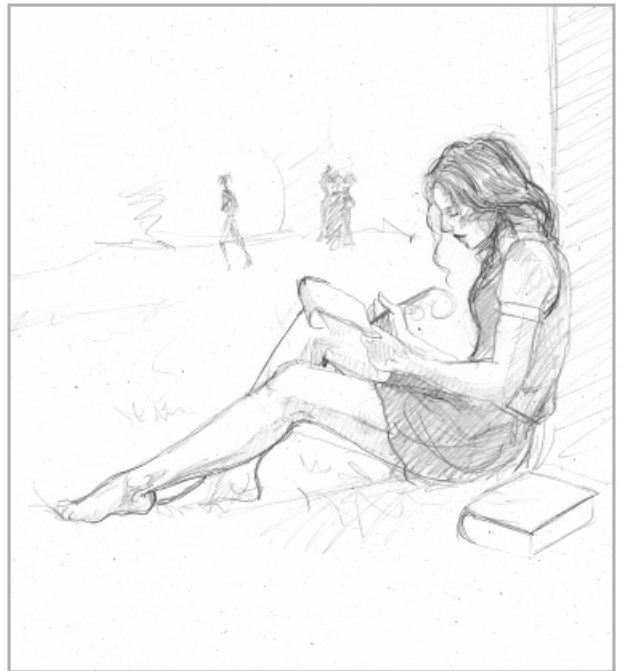


Part Eight
Mid-February, 1976

Taken and collected by one James Potter in the first half of his sixth year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and later referred to as The Stalking File.





"Potter, take your face out of that chair, you don't know where it's been." Sirius flips a page in his book, rocking his chair back on two legs with both feet thunked on the table, a position which every professor in the world decries.

"Mmpsuh mmmph," comes James's muffled moan from within the cushions.

"Sorry, mate, I don't speak pathetic bastard. Come again?" James, suffering from an obviously indescribable woe, has been in that bloody chair for about ten minutes, having stumbled in, given them a look of immense affliction, and finally having collapsed to his knees on the floor, face saved only by a brocade cushion. Sirius knows James well enough to know that he's just waiting for someone to ask him what's the matter, and that it will drive him mad not to be asked. Sirius crosses his legs, idly scratching the heel of his boot against the shining wood, and hears Remus make a small noise of pain from the next chair.

"I said 'What's the point?'" James emerges from the cushions, hair more insane than usual and rather red in the face from shortness of breath. "I might just as well die here as anywhere."

"I'm so glad you two came back from break. I've missed your incredible predictability." Remus scribbles something down on a piece of parchment and gnaws on his quill.

"Don't lump me in with him," Peter protests. There is a definite smugness in his voice that Sirius catches immediately and is strangely intrigued by. "We're in totally different categories, Prongs and me."

"Oh, do go on, Wormtail, they all love to laugh at my pain," James snorts bitterly. "Tell them why we're in different categories. Please. I, for one, would love to hear it again."

"Well." Peter folds his arms, rising at least three inches in his seat. How didn't Sirius notice before how pink his ears were, and how uncharacteristically fidgety and smiley he was? There is something suspicious about the whole thing. "Well, only *one* of us got turned down for a Valentine's Day date today."

Sirius looks between James, flung haphazardly over chair and floor, and Peter, arms across his chest, looking uncommonly like a Czar, and burst out laughing. "You're not *serious*," he says, not trying to be unkind. "You've got a date, Wormtail?"

"And James," Peter reminds them unnecessarily, "hasn't."

"Redheads," James whimpers. He stares dolefully up at the ceiling for a few moments before shutting out the vibrant colors of life with his arm over his eyes. "You didn't ask a redhead on a date, *did* you. It's different."

"She's a blonde," Peter adds. "With blue eyes. And *dimples*."

"The whole world's gone upside down," James says. "Topsy-turvy. I don't know which way is up anyway."

"That's because of the position you're in," Sirius suggests. "Try sitting up like a man and I'm sure you'll see that my feet are on the floor rather than my head is on the ceiling."

"I think that's nice, Peter," Remus offers. Unbothered, apparently, by the carnal pleasures of Sixth Year Boys, St. Valentine's Day, and This Earth, he returns to his work, bobbing neatly with each line of script over his curling parchment. "And I'm very sorry, James. Though Sirius is right. Sitting the right way will help with the dizziness."

"Heartless," James mutters, "cruel, unfeeling -- the dizziness is *within my soul*, Moony. She's given me a -- a *disease*, or something."

"Can't give you a disease if she always says no to a date," Sirius points out, pragmatically.

"You always look on the bright side, Pads, that's what I like about you," James says.

"Maybe you just don't know how to go about it," Remus suggests. "Romance, I mean."

James looks up, indignant and going still redder in the face. "I know loads about romance, you know! I read books!"

"*Busty and Bewitched is not a book*," Sirius feels compelled to mention.

"It's a Gentleman's Quarterly!" Peter says helpfully. "Not that that's something I need anymore, since I now have a date. With a girl. Who is blonde."

"Thanks for that over-share, Pettigrew, I'll keep that in mind," James grumbles, twitching slightly. "Forever. Look, Moony, if you know so bloody much about romance, why don't you teach me?"

Remus goes pink from chin-tip to hairline, his lips twisting up in the way they have when he gets upset or bewildered. "I -- I didn't mean that *I* knew how to go about it, I just meant--"

"Actually, Moony." Sirius tips the chair forward so he lands with a jingling crash, elbows on his thighs. "Now that you mention it, if anyone could get this idiot fixed up with Evans, it'd be you. I mean, Evans loves you. And you know what friends do? They help each other. It is the Gryffindor Way."

"No," Remus says, knowing what is coming. "No, no, no, a thousand times no, and no."

"His mind says no, you see, but his body says yes," Sirius translates for James, grinning wickedly.

"Yes, you'd know all about that, wouldn't you," Remus snaps. If it were possibly for one boy to creep into the binding of a book and disappear amongst the glue and the threads, Remus would be effecting that great escape currently. As it is, he manages only to shrink a good foot and a half, tipping the book upright so he is shielded behind it. "I don't know what you want of me but I've far too many good guesses and the answer is, and always will be, no."

"But look at him," Sirius says, tipping Remus book over with one hand and bringing James face up to his with the

other. "Look how he droops. Look how he withers. Look how he is wasting away."

"I saw him at lunch," Remus returns. "He had three helpings of pudding and, I think, stole part of your cake as well, so we're in no danger of losing James, thank you very much."

"You *stole* my *cake*?" Sirius asks. "I thought I ate it while I wasn't paying attention."

"It was the last slice," James explains. "Remus, I'll pay you."

"That's ridiculous." Remus sniffs. "I won't have my friends *paying* me for something I can't even do. I don't know anything about -- about -- *wooing* anyone."

"That's for certain," Peter agrees. "I don't think they call it 'wooing' anymore, Moony."

"Well, no." Remus colors. "As you can see: I am clearly unqualified. I suggest Shelley or Keats if you want a love poem that's without complications, or even Byron if you feel she's in the mood for something colorful and consumptive, but I *will* not -- *cannot* -- *refuse* to -- well, do what you're going to ask me to do."

"Help me," James says. He clasps his hands together on the tabletop, kneeling across the way. "I don't even know what a Shelley or a Keats is."

The vein at Remus' temple twitches.

"They're ice cream flavours," Sirius says, and is pleased when Moony gives him a sharp, burning glare. "Chocolatey. Delicious."

"They're poets, James."

"Look at me! I am pathetic! Just teach me. I'll do anything."

"You should take him up on that, you know," Sirius says meaningfully, and makes a very vulgar gesture and an even more vulgar face. "Primo."

James flips him two fingers without sparing him a glance and keeps his full attention on Remus, his brown eyes melting and enormous. "I swear to you, Moony, I will do anything you want me to. Papers, assignments -- oh wait, you like doing those -- well, menial labor, two days without me saying one word about Evans, *anything*, I swear -- I'm about ten seconds from weeping like a child. Please."

"Oh, come on," Peter says, looking pityingly at James. "He's so sad."

"You are a kind man, Peter Pettigrew. Let it go down in history that Peter Pettigrew is the only one of you useless lot to stand by a friend in need. Moony, just -- all you have to do is -- is give me something, anything, to give to her. Give me a poem. Give me some of this Shelley stuff. I'm not asking for much, and my soul will wilt away and *die* unless you do me this little titchy favor." Remus wavers. James knows it. Sirius knows it. Even Peter knows it. They are far too used to what it means when Remus wavers. James leans in closer, knowing his case is

already sold, searching for the right words to drive the final nail in the coffin. "It would be so *literary*," he adds. "It would be like *Shakespeare*. Your words making my love speak through -- er -- me."

Remus bows his head. What a dirty, irresistible trick. "All right," he acquiesces, caving at last. "All right. I'll help you. But on one condition."

James gives him his most starry-eyed gaze of gratitude. "Anything," he promises.

"You must do *exactly as I say*," Remus instructs.

"Everything?" James asks.

"Everything," Remus confirms.

"Tell him to put his underwear on his head and sing 'I'm a wanker' out the window of the Astronomy Tower," Sirius suggests. "Or have him cluck like a chicken in Transfiguration."

"And this," Remus says grimly, "is why you're glad I'm helping you, and not Sirius Black."

"Ecstatic," James agrees. "No underwear will be involved. Will it?"

"We'll see," Remus says.

"I should be getting ready for my date," Peter whispers. He rubs under his nose, shifting, stepping on Remus' toe, which Remus graciously doesn't mention.

"Valentine's Day isn't for two days," Remus says instead. "Will it really take you that long to get ready for *one date*?"

"He needs all the time he can get," Sirius assures him. "And probably all the help he can get, but sorry, Wormtail, old friend -- James is the worser off, the squeaky wheel, so you'll have to muddle through on your own." He claps Peter on the shoulder, offering him a good-natured grin. "We're all proud of you, though, very proud. Go get 'em, Hippogriff, and all that."

"Er," Peter says. "Thanks."

"Shh!" Remus hisses. "Here she comes."

Sirius flashes James a thumbs up, and although he can't see it, there's a certain doomed valor with which he squares his shoulders and raises his head. The light shades abruptly over his haggard, hunted-looking face; and Lily Evans appears through the garden gate, shivering in a gust of cold and pulling her winter cloak tighter around her. She really is a pretty girl, Remus thinks, and looks prettier even than usual, her cheeks nipped pink by the

cold and her red hair peeking out from under her hood. She stops short at the sight of James.

"Er -- wotcher, Evans," James says gruffly, stuffing his little sheet of paper into his pocket.

"I might have known," she says, disgustedly. "I expected a little better of Remus--" Sirius elbows him in the solar plexus, and Remus chokes and steps on his foot "--but I might have known you'd talk him into something like this."

"I don't know what you're talking about," James protests, not at all convincingly. "I just -- er -- I happened to be, you know, about, and maybe I overheard Remus saying he wanted to meet you to study, and maybe--"

"Maybe you just showed up to stalk me, the way you always do?" Evans snaps. "Well, forget it, Potter, I'm--"

"Wait!" There is an edge of desperation in James's voice. "Er -- just -- just wait, one minute--" Lily puts her head to the side and her hands on her hips, and glares. "I just wanted to -- I wanted to say something--"

"I'm not going to Madam Puddifoot's with you on Valentine's, so you can save yourself the trouble--"

"She walks in beauty," James interrupts, stumbling slightly on the words. Evans stops dead, her green eyes widening. "She walks in beauty, like the night, of cloudless -- of starry skies and -- cloudless climes; and all that's best of dark and bright meet in her aspect and her eyes." Evans stares at him, looking as if he's just grown another head. "Thus mellowed," James continues, rather breathlessly, "to that tender light, which heaven to -- to gaudy day denies--"

"Potter--"

"One shade the more, one ray the less, which softly lightens o'er her face--"

"Potter--"

"Doth -- doth -- where thoughts, serenely sweet, express how pure, how -- dear their dwelling place--"

"Potter." Evans puts two hands on his shoulders and shakes him. He blinks.

"That's the most physical contact they've ever had without someone getting slapped!" Sirius's excited whisper puffs in Remus's ear.

"You skipped two lines and messed up the rest and you totally destroyed that stanza," Evans says. "How can I go to Hogsmeade with a boy who destroys stanzas?"

"I won't do it again," James promises. Even from across the garden, Remus can see his hands shaking. Poor chap.

"I didn't know you knew Byron." She cocks her head slightly to one side, eyeing him thoughtfully. "That's -- it's a lovely poem, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes," James agrees fervently.

"It's one of my favorites."

"Mine, too -- definitely, if not my top favorite--"

"Shut up," Evans says. She returns to that contemplative perusal. Finally, she continues. "It's too bad about that stanza. You've got hidden depths, Potter, but I'm not going with you." She gives him a small, puzzled smile and sweeps out of the garden.

"Are you sure about that?" James yells, after a few moments of working his mouth in an apparent effort to get sound to come out of it.

"Positive!" The sound of the gate closing seals his doom.

"It was *Byron*," Remus murmurs. He shakes his head. What could possibly have gone wrong? "Perhaps," he wonders to himself, "perhaps she's a fan of more modern works -- but it was *Byron*."

"Yes," Sirius says, "see where poets'll get you, eh? Especially the dead ones."

"It must have been the choice of poetry," Remus insists, still mumbling to himself for his own benefit. Puzzlement marks his brow. "If I knew more about her -- perhaps it isn't love poetry she *wants* -- but she didn't *hit* him, did she, so it's a start, don't you think?"

"If James doesn't fling himself out a window before you ever get to step two," Sirius agrees, "it was a fantastic start." He points to their fallen comrade, arms and legs splayed into a bodily X, on the ground. "He's got no stamina, that one, no sense of perseverance."

"He gave it a good shot," Peter insists. "She almost said yes, I think."

"No," Remus says, tossing off the cloak. "James! James! I think I've got it!"

"I don't want anymore of your poetry," James groans from afar. "I don't want anymore of your Byron, but I'll take some of your chocolate. It's over! We're done for. Doomed. Forever." He lets out a terrible, fantastic sound, low and keening and amplified for dramatics, but Remus can see the humiliation in his prone form, and the disappointment. He crouches down by James' side, hands clasped together.

"She doesn't want you to quote at her," Remus says. "*I'd* like to be quoted at, but of course it must be different with her. The quoting business."

"Naturally," Sirius interjects, "because you're Moony and she's some redhead bint who knows fuck-all."

"In any case," Remus continues, "James, I think she's warming up to you."

"Augnnhghhhh," James whimpers. "I can't take it anymore, Moony. Just bury me beneath the Willow when I go."

"James," Remus insists, "you're being entirely too melodramatic."

"You weren't the one who just quoted *poetry* at a girl who has *probably put a spell on you because this can't be normal*. You weren't the one who stood before her while she dashed your heart to pieces on rosy thorns. You weren't the one who used phrases like *cloudless climes* and *starry skies* while *she* called you a *stalker*."

"You are, sort of," Sirius says. "Tough luck, that. Should've played it cooler, I think."

"You do have all those pictures," Peter says.

"Aesthetic appreciation," James mutters, "artistic shots--"

"Even the one from the baths?"

"She's got a robe on, and shut up."

"She didn't hit you!" Sirius says, kicking James reassuringly in the shin with one foot. "That's the place to focus right now. The not-hitting. She looked kind of intrigued, even. And she said you had hidden depths!"

"Of stalkerness," James says, disconsolately.

"No," Sirius says, shooting an inscrutable glance at Remus. "She was -- she was impressed, Prongs. It was a good start. You can't expect her to just fall all over you, after six years and that whole debacle with the wrong bed -- it's a long, hard path you have to travel, my lad, but you can do it."

"I can't. It can't be done."

"Shut up," Sirius insists. "If Moony can get you this far, he can get you as far as he likes. If you stop complaining. Can't you, Moony."

"I don't--" Remus starts, but then makes the mistake of looking down at James's genuinely miserable face, and hasn't the heart to go on. "I don't -- I -- oh, bother. All right. I'll try again. But next time, do try not to stammer so much."

"It's not like I did it on purpose," says James irritably, and wipes his nose. "Now what do you propose, genius?"

"Did you send this to me?" Evans comes storming into the common room like a small, auburn-headed thundercloud, clutching a crumpled-up parchment and a single, rather pathetic-looking rose. She shakes the parchment under James's nose, looking furious. Remus tries not to stare and manages only to watch very discretely over his newspaper, which is, unfortunately, upside down. Luckily, Lily Evans is paying attention to James Potter and James Potter alone. For the first time in probably ever. "*Did you?*" she demands again. Remus,

Sirius and Peter simultaneously dive behind Remus's copy of the Prophet.

"Er," James says, carefully laying down his quill. "Er. Well. That depends, you see. Did you like it?"

"Did I--" Lily starts, looking bewildered, and then shakes her head. "That isn't the point. I told you I wouldn't go with you!"

"Well," James says reasonably, "I didn't ask you, so you needn't be so presumptuous. Although," he winks lasciviously at her, even though his fingers are drumming a panicked tarantella on the tabletop, "if you're that eager--"

"You didn't -- how can you say you didn't ask me -- you sent me *this*!"

"I thought you might like it. Where does it say in there, 'Lily Evans, be my Valentine'? It doesn't. It's just some old Muggle poetry and a flower I found in the bin, so don't get excited."

"You're cheating! How did you know I liked Yeats? It's unfair tactics!"

"Lucky guess?" James's foot encounters Remus's leg under the table.

"I'm not going with you, so you can just -- just forget it," Evans huffs. She blushes magnificently and folds her arms. Remus catches sight of James and knows, somehow, exactly what he's thinking. Still, he can't help but agree: she *does* look lovely when she's mad.

"All right," James says, "you needn't be so -- forceful. Tread softly, Evans, for you tread upon my dreams." In a magnificent feat of self-control, he returns to his books, whistling tunelessly through his teeth.

Evans hovers over him for a moment, looking utterly bewildered, as though she's trying to decide whether to box his ears or shove him out of his chair. Without warning she throws her arms up in the air and storms off, but still clutching both the rose and the poetry. James, without turning around, pumps his fist discreetly at the three of them and grins helplessly at his paper.

"Whence did all that fury come?" Remus says, slyly, as James collapses forward onto the table in hysterical laughter. "That's Yeats too, you know."

"I don't care what it is," James chokes, "just, let's have some more of it."

"This one's called **To a Young Girl**," Remus says. He hands the book over, battered cover and flimsy pages and dusty smell, and taps the poem with his forefinger. "That, that right there. I think it's appropriate."

"Shorter than the last one," James worries. "Do you think that's all right?"

"She likes Yeats," Remus assures him. "Don't worry. This one will be all right." He holds the book open as James begins copying the lines over, keeping his hand as steady as he can. It's shaking nonetheless. Remus isn't sure if it's stopped shaking once since they began.

"If she doesn't -- well, you know -- by tomorrow -- well, then, that's it, isn't it." James pauses, looking up from the task laid out before him. "What'll we do then?"

"If you don't trust me," Remus replies, "trust Yeats."

"But I don't *know* Yeats," James mutters.

"You will by tomorrow," Remus says. "In fact, if we're lucky, you will by tonight."

"I was reading some Yeats earlier," Sirius says. He leans against the sink, staring at Peter's profile. The bathroom smells funny. In fact, Peter smells funny. "You know, the girl's the one supposed to put perfume on. You smell like a great big confused flower, and I'm not sure if that's attractive."

"I think I should get a haircut," Peter says. "Should I get a haircut?" Sirius moves to stand behind him, peering at his reflection in the mirror, then shrugs, grins, and messes his hair from the back forward. "Hey! Sirius -- Sirius, I just *combed* that!"

"You're going to sleep on it and muss it up again tonight, aren't you? Here's a novel idea -- it's just a *girl*. Here's another -- comb your hair right before the date, not the day before."

"Thanks," Peter scowls. "You're being *very* helpful."

"I'm full of helpful hints," Sirius replies. "Anyway, like I said, I was reading some Yeats earlier, and it's all right, I suppose, but it's got this power over Evans that's totally insane. I mean, you saw it. Is she mad? Is Yeats mad? Is it a combination of the two?"

"She is foremost of those that I would hear praised," James says from in front of the stall furthest away. "Er. Wait -- no -- I knew it. I *did*! Stop looking so disapproving. Damn, Moony, do I really have to know all these poems?"

"It's sad, really," Sirius sighs. "What you lot are willing to do for women."

"Oh, yes," James says, scornfully. "Because no one else in this bathroom ever did anything insane to get a girl to notice him, especially no one whose name rhymes with Shmirius Shmack."

"I did not," Sirius says with dignity. "I went to Great Lengths, but I was not 'insane.'"

"You made her walls sprout out in dog roses," Remus reminds him, examining his nose from different angles in the mirror. "I don't know what you think of as 'insane,' but--"

"I wasn't to know she was allergic," Sirius says mulishly, turning around and hoisting himself up to sit on the sink.

"Oi, Sirius," Peter says suddenly, arranging the strands of lank blond hair around his broad forehead, "how come you haven't got a bird, eh? It's only a day away."

"Not interested." Sirius leans back with exaggerated casualness, swinging his legs. "I'd rather mess with other people's. And even if I did want a date, I needn't arrange them in advance." He'd be met with disagreement, loud disagreement, except that it's true, of course, which makes it all the more frustrating and irritating. Sirius has this thing, Remus thinks with remarkable eloquence. He has this *thing* that he does, where he smiles, or he crinkles his eyes at the corners, or he pushes his sleeves up over his elbows, or he brushes a girl's waist with his fingers as he passes her in the halls, and things go right for him. It seems unfair and inexplicable that the mere act of getting Sirius's attention is more or less like turning on the sun. But there it is, and so although Sirius is reckless and mercurial and arrogant and immature and remarkably stupid for someone so intelligent, he has the *Thing*, and even if not every girl fancies him, he really doesn't need to get a date in advance. "What about you, Moony?"

Remus shrugs. "I'm busy winning the fair hand of Lily Evans for the less-fair-but-at-least-his-nails-are-scrubbed James Potter."

"All the wooing but none of the mess afterwards, is that it?" Sirius asks. When Remus says nothing, merely peering more closely at his nose in the soap-streaked mirror, Sirius allows himself a triumphant laugh. "I'm right, aren't I? You're having the time of your life feeding your poetry into this parrot. It's working *splendidly* and in the end you're going to be up with a box of chocolates and some book that smells like the bowels of the library while James reaps all the reward."

"I have gone about the house, gone up and down!" James exclaims. "That's it, isn't it? The next line?"

"Yes," Remus says. "That's it. On the -- nose." He pushes his hair out of his face, smiles when it falls forward again without even waiting, and steps back from the sink. "I don't know, Sirius. I'm enjoying myself."

"Course you are," Sirius scoffs. "That's just like you, isn't it."

"You're the one who suggested I help him with it in the first place, if memory serves." Remus passes by Peter on his way out, is hit with the smell of him, and winces. "Peter, that's too much."

"Isn't more better?" Peter asks helplessly.

"If you want to *literally* knock her off her feet, yes," Remus replies. "But I'm not sure that's what you're going for. Subtlety. Am I right?"

"When'd you get to be such an expert with girls?" Sirius calls after him. Remus shrugs off the usual injustices as another mood to welcome and weather. "Don't see you with any dates, now do I?"

"As a man does who has published a new book!" James howls, spilling out into the hall. "That's the next one! I'm

right, aren't I?"

"Surprisingly, yes," Remus says. "Keep going."

Sirius is mysteriously but persistently moody all day, and when Remus asks him what his problem is, he folds his arms and leans back deliberately in that way that means he's looking for a fight. "I'm not having a problem."

"Yes, you are. I'm sorry to say it, but it's unbearable. James is mouthing the wrong lines of my favorite poetry and Peter is doing nothing but rearrange the straw on his head, and for some inexplicable reason I was looking to you to be a beacon of sanity, but you've been moping around all day, and I'm quite tired of--"

"Sod off, Moony. I'm not doing anything. You're the one having a *problem*." Sirius's eyes meet his, insolent and blank. He holds Remus' eyes with the promise of losing it at any moment, but instead wheels in his chair and gets up, brushing off his knees. "Whatever. Anyway, I think we should go find Pete and watch the show. Third time's the charm, eh?" He saunters toward the door, hands shoved into his pockets.

Remus glares, but follows him out of the common room anyway, wondering whether it would be wrong to push Sirius down the stairs and then act like it was an accident. It would certainly get rid of one of the problems -- the least noisy, perhaps, and the least nervous, but the least explicable. James and Peter have their reasons to be on edge. They're dealing with girls. Girls are, to the best of Remus' knowledge, something of a different species from boys. They store a lot of secrets in their curves that Remus doesn't understand and doesn't want to understand and never will understand. Naturally James and Peter are terrified and helpless. Sirius, who has all the charm in the world at his fingertips, has no reason whatsoever to be in such a foul mood.

Sometimes, Remus thinks, boys are just as confusing as girls, and quicker to hit things like great flailing gits.

Lily is grading some of McGonagall's first-year homework in the Transfiguration classroom when James and his unseen escort come in. He coughs, discreetly. She looks up -- sees him -- and promptly looks back down again, directing an inordinate amount of focus towards the act of answer-checking. James is onto her, though, clever in making his ambling, seemingly distracted way over to her side. "So," he says, standing beside her at last. "Yeats."

"I don't know how you're doing it," Lily snaps. "I don't know why you're doing it, either. Is this some sort of *joke* for you, Potter? Some sort of trick? Some -- some sort of *prank*?"

James winces, but covers it up well. "No," he says simply. "That's not what it is."

"Don't tell me St. Valentine's Day has shown you the error of your ways," Lily grinds out.

"Not exactly," James says. He grins. "You are foremost," he begins, but Lily holds up one hand to stop him.

"I don't want anymore poetry," she explains. "It's lovely and I never thought you were capable of it, and I'm not sure I want to know what talkative little bird gave you the Yeats idea to begin with, but I think I'd like to hear, *in your own words*, why you're *persisting* so."

Remus swallows. He hasn't prepared James for this. He wouldn't have known how to, in any case. He looks to

Sirius, arms crossed over his chest, leaning in the doorway beside him. There's a smug sort of expression chasing remorse off his features, a little bit of embarrassment for his friend confusing the hardened lines of his face. Remus doesn't know if Sirius wants James to succeed or not. Remus doesn't think Sirius knows what he wants, either. "Damn," Remus mouths. Sirius shrugs.

"I fancy you," James says. "Don't ask me why. Couldn't tell you. I fancy you and I want you to go with me to Madame Puddifoot's for Valentine's Day."

Lily licks her lips. She looks around, not nervously, but thoughtfully, taking in the moment. "You're going to tell all your friends," she says. "If they're not here, watching, already."

"They're my friends," James protests. "I mean, if I don't tell them, they'll find out."

"Hm." Lily's mouth goes tight. She taps her fingers on the table. She adjusts a flyaway strand of hair, tucking it behind her ear. She watches James for a half a minute, taking the time to study his squirming. And then, she makes an evident decision, back straightening, jaw relaxing. "You're not going to leave me alone unless I say yes, are you?"

"I'll probably beg," James says. "It'll be really embarrassing."

"It'll ruin the moment," Lily agrees. "All right. Madame Puddifoot's. Tomorrow. Eight o'clock. If you're late or if you bring something from Zonko's or if I find any roaches in my tea I will hang you out upside down from the Astronomy Tower by your *underwear*, is that clear?" James nods. "Good."

"Good," James echoes. A little smile pulls at the edge of his mouth, slow and sweet and totally unlike his usual confident, swaggering grin. "Great."

"Fine," Lily says firmly, redirecting her attention to the pile of papers.

James grins stupidly at the top of her head for a minute, then turns round and bounces down the aisle between the desks. At the door -- Sirius, Peter and Remus shuffle quickly and not very discreetly out of his way -- he stops, turns back, his hand in his hair. "You won't be sorry!"

"I already am," Lily mutters, and slices a red x into someone's paper with unnecessary ferocity.

"I cannot believe this," Sirius says for about the twelfth time. He's smiling, massaging James's shoulders encouragingly if not enthusiastically, and Remus is grateful for the effort -- if effort it is. It's still hard to tell. "I cannot fucking *believe* this. You do realize this is a milestone in your personal history, don't you? The entire school is going to be talking about it. You have to make this a good one and no mistake."

"I know," James says hoarsely. He looks completely stricken, and has ever since they left the classroom. This is why, Remus thinks to himself, he doesn't go around quoting poetry at girls. The panic that comes afterwards must

be absolute -- overwhelming -- debilitating. James is already buckling under the pressure. Remus imagines he'd spend the time leading up to the ultimate goal, the date, on his knees over a toilet, relieving himself of every enjoyable meal his life ever saw. "And it's going to be a good one," James adds.

"Course it is, mate," Sirius says. "Gorgeous bird that she is, shouldn't be any problem for the dashing, mischievous you. Even with her silken red hair and green eyes all shiny the way you like them." He claps James a final hand on his shoulder, and pulls away. "No pressure at all, of course. You've been primed and ready for this day for years, after all."

"Of course," James agrees. "Oh Merlin. I'm still doomed." He flops forward, brave expression nearly melting off his face. Remus looks to Sirius, who is examining the nails of his left hand with intense fascination. "I mean, what do I know about dating *Lily Evans*? What do I know about *Madame Puddifoot's*?"

"Don't know," Sirius says. "You know a lot about roaches in tea cups, though."

"Sirius," Remus warns. "No roaches, James, remember that."

"No roaches," James repeats. "No roaches. Nothing from Zonko's. Nothing that makes any sounds of certain bodily functions. Nothing resembling owl waste or hairballs or small, dead, fuzzy animals. Nothing which emits the smell of certain bodily functions. That's easier than poetry, Remus. *That* I remember."

"Dates are easy," Sirius scoffs. "Bring her flowers or chocolates or a card or something, girls like that. Get all swoony in the knees."

James eyes him. "She's not just any girl, you know, she's *Lily Evans*. I can't just -- show up and shove a daisy at her."

"What about a lily?" Peter chimes in from the mirror, where he is alternating between holding up a garish pink shirt and a still more garish electric blue one against his chest. "Wouldn't that be sweet?"

"Lilies mean *death*, Wormtail," Sirius says, giving him a scornful look. "That's a great message for a girl on a first date: Happy Valentine's Day, I can't wait for your funeral!"

"Well, fine. How do you even know that?"

"How about that's none of your business?"

"Closet florist," James says from the table, sounding slightly better. "If I ever get *you* a flower, I know what it'll be: a pansy. Heh-heh."

"You never bring me flowers anymore anyway," Sirius says. "And now, this bint? The romance has gone completely out of our relationship. I decided long ago to leave you, Potter."

"For who? No one'll have you as you are now, all old and bitter and dried-up. And what about the children?"

"Pig."

"Wanker."

"Adulterous bastard."

"Whiny trollop."

"Children!" Remus stops them reprovingly. "James, I think you need to go get some sleep. Looking like a zombie is never considered attractive. And Sirius, you need to go--" *Find a hobby*, says a treacherous little voice in his mind. "--go somewhere and stop making James panic."

"Hm." Sirius goes back to the study of his nails, indifference settling in over his shoulders like a suit. "Think I will, Moony. Leave you lot here to muddle through your flowers and your poetry and Peter's copious cologne on your own, but when Evans punches you in the nose I will be somewhere else and otherwise occupied with *not* sweeping your shattered ego into my arms." He shoots a dark-eyed look around the room once, twice, and then turns on his heel with only a wave and a snort.

"Must be that time of the month for him," Peter says. "D'you think I should wear a bow-tie?"

"Am I really going to get punched in the nose, Moony?" James whispers, lifting his head from the table and peering at Remus from the shadows of his elbow.

"No, and no," Remus tells them both. "She likes you, James, or else I don't think she would have said yes. Just remember the three golden rules."

"One: don't play with my hair like that," James begins. Remus nods his encouragement. "Two: don't talk about Quidditch or she will break my nose." Remus nods again. "Three: no reference to, indulgence in, or acknowledgement of, pranks." Remus pats his shoulder, none of the easy boyishness in his touch that Sirius had, but more comfort.

"The rest is up to you," he says.

"We've faith in you, mate," Peter adds.

James swallows thickly. "Right," he says. "I won't let you down."



Sirius bounces into the common room, still stomping snow off his boots and shivering, looking windblown and terribly pleased with himself. Remus is already worried. Despite himself, he's really been enjoying the quiet day in the abandoned tower, all the time to himself, all the unaccustomed silence. From the look of things, he knows that Sirius Cannot Be Having with silence, and has the feeling this will inevitably lead to conflict.

"What have you done? You look like the cat that got at the canary."

"Oh, I did," Sirius says, and leers. "It has been a productive day indeed. So far I have stolen two dates, improved four by my constant presence, and ruined another, which is fine because it was Bellatrix's."

"What did you do to Bellatrix's date?" says Remus. He isn't sure he really wants to know.

"Leaned over him and thanked him for showing me such a good time last night in the Quidditch shed," Sirius says happily. "And then I said I hoped we could do it again someday when he wasn't busy and I put my tongue in his ear. You should have seen her, I thought she was going to explode. You could hear the yells all the way down the street."

"Why can't you just let people enjoy a harmless holiday?" Remus sighs. He unfolds his legs, carefully placing his book aside. "It might do you some good to just -- I don't know -- take a walk, or something, and let Valentine's Day get on with itself."

"Horror!" Sirius draws back, crossing himself quickly, or pretending to, rolling his eyes towards the heavens. "Have you any idea of what you blaspheme?" he demands.

"I don't think that's the proper," Remus begins, but Sirius cuts him off.

"To allow *Valentine's Day* to get on with itself is allowing disaster to happen! It's allowing evil to roam free! It's letting the greeting card corporations both Muggle and Wizarding to get that much closer to world domination -- Moony, *someone* has to look after the good of boys and girls everywhere."

"In other words," Remus says dryly, "I'm to take it you're like Santa Claus."

"If Santa Claus were ever fit enough to run about starting his own card franchise," Sirius agrees. "Look -- I made this one especially for you."

"Sirius," Remus says. "It's a scrap of parchment. It has notes on the back of it."

"Recyclable." Sirius lets the card fall into Remus' lap and flings himself down into a chair across from him. "Go on. Read it. It's genius in the making."

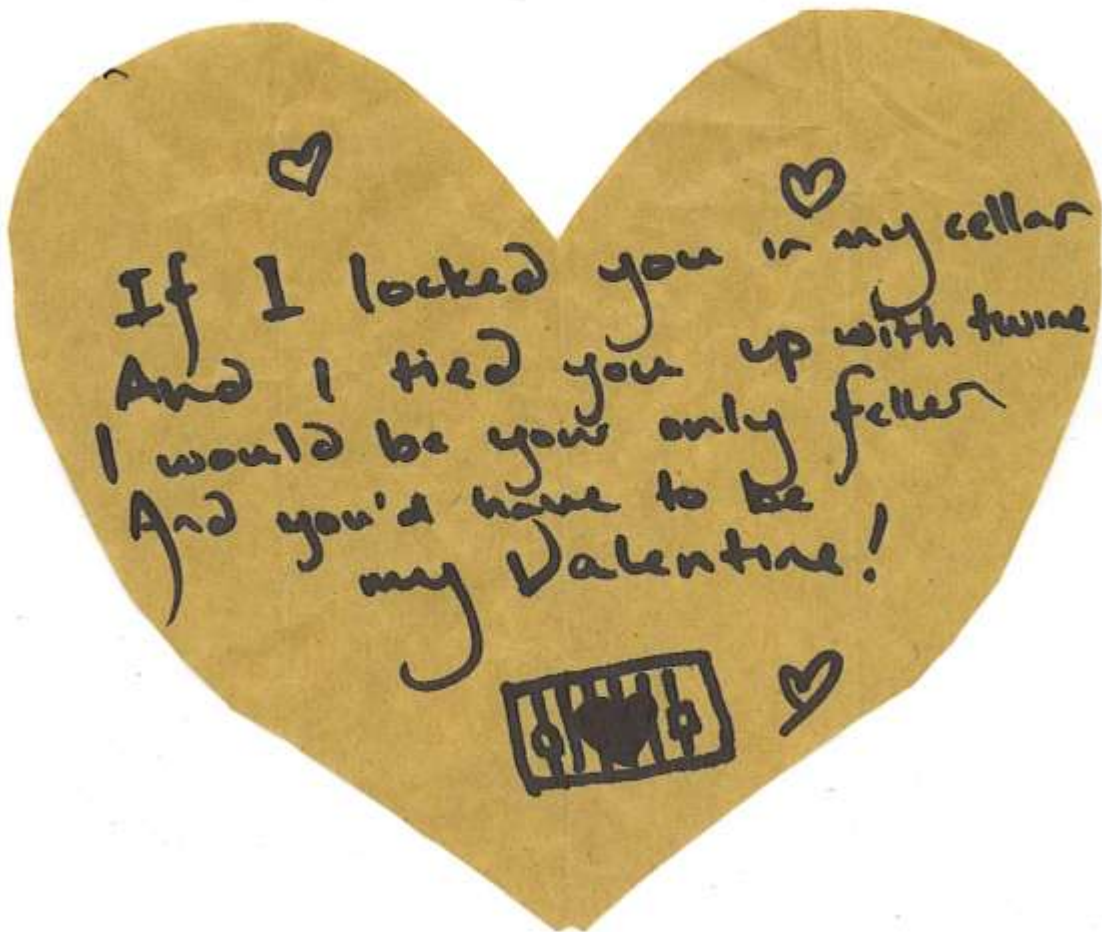


"How poetic of you," Remus says. "You're a Yeats in the making."

"I will leave express instructions when I die that no one is to use me to woo the underthings off anyone named Evans." Sirius pats his pocket. "I've loads of them. Perhaps I'll copyright them and sell them off to Zonko's, furthering the good fight."

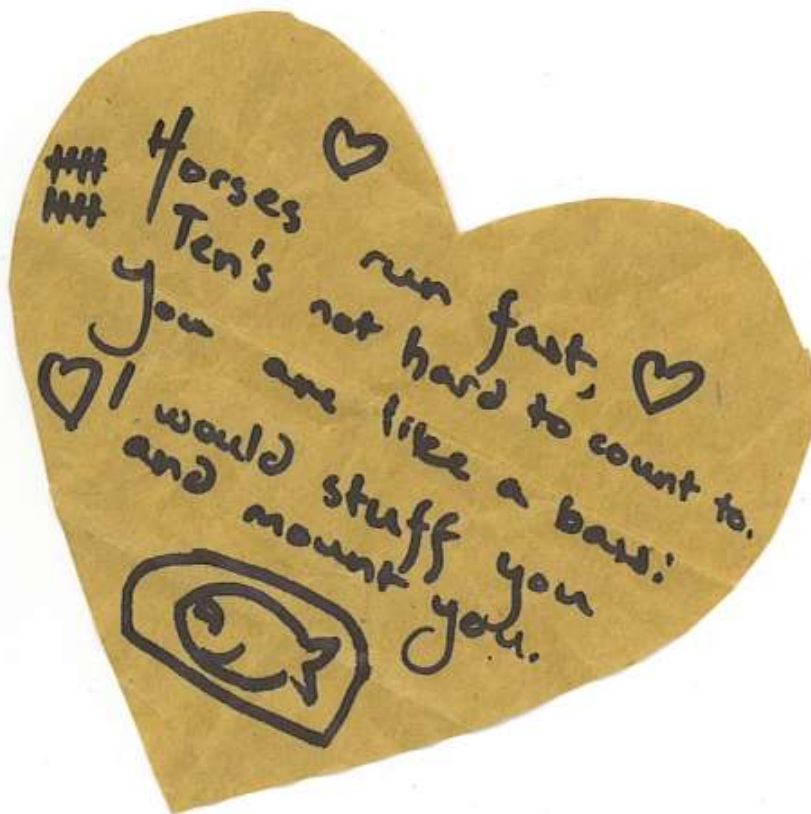
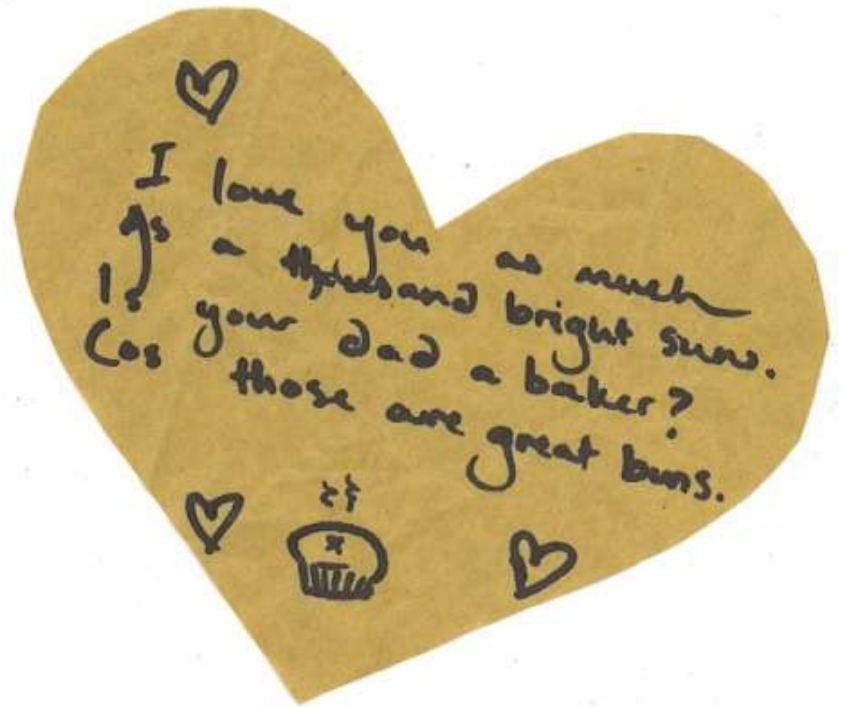
"No," Remus says.

"Tell you what, as one of my favorite customers, I'll give you a dramatic reading." He fishes another out of his pockets, clears his throat, fixes Remus with a look, and puts his hand on his heart.



"That's horrifying," Remus says.

"I know! Ooh, and here's one of my personal favorites--"





"I think I need to go somewhere and be ill," Remus says. "Truly, you know the way to a woman's heart. I am shocked, shocked, that you are not off somewhere having a glass of wine with a truly classy woman right this instant."

"No one is more shocked than I." Sirius shrugs. "But that only leaves my schedule wide open for a sneak preview tonight of the honorable James Potter's first date." He shifts his eyes slyly to Remus' face, and Remus knows immediately what's coming. "What do you say, eh, Moony? Let's make a night of it."

"Sirius," Remus protests. "If she finds out that we're *there*--"

"She won't," Sirius insists. "She won't. We'll take James' cloak and we'll be very quiet. And we can even help him out if he looks too pathetic."

"It's his date," Remus says. "Not yours. Not mine."

"Correction," Sirius replies, "it *is* your date. You, and your Yeats, and all the information you spoon-fed him about being a gentleman and sliding out chairs for girls and telling them their eyes are starry vortexes of infinity."

"I never said that," Remus mutters.

"Well you never said anything about slamming doors and mounting basses, that's for sure. More's the pity. Catch the *right* kind of girl, that way."

"If you catch any at all." Remus opens his book intently, flipping forward to his place. "I'm sorry, Sirius. I'm reading. I've been reading. I'm going to keep reading. I don't believe in Valentine's Day and going to Madame Puddifoot's would be deeply hypocritical."

"But," Sirius says, grin pulling at his words, "if I go alone and you're not there to keep an eye on me, think how James' date might just be ruined."

Remus pauses. "You wouldn't."

"Wouldn't what?"

"You *would*."

"*Would* I."

"You would! I can see it in your eyes."

"Starry vortexes of infinity that they are." Sirius tosses back his head and laughs. "You've got ten minutes to get ready, Moony, or I am riding for doom and destruction without you."

"Aahgh," Remus says, drops the book on the table, and trails upstairs to get his cloak.

Madame Puddifoot's is a deeply horrifying place. Remus has believed this ever since Mafalda Hopkirk dragged him here in the third year and tried to give him a lock of her hair while a cupid hovered overhead and strummed merrily on his lyre. It's even worse than the fanged mistletoe. Luckily, the cupids appear to be as affected by the cloak as anyone else, and mercifully ignore him and Sirius as they stroll over and take a seat in one of the huge, squashy armchairs.

"Someone's going to sit on us," Remus hisses.

"You're already sitting on me," Sirius points out, sounding slightly short of breath. "And much heavier you are than you look. Mercy on my poor lungs, Moony. Don't worry, no one's going to sit over here, it's much too public. Believe me, no respectable girl will sit in this chair with you; this is the chair of lonely, voyeuristic bastards. I've seen 'em in here before. Severus Snape is extremely fond of this chair."

"Has he got a date?" Remus wonders aloud.

"Not anymore!" Sirius says, rather too contentedly. "Can you see either of our targets?"

Remus casts about for an instant, and then spots a familiar fuchsia shirt and limp blond head, not five feet from where they are seated. "There's Peter and what's-her-name! Right there, just to your left--" Sirius shifts under him, digging his knee accidentally into Remus's thigh, and Remus gives a muffled yowl of pain.

"Where?"

"Just there. Can't you see the pink?"

"I'd rather I hadn't." Sirius pats Remus' thigh, distracted but apologetic. "It's blinding. Why'd you let him wear that?"

"The other options were worse," Remus sighs. "Hard as I know that is to believe. Well. They look like they're having a good time of it anyway, don't they." As if on cue, he and Sirius lean forward, heads tilted to catch snippets of inane date conversation.

"You look nice," Peter is saying. "No, really, you do."

The girl laughs, cheerful and empty. "So do you. I love that shirt."

"Well," Sirius whispers, "Peter's found himself a complete nutter."

"Shh," Remus reprimands, "I can't hear."

"I didn't know what sort of flowers you'd like," Peter continues, shy but unflaggingly brave. "So I got one of each and sort of had it all wrapped up in one bouquet, like."

"Oh, Peter," Peter's date says.

"Oh, my stomach," Sirius groans.

"Oh, shut up," Remus mutters.

"Oh, you're welcome," Peter replies.

"*Next*," Sirius says, snagging Remus by the wrist and pulling him up through the rows of tiny, secluded, supposedly romantic tables. They pass by a few nameless third and fourth years being awkward at one another, almost playing a game of warring incompetence, and Remus is glad he missed all this. A little worried at the prospect of being capable in his future, but on the whole glad he missed all this. Sirius makes small noises of contempt in the back of his throat, muttering *beginners*, *all* at odd intervals, or *amateurs*, *I tell you*, or *he could do with one of my cards*. Remus doesn't even try to make him quiet down. It's a losing battle he no longer has the energy to fight. All the satin and shades of clashing pink and sparkle-toothed waitresses have sapped the life force out of him.

"This holiday is horrifying," he whispers. "It's the most depressing thing I've ever born witness to."

"With you one hundred percent," Sirius says grimly. "Where on earth is Prongs? I hope his body hasn't been dumped in a gutter."

"Oh God," Remus says, amazed at Sirius's ability to come up with new and horrible outcomes that had never even occurred to him. "No, Lily wouldn't do that. She'd cover her tracks."

"There!" Sirius yips, and drags him forward again, to one of the side tables less frequented by Cupids.

"...really do hate this place," Evans is saying when they skid breathlessly up to the table. Sirius flattens them both against the wall, staring intently at the two of them.

"Me too," James mutters. His hands are wound into his hair, and under the table Remus can see his leg jiggling frenetically. "It's like -- like being raped by a marshmallow, is what it's like."

"Oh God," Remus clutches at Sirius's arm in a blind rush of panic. "Oh God, he didn't say that."

"Oh God, he did," Sirius says, sounding gleeful.

And then, to their immense shock, Evans laughs, abrupt and surprised. "That's it exactly! What were you thinking, asking me here?"

"I don't know," James replies. "I thought you might be distracted by all the glitter and forget it was me you were here with."

"Not working," Lily says. She gives him an odd sideways look, light green eyes catching gold in the Romantic Atmosphere. "Did you try to comb your hair?"

"What is she doing?" Sirius hisses. "She's -- she's undermining, is what she's doing, and I won't stand for it!"

"Quiet." Remus elbows him.

"Er," James says. "I am a big believer in making an effort? I did my best, you know."

"How much Sleekeasy's is in there?" There's a laugh bubbling on the edge of Lily's voice, sweet and surprising.

"Loads." James gives her a mournful look. "If I bent it, I swear, it would snap off. Try knocking on it; it's like a helmet." He lowers his head towards her and Lily raps her knuckles against James's head. She giggles. It crackles. James laughs.

"This is disgusting," Sirius fumes. "We have to do something about it--"

"No we don't!" Remus snaps, lunging at him and catching the back of his robes. "Agh. Come on. Let's give them some privacy."

"They don't *need* privacy; they *need* someone to stop this madness before the two of them fancy themselves --"

well -- *you* know." Remus drags Sirius back, nearly tearing his sleeves, Sirius' heels dragging on the carpeting.

"Look." Remus brings their faces very close together, trying his best to be firm without being too harsh. "Do you see them? Having such a good time? I spent *hours* teaching James *Yeats*, while Yeats spent *hours* rolling around in his *grave*. This is something worth protecting. This is a triumph of will and perseverance. This is the fruit of all our labors. This is James *not getting punched in the nose*. Aren't you in the least bit happy for him?"

"I don't like her," Sirius says tersely. "I don't like her at *all*."

"Well, James does," Remus replies. "You're just going to have to get used to it." Sirius turns, looking back over his shoulder at the Lovely Couple Scene made a few feet behind them. James is loosening his tie and Lily is flicking pieces of her napkin at a cupid hovering too close to their table. They look happy. Lily looks wicked, James looks relieved enough to wet himself, and they look happy.

"I hate this place," Sirius snarls. "Let's get out of here."

Sometime in the night it begins to snow. The Gryffindor Common Room is quiet save for the crackling of the fire and the occasional snort of Sirius' angry inner monologue bursting through to the surface. Remus spends a half hour studying him, a half hour analyzing the problem, and another half hour diagnosing it. From nine-thirty until eleven o'clock, he tries to read, and fails miserably. "Well," he says finally, "I don't suppose you want any chocolate?"

"Yes," Sirius says miserably. "Give it here. This is the worst holiday in the world. Where is he? Why isn't he back? What if he's been run over by a coach? No one would ever know. He knows I get worried when he gets in late and he hasn't even the consideration to owl me or Floo me or anything--"

"He's always in late," Remus reminds him. "And you always wake him up in the morning and give him a high-five and the Inquisition. Where's he supposed to Floo you from, anyway?"

"He's not always in late with Lily Evans," Sirius mutters, and puts his face in his hands. "Ughh. Moony, I'm sorry. I don't mean to be like this, I swear, I don't. We all wanted it to work. I'm happy for him. Honestly, I am." He gives Remus an immense, horrifying smile.

"That's unnerving." Remus cringes. "Please don't do it anymore."

Sirius slumps even further down into himself. "I hate this bloody holiday. Didn't you offer chocolate?"

"I don't see what you're so depressed about," Remus says, trying to be comforting, as he leans over the chair and rummages in his bag for his ever-present package of Honeydukes' Finest. "You could have had a date, if you liked."

"I didn't like," Sirius says gloomily. "I hate dating. It's the romantic equivalent of making small talk about the

weather with the man who's about to give you your lottery winnings. Everyone knows what's going to happen, but you have to go through some useless ritual with someone who isn't even your friend, who doesn't even really care about being your friend, just to get there. It's pointless and degrading." Wordlessly, Remus hands him a bar of dark -- his favorite -- and Sirius crams it into his mouth, looking black. "I hope he's lost in the snow," he adds, spewing bits of chocolate onto his shirt. "What about you?"

"What about me, what?" Remus leans over to peer beneath the chair, fishes one hand underneath it, and tugs out a large heart full of chocolates. "Failed attempts," he explains. "The rejected parties always leave their chocolate offerings of appeasement behind. Thwarted love ruins the appetite, I've heard. Do you want one?"

"Sure. One of the one's with coconut." Sirius drags himself up and across to personally fondle every one of the chocolates, before picking one which, by his expression, must be cherry-filled, or one of those gross melting nougat concoctions that taste like human waste. "What about you," he continues, swallowing valiantly. "I mean, why aren't you on a date?"

"Someone's got to stay behind and make sure you don't fling yourself into the fireplace in despair," Remus points out.

"You could've had one," Sirius presses. "What with your poetry and your gentleman's guide to getting the girl and all your great advice. The girls would have been lining up for you -- well, the one's without dates already, anyway. And the one's I didn't sneak away with in the night. Why didn't you?"

"Sirius," Remus replies, "what would *I* know about what to *do* with a *girl*? Talk to her? About poetry? All night long? She'd fling her fork at my face to get me to shut up, if she didn't fall asleep from boredom before she managed it. Or I'd just sit there staring at her not knowing what to say, my tongue some great sausage in my head, my body frozen to the spot, while she was left to wonder if I'd been bitten by a poisonous spider or if I was simply having a fit." Remus shakes his head, licking chocolate politely from his fingers. "No. Thank you. I've enough trouble talking to *people*. I'd be a glutton for punishment, getting myself into talking to *girls*."

"Girls like you," Sirius insists.

"They'll get over it," Remus says firmly.

"You always give up on yourself. It's irritating." Sirius makes a horrible face at his chocolate selection. "Someday we'll find you a girl worth your time. Oh, that'll be in my teeth for the rest of the year."



"Here," Remus says. "This one's coconut. I can smell it."

Sirius takes it gratefully. "You're a good friend. Though all too well," he adds, looking up and wrinkling his nose, "do I know the folly of being comforted."

"That's almost Yeats," Remus says, taken aback.


"I know," Sirius says, and grins a little.

Cowritten by  [dorkorific](#) and  [ladyjaida](#).



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Don't worry; Peter won't be stupidified. **Trust us** on that one.

We would like to take a moment to thank  [windjinn](#) for leaping down the stairs with  [ladyjaida](#)'s bra on his head.

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