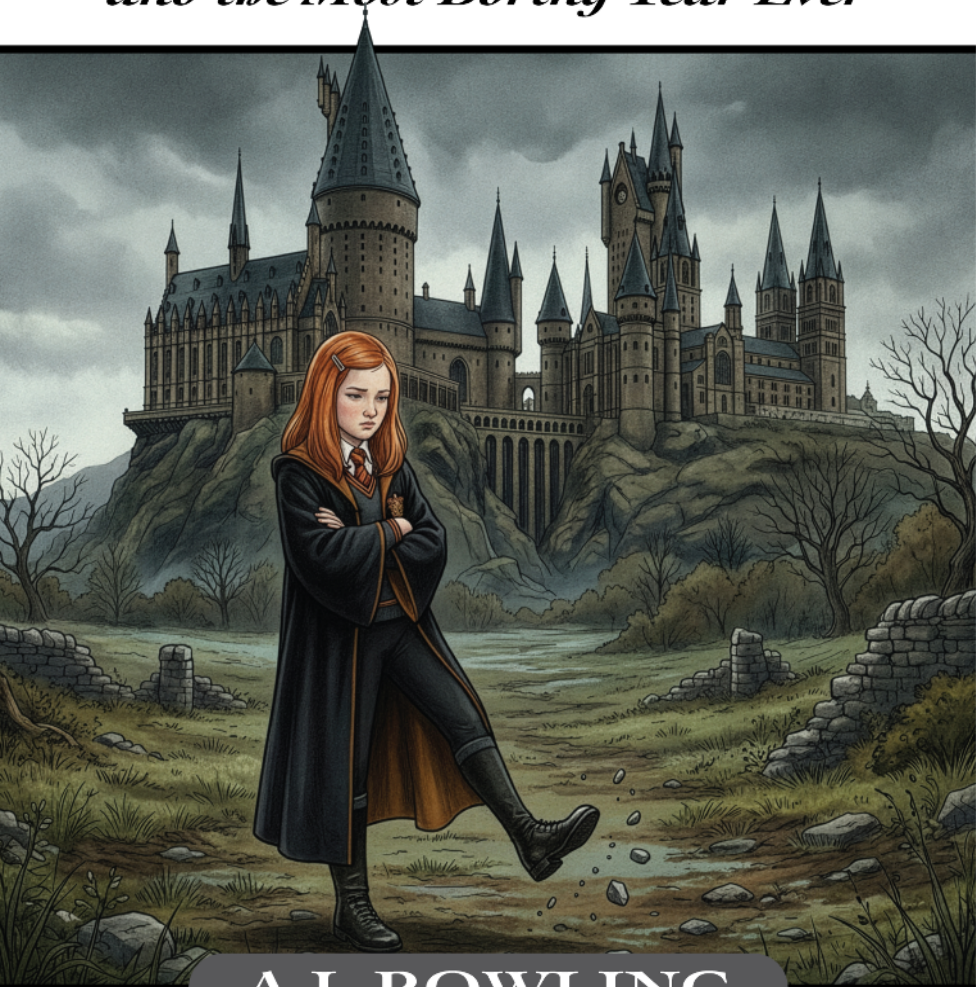


LILY LUNA POTTER

and the Most Boring Year Ever



A.I. ROWLING

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— CHAPTER ONE —

The Journey Begins

Lily Luna Potter had made her father tell her the stories of his first year at Hogwarts so many times she could recite every word by the time she was nine.

The three-headed dog. The troll in the dungeon. The midnight duel. And of course, the final confrontation with You-Know-Who himself, which Dad always skipped over when she asked about it, his face going tight in that way that meant the conversation was over.

She'd been asking since she was six. Stories at bedtime, over Sunday breakfast, whenever she could convince him. He'd describe the smell of the troll ("like a public toilet mixed with old socks"), the way the Sorting Hat had whispered in his ear, how terrified he'd been flying for the first time. She'd memorized every detail.

Now, standing in her bedroom doorway watching Mum pack her Hogwarts trunk, Lily felt her stomach twist with anticipation.

Today was the day.

"Lily, love, have you seen your other dragon-hide glove?" Ginny called from inside the wardrobe. "I can only find the left one."

"I don't know. Under my bed?"

Lily's attention was fixed on the living room below. Through the banister, she could see her father sitting in his armchair, staring out the window at the garden. He'd been quiet all morning. James, on the other hand, had been the opposite—thundering around the house since breakfast, insisting his Chudley Cannons banner had mysteriously vanished and making a dramatic production of repacking his trunk for the third time. Albus had packed his trunk three days ago and was now sitting on the sofa with a book, occasionally glancing at James with the weary patience of someone who'd survived two years of this routine already.

Was Dad remembering his own first day? Was he worried about Lily?

She hoped he was worried. That would mean he expected something dangerous to happen.

"Got it!" Ginny emerged from the wardrobe, waving the matching glove triumphantly. She caught Lily's expression and smiled. "You look like you're about to jump out of your skin. Nervous?"

"No," Lily said quickly. Then, more honestly, "Maybe a bit."

She wasn't nervous, though. She was ready. She'd been preparing for this her entire life. She knew every password and secret passage Dad had told her about. She'd practised the Disarming Charm until she could perform it with her wand without thinking. (Trying it wandlessly had earned her a Ministry warning and Mum's most withering look.)

Ginny set the glove in the trunk and sat beside Lily on the bed, brushing a strand of red hair from Lily's face. "You know, when I was your age, I was so excited to start Hogwarts I could barely sleep for a week."

"Really?" Lily leaned forward.

"Oh yes. I kept imagining all the adventures I'd have. The spells I'd learn. The friends I'd make." Ginny's smile turned wry. "Of course, my first year didn't quite go as planned."

The diary. The Chamber of Secrets. The basilisk. Mum never talked about it much, but Aunt Hermione had filled in the details one Christmas after too much mulled wine.

"But you survived," Lily pointed out.

"I did." Ginny studied her daughter's face. "Lily, you know Hogwarts is safe now, don't you? McGonagall runs a tight ship. There hasn't been a major incident in over twenty years."

The knot in Lily's stomach loosened - not with relief, but with something closer to disappointment. Adults always did this. Told you everything was fine right up until it wasn't.

"I know," Lily said.

They finished packing in silence. Lily's trunk was already overflowing with school robes, textbooks, cauldrons, and all the other supplies on her list. She'd also managed to sneak in a Muggle torch, a pocket knife, and a length of rope.

Just in case.

Her wand - ten inches, willow, unicorn hair, 'swishy' according to Mr Ollivander - was tucked securely in her jacket pocket. She kept touching it to make sure it was still there.

By the time they loaded all three trunks into the car—James claiming the best spot for his, naturally—and drove to King's Cross, Lily's heart was hammering. The Muggle station bustled with the usual chaos - harried travellers dragging wheeled suitcases, screeching train announcements, the smell of coffee and pastries from the station café.

Lily barely noticed any of it.

Her eyes were fixed on the barrier between platforms nine and ten.

James went first, striding through with casual confidence. Then Albus, quieter, pushing his trolley with steady determination.

"Ready?" Harry asked, appearing at Lily's side. He'd been quiet during the drive, but now he gave her one of his rare, genuine smiles - the kind that made the scar on his forehead crinkle slightly.

"Ready."

"Remember, lean into it. Don't hesitate or you'll lose your nerve."

Lily nodded, gripping her trolley tightly. She'd been through the barrier before—years of seeing James and Albus off—but this time she wasn't going back home with Mum and Dad. This time she was getting on the train.

She took a breath, picked up speed, and pushed through.

The world shifted.

The Muggle station's fluorescent lights and grey concrete dissolved. Platform 9¾ spread before her in a glorious riot of colour and noise and magic—the scarlet Hogwarts Express gleamed like a jewel in the lamplight, its enormous engine billowing thick white steam that smelled of coal and adventure and promises of the journey ahead. Owls hooted and shrieked from their cages with voices that echoed across the crowded platform, students and parents crowded everywhere in robes of every colour imaginable from emerald green to midnight blue to warm amber, whilst trunks scraped across the ground and friends reunited after the long summer with squeals and embraces and rapid-fire conversations. Everywhere Lily looked there was magic happening casually, thoughtlessly, wonderfully—older students near the train entrance levitating their trunks aboard and laughing as one trunk spun in lazy circles before settling in the luggage compartment, a girl's ginger cat escaping and

darting between people's legs whilst the girl shouted after it in exasperation, two younger boys comparing wands and arguing earnestly about core materials, an owl swooping low overhead clutching a letter in its talons and nearly colliding with a floating trunk. The whole platform was alive with the kind of chaotic magical energy that made Lily's heart race with anticipation.

Pure magic.

Lily stopped and stared, trying to take it all in.

The wizarding world, in all its chaotic glory.

James had already spotted a cluster of Gryffindor Quidditch players and was heading their way, calling out greetings. Albus stood near the barrier waiting for their parents, his trunk beside him, scanning the crowd with the careful watchfulness he'd developed over two years of being a Potter in Slytherin.

"Lily! Over here!"

Hugo was waving frantically from further down the platform, his shock of red hair unmistakable even in the crowd. Her cousin's face was split in an enormous grin.

Lily waved back, then felt her father's hand land on her shoulder.

Harry and Ginny were making their rounds—Ginny had already hugged James (who'd tolerated it with good humour before escaping back to his friends), and Harry was having a quiet word with Albus nearby. But now it was Lily's turn.

"You'll write, won't you?" Harry said quietly.

"Every week." Even though she secretly hoped she'd be too busy with adventures to write that often.

"And if anything strange happens - "

"I'll tell Headmistress McGonagall immediately." She'd heard this lecture three times already. Today.

Harry hesitated. For a moment she thought he might launch into another safety speech. Instead, he pulled her into a quick, tight hug. "I'm proud of you, Lily Luna. You're going to do brilliantly."

Ginny hugged her next, holding on a bit longer. "Be yourself. Don't worry about what anyone else expects. And please, please try to attend at least some of your classes instead of exploring secret passages all the time."

"Mum, I would never - "

"You're already planning which ones to explore first, aren't you?"

Lily felt her face heat. "For educational purposes."

Ginny laughed and kissed the top of her head. "Just like your father. Go on, then. Hugo's waiting."

Lily grabbed her trunk and navigated through the crowd towards Hugo, who immediately launched into an excited babble about their compartment strategy and which sweets they should buy from the trolley.

" - and James said the Chocolate Frogs are the best but Albus insists the Bertie Bott's are more fun because you might get a disgusting flavour, which I think means he's mental, honestly - Lily, are you listening?"

"Yeah," Lily said, though she wasn't.

Her attention had snagged on something else.

There, near the train's middle carriages, stood a tall, lanky boy about her age with dark hair that fell into his eyes. He was alone, watching the platform with an unreadable expression. His trunk sat beside him, battered and covered in faded stickers from various magical locations.

No parents in sight.

Something about him seemed off. Furtive.

Suspicious.

First potential mystery: the boy with no parents.

"Earth to Lily!" Hugo waved a hand in front of her face. "Come on, let's get a good compartment before they're all full."

They boarded the train. Hugo led the way with the confidence of someone who'd heard all about the Hogwarts Express from his older cousins. The narrow corridor was packed with students greeting friends, shoving trunks into overhead racks, creating organised chaos.

"Here!" Hugo threw open the door to a compartment near the front. It was empty, with burgundy seats facing each other and a window overlooking the platform. "Perfect."

They wrestled their trunks into the storage space and collapsed onto the seats just as the train's whistle blew. Through the window, Lily watched the platform begin to move - or rather, watched the train begin to move whilst the platform stayed still. Parents waved. Students leaned out of windows, shouting last-minute goodbyes.

Mum and Dad were somewhere in that crowd.

But Lily had already turned her attention forwards.

The train picked up speed, leaving London behind. Buildings gave way to countryside, green and rolling under a grey September sky. Lily pressed her face to the window, watching the landscape blur past.

"So," Hugo said, pulling out a bag of Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans. "What do you think our first adventure will be?"

Lily accepted a bean. Lemon, thankfully. "Maybe there's something wrong with the castle wards. Or a cursed artefact in one of the classrooms. Or - " She sat up straighter. "Or maybe there's a student who's actually a Dark wizard in disguise."

"That seems a bit far-fetched."

"My dad dealt with a Dark wizard pretending to be a teacher in his fourth year."

"Yeah, but that was different. That was during the war. Now it's just... school."

Lily shot him a look. "Nothing's ever 'just school' at Hogwarts. Haven't you read any of the history? There's always something."

Hugo crunched thoughtfully on a bean, made a face (vomit-flavoured, probably), and swallowed with difficulty. "I guess. But what if this year is different? What if it's actually, you know, normal?"

"It won't be." Lily's voice was certain. "It can't be."

Because if Hogwarts was just a normal school now, with normal classes and normal problems, then what was the point? She wasn't here to learn Transfiguration and the history of goblin rebellions. She was here to have an adventure. To prove she was brave like Dad. To face danger and come out the other side stronger.

Anything less would be unbearable.

The trolley witch appeared eventually, rattling her cart of sweets down the corridor. Lily and Hugo pooled their money and bought enough Chocolate Frogs, Pumpkin Pasties, and Liquorice Wands to make themselves thoroughly sick. Hugo did indeed get a vomit-flavoured bean and spent the next ten minutes regretting it.

Other students passed their compartment, some glancing in curiously. A few first-years poked their heads in to ask if there was room, but Hugo told them they were saving seats for friends. A lie, but a harmless one. Lily

recognised some faces from the platform - the girl whose cat had escaped, a pair of identical twins arguing in whispers, a boy with glasses who looked terrified.

And once, the dark-haired boy from the platform walked past their compartment, glancing in briefly before moving on.

Lily met his eyes for just a second.

They were grey. Sharp. Assessing.

Definitely suspicious.

"Who was that?" Hugo asked.

"No idea. But I'm going to find out."

Hugo sighed. "Here we go."

The sun was starting to set by the time the train slowed. A prefect stuck their head into the compartment to announce they should change into their robes. Lily's hands shook slightly as she pulled on the plain black robes - unmarked, with no house colours yet.

By tomorrow, she'd have a house. She'd be sorted, like her parents and brothers before her.

Gryffindor, probably. She hoped it was Gryffindor. That's where the brave ones went, and she was going to need bravery for whatever awaited her this year.

The train shuddered to a stop. Chaos erupted as students poured off onto a dark, lamp-lit platform. Lily could barely see through the crowd. Then she heard it - a voice that carried over the noise like a foghorn:

"Firs' years! Firs' years over here!"

Hagrid.

Lily's heart leapt. She'd heard so many stories about the gentle half-giant who'd been her father's first friend in the wizarding world. Now here he was, enormous and beaming, waving a lamp the size of a small cauldron.

"Come on," Hugo said, tugging her sleeve. "We need to get to the boats."

The first-years clustered around Hagrid, who led them down a steep, narrow path that smelt of lake water and pine.

And then Lily saw it.

Hogwarts.

The castle rose from the far shore of the black lake, its windows blazing with light, its towers reaching towards the stars. The sight of it stole her breath.

This was where her father had fought a basilisk. Where he'd set up Dumbledore's Army with Aunt Hermione and Uncle Ron. Where he'd died and come back to life.

This was where she would prove herself.

"No more'n four to a boat!" Hagrid called.

Lily climbed into the nearest boat with Hugo and two other first-years she didn't know yet - a boy with dark skin and nervous energy, and a girl with wild curly hair who kept fidgeting with her wand.

The boats glided across the lake without oars, moving by magic. Lily trailed her fingers in the cold water and stared up at the castle, trying to memorise every tower, every window, every shadow.

By this time tomorrow, her adventure would have begun.

She couldn't wait.

— CHAPTER TWO —

The Sorting

The Great Hall was even more magnificent than Lily had imagined. The ceiling soared impossibly high above them, enchanted to mirror the night sky outside where clouds drifted lazily across a field of stars and a shooting star streaked past one of the distant rafters leaving a trail of silver light in its wake. Thousands of candles floated in midair like golden fireflies, casting warm honey-coloured light that danced and flickered over four long house tables that stretched the entire length of the hall and were packed with hundreds of students whose faces turned toward the incoming first-years with curiosity and welcome and remembered nervousness. At the far end on its raised platform, the staff table gleamed with silver and crystal and the stern faces of professors in formal robes who watched the new arrivals with expressions ranging from Professor McGonagall's sharp assessment to what must be Professor Longbottom's warm encouragement. The whole vast space echoed with the sound of hundreds of conversations and the clink of goblets and the rustle of robes, creating an atmosphere of ancient magic and timeless tradition that made Lily's breath catch in her throat.

Home. This was Hogwarts.

Lily's eyes went immediately to the Headmistress's chair.

Professor McGonagall sat ramrod straight in the centre seat, her pointed hat adding another foot to her already imposing height. She looked exactly as she did in Dad's stories: sharp, severe, and utterly unflappable. Lily had met her a few times at family events, and the professor had always been kind in her brusque way.

But here, in her element, she was formidable.

She'd held off Voldemort's forces during the Battle of Hogwarts. She'd duelled Snape. She was probably the most powerful witch in Britain.

If McGonagall was still here, surely that meant danger still lurked somewhere in the castle. You didn't keep a warrior as Headmistress unless there were battles left to fight.

"Blimey," Hugo whispered beside her. "It's massive."

The first-years clustered together at the entrance to the hall. A few older students called out encouragements or teasing remarks as they passed. Lily spotted James at the Gryffindor table, grinning like an idiot. He caught her eye and gave her an exaggerated thumbs-up. Further down, at the Slytherin table, Albus sat next to Scorpius Malfoy, both of them looking far too cool and collected.

Her brothers. One in Gryffindor like Dad, one in Slytherin like - well, like a lot of complicated people from the war.

Lily didn't know which house she wanted, but she knew it mattered. Houses defined you at Hogwarts. They became your family, your identity, your legacy.

No pressure.

"First-years, please form a line!"

Professor McGonagall had descended from the staff table and now stood before them, holding an ancient scroll. Behind her, perched on a wooden stool, sat the Sorting Hat.

Lily stared at it. The hat was exactly as Dad had described - patched, frayed, and somehow both ridiculous and deeply intimidating. It looked like it might fall apart if you breathed on it too hard, yet she knew it held a thousand years of Hogwarts history in its folds.

The hall fell silent.

And then the hat began to sing.

The brim opened wide like a mouth, and a voice rang out - surprisingly rich and ridiculously melodious for something that looked like it belonged in a rubbish bin. Around Lily, the other first-years went still, transfixed by the sight of a thousand-year-old magical artefact performing what was essentially a musical number about school houses.

*I'll find the house that suits you best,
And helps you with your magic quest.
In Slytherin or Gryffindor,
or Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw*

*The cunning, brave, the loyal, wise-
Each of the houses holds its prize.
Though darkness came in days of old,
New stories are now yours to hold.*

*So listen me, and think things through,
But let me do the rest for you.
For when I'm done, you'll have your home-
The place where you are meant to roam.*

The song ended, the hat's brim falling limp once more. Scattered applause rippled through the hall.

Lily's heart was still pounding. New stories are now yours to hold. Even the Sorting Hat knew that things were different now. Peaceful. Safe. Boring.

McGonagall unrolled her scroll. "When I call your name, you will come forwards, place the hat on your head, and be sorted into your house." Her voice carried effortlessly across the hall, crisp and authoritative. "Blackwood, Nova!"

A small girl with dark curls and anxious eyes stepped forwards. She was the girl from Lily's boat, the one who'd been fidgeting with her wand the whole way across the lake.

Now she looked like she might faint.

McGonagall placed the hat on Nova's head. It slipped down over her eyes.

For a long moment, nothing happened. The hall waited. Nova's hands clenched in her robes.

Then - "RAVENCLAW!"

The Ravenclaw table erupted in cheers. Nova pulled off the hat with visible relief and practically ran to join her new house, where older students were already making room.

"Finch-Fletchley, Marcus!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Finnegan, Bridget!"

"GRYFFINDOR!"

The sorting continued. Each name called meant one less person between Lily and her fate. She tried to calm her breathing. Around her, other first-years shifted nervously. Hugo had gone pale, his freckles standing out in sharp relief.

"You'll be fine," Lily whispered.

"Easy for you to say. You're a Potter. You'll definitely get Gryffindor."

Would she, though?

Dad had been brave, there was no question. Mum too. Even her brothers had their own kinds of courage - James with his reckless confidence, Albus with his quiet defiance of expectations. But what did Lily have? She'd never faced a troll or a basilisk. She'd never saved anyone's life. She'd just... read about it. Prepared for it. Waited for her chance.

Was that enough?

"Flint, Kieran!"

Lily's attention snapped up. It was the boy from the platform - the dark-haired one with no parents. He walked forwards with an easy, confident stride that seemed at odds with his worn robes and battered trunk.

When McGonagall placed the hat on his head, it barely touched his hair before shouting -

"SLYTHERIN!"

The Slytherin table cheered, though not as enthusiastically as they had for some of the others. Kieran pulled off the hat and headed to join them, his expression unreadable. He took a seat near Albus, who nodded at him in greeting.

Flint. The name was familiar. Hadn't there been a Flint who played Quidditch during Dad's years? Marcus Flint, the Slytherin Beater who'd been notorious for playing dirty?

Two mysteries now: the boy with no parents was a boy with a Death Eater surname.

"Granger-Weasley, Hugo!"

"Oh God," Hugo muttered, and stumbled forwards.

Lily held her breath as McGonagall placed the hat on her cousin's head. Hugo's eyes were squeezed shut, his lips moving in what might have been a prayer or a plea.

The hat sat there for what felt like ages. Longer than anyone else so far.

Come on, Lily thought. Gryffindor. Put him in Gryffindor with me.

But that was selfish, wasn't it? The hat was supposed to choose the house that fitted you best, not the house your family wanted. Uncle Ron had been in Gryffindor, and Aunt Hermione too, but that didn't mean Hugo had to follow in their footsteps.

Finally, the hat spoke: "HUFFLEPUFF!"

The Hufflepuff table exploded with cheers and applause. Hugo opened his eyes, looking stunned, then broke into a huge relieved grin. He practically skipped over to the Hufflepuff table, where students were already clapping him on the back.

Hufflepuff. Loyal, hard-working, fair-minded Hufflepuff.

It suited Hugo, actually. He'd never been one for glory-seeking or adventure. He just wanted people to be happy and safe.

She was happy for him.

She was.

(She was also, privately, a little disappointed. She'd hoped they'd be in the same house.)

More names. More sortings. The line of first-years grew shorter.

"MacDougal, Emma!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

"Nott, Theodore Jr!"

"SLYTHERIN!"

Another familiar surname. Another family with complicated history. The wizarding world was small that way - everyone was related to everyone else, connected by blood or betrayal or both.

"Potter, Lily!"

The hall went quiet.

Not the normal quiet that followed each name, but something deeper. Lily felt the weight of hundreds of eyes turning towards her. Whispers rustled through the tables like wind through leaves.

" - Harry Potter's daughter - "

" - the third kid, I think - "

" - wonder which house - "

Her legs felt like jelly as she walked forwards. McGonagall's expression softened almost imperceptibly as she picked up the hat.

"Miss Potter," she said quietly, just for Lily's ears. "Your father was one of the finest students I ever taught. I have no doubt you'll do the Potter name proud, no matter which house you find yourself in."

Lily nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

The hat descended.

Everything went dark as it covered her eyes, and then -

Well, well, well. The hat's voice spoke directly into her mind, dry and amused.
Another Potter. How delightfully predictable.

Lily's first instinct was to snap back with something witty, but she restrained herself. Making enemies with an ancient magical artefact that controlled your fate seemed unwise.

You've got your father's courage, the hat continued, though you've never been tested the way he was. You want to be, don't you? Want to prove yourself. Want an adventure of your own.

Yes, Lily thought fiercely. I want to matter. I want to do something important.

Mmm. Ambitious. That could be Slytherin. You've got the cunning for it too - I can see how you've been watching, cataloguing, planning who might be hiding something.

Was she really that transparent?

But no, the hat said thoughtfully. Ambition isn't quite the right word for you, is it? You don't want power for its own sake. You want to be brave. You want to be good. You want to live up to a legacy that weighs heavier than any eleven-year-old should have to carry.

I can handle it, Lily thought.

Perhaps. Perhaps not. But you'll certainly try. And that trying, that determination to stand up and be counted even when you're terrified - that's Gryffindor through and through.

Relief and pride flooded through her.

But let me give you a word of advice, Lily Potter, the hat said, its voice dropping lower, more serious. Courage isn't always about facing Dark wizards and fighting battles. Sometimes it's about accepting that life won't always be dangerous. Can you be brave enough to be ordinary?

Lily didn't have an answer for that.

The hat chuckled. *No, I didn't think so. Well, off you go then.* "GRYFFINDOR!"

The last word rang out across the hall, and the Gryffindor table erupted. Lily pulled off the hat with shaking hands, handed it back to McGonagall, and

walked towards her new house on legs that didn't quite feel like they belonged to her.

James was whooping and hollering, embarrassing her thoroughly. Other students she didn't know were grinning and waving her over. Someone shouted, "We got another Potter!" and someone else started a chant of "Gryffindor! Gryffindor!"

Lily slid onto the bench, accepting congratulations from all sides, and looked up at the staff table. Several professors were smiling - she recognised Professor Longbottom, who taught Herbology and had been one of Dad's best friends. He gave her an enthusiastic wave.

But her eyes drifted to Headmistress McGonagall, who had returned to calling names.

"Prewett, Lark!"

A tall girl with long blonde hair and an air of absolute confidence strode forwards. Her robes looked expensive, perfectly tailored. As she passed the Gryffindor table, she glanced at Lily with cool appraisal, one eyebrow slightly raised.

The hat took longer on Lark than it had on most others. Lily watched, curious. The hall had gone back to its normal buzz of conversation, but she kept her attention on the sorting stool.

Finally: "SLYTHERIN!"

Lark removed the hat and walked to the Slytherin table with the same confident stride, taking a seat near Kieran Flint. She said something to him - Lily couldn't hear what - and he responded with a brief smile.

Prewett. Another familiar name. The Prewetts were related to the Weasleys somehow, weren't they? Mum had mentioned it once.

Which meant Lark was probably some sort of distant cousin.

A wealthy, Slytherin, suspicious distant cousin.

Mystery three.

The sorting continued until the last first-year - "Zabini, Marcus!" - was placed in Slytherin, and then McGonagall vanished the stool and scroll with a wave of her wand. She stepped up to the podium, and the hall fell silent once more.

"Welcome," she said, her voice carrying to every corner of the vast hall, "to another year at Hogwarts. To our new students, I say: you have been sorted into

houses that will become your families. Support each other, challenge each other, and uphold the values of your founders. To our returning students, I say: set a good example. Our first-years will look to you for guidance."

She paused, her sharp eyes sweeping across the tables.

"I am also pleased to announce that Professor Horace Slughorn has graciously agreed to return to us once again to teach Potions this year. Many of you older students will remember him fondly from his previous tenure, and I know our first-years will benefit greatly from his considerable expertise."

There were a few whispers along the Great Hall, another pause, and her expression returned to its usual severity.

"A few reminders: the Forbidden Forest is, as its name suggests, forbidden to all students unless accompanied by a staff member. This is not an arbitrary rule. The forest is home to centaurs who do not take kindly to witches and wizards disturbing their territory, and there is a family of acromantulas—giant spiders—that pose a lethal threat. These are real dangers, not simply school regulations to be tested. Mr Filch has asked me to remind you that magic is not permitted in the corridors between classes, and the list of banned items has been updated - it now includes Screaming Yo-Yos, Fanged Frisbees, and anything purchased from Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes."

A ripple of laughter ran through the hall. James looked personally affronted.

"Finally," McGonagall continued, "I want to remind you all that Hogwarts is a safe place. We have wards, protections, and staff dedicated to your wellbeing. If you have concerns, bring them to your Head of House. Do not attempt to handle serious matters on your own."

The words should have been reassuring.

Instead, they struck Lily as ominous.

Why would McGonagall emphasise safety unless there was something to be unsafe about?

Don't attempt to handle serious matters on your own. That sounded exactly like the kind of warning adults gave right before expecting you to ignore it.

"And now," McGonagall said, her stern expression softening into something that might have been a smile, "let us eat."

She clapped her hands.

The empty plates on the tables filled instantly with food—the rich smell of roasting meat and fresh-baked bread filled the hall. Roasted chicken, mashed

potatoes, Yorkshire puddings, steaming vegetables, gravy boats, rolls with butter - more food than Lily had ever seen in one place. The hall erupted into noise again as students dug in, passing dishes and filling their plates.

Lily served herself automatically, but her appetite had vanished.

She looked around the Gryffindor table, at her new housemates laughing and eating and chatting about summer holidays and Quidditch prospects. Everyone seemed so normal. So happy.

So... ordinary.

No one looked worried about Dark forces or hidden dangers. No one seemed to think this year would be anything other than classes and homework and maybe some Quidditch matches.

She glanced across at the Slytherin table. Kieran was eating silently, not really engaging with those around him. Lark was in animated conversation with an older student, gesturing dramatically. Albus caught Lily's eye and raised his goblet in a silent toast. She smiled and raised hers back.

"Oi, Lily!" James leaned across the table, nearly knocking over someone's pumpkin juice. "How'd the hat sort you so fast? Mine took ages because it couldn't decide if I was brave or just stupid."

"You're definitely just stupid," the girl next to him said, and James threw a roll at her.

A prefect shot them a warning glare, and they settled down, snickering.

Lily picked at her food and tried to feel excited. She was here. She was at Hogwarts. She was in Gryffindor, just like Dad.

So why did she feel so... deflated?

Can you be brave enough to be ordinary?

The hat's words echoed in her mind. She pushed them away. This wasn't ordinary. This was Hogwarts. Magic and mystery and adventure were practically guaranteed.

They had to be.

By the time dessert appeared - an overwhelming array of pies, cakes, puddings, and tarts - Lily had managed to work up some enthusiasm again. She was just tired, that was all. Tomorrow, classes would start. Tomorrow, the real adventure would begin.

As the last plates were vanishing, Professor McGonagall stood again. "First-years, your Heads of House will now distribute your class schedules. Please collect them before returning to your dormitories."

A ripple of excitement ran through the first-year students. Lily watched as Professor Slughorn made his way along the Slytherin table, handing out parchment sheets with a jovial smile. At the Gryffindor table, McGonagall herself moved down the benches, her expression stern but not unkind.

"Miss Potter," she said, handing Lily her schedule. Their eyes met briefly, and Lily thought she saw something flicker in McGonagall's gaze - perhaps a memory of another Potter, years ago, receiving his first schedule at this very table.

"Thank you, Professor," Lily managed.

She wanted to look at it immediately, but McGonagall had already moved on to the next student. Lily folded the parchment carefully and tucked it into her robes. Tomorrow morning, she'd see what classes awaited her. Defence Against the Dark Arts. Potions. Transfiguration. All of it.

Tomorrow, something interesting would happen. It had to.

— CHAPTER THREE —

First Lessons

Lily woke to the sound of someone shrieking.

For one glorious, heart-pounding moment, she thought: This is it. An attack. A crisis. Something's finally happening.

She bolted upright in her four-poster bed, fumbling for her wand on the bedside table. Around her, the other first-year girls in the dormitory were stirring, groaning, pulling pillows over their heads.

"What - what's wrong?" Lily called out, ready to spring into action.

The shrieking girl - a blonde named Iris something - stood in front of the mirror, clutching her uniform robes. "My trunk ate my tie! I can't find it anywhere and we have Transfiguration first thing and Professor Edgecombe will murder me if I'm not in proper uniform - "

Not an attack then.

Just a missing tie.

Lily slumped back against her pillows, adrenaline draining away, leaving behind hollow disappointment.

"Check the pocket inside the lid," one of the other girls mumbled groggily. "That's where mine was."

"Oh! Oh, you're right! Thank Merlin!" Iris's panic dissolved into relief.

Lily stared up at the crimson canopy of her bed. First day of classes. Real magic. The beginning of her Hogwarts journey.

A missing tie. That's what passes for drama here.

By the time she'd dressed in her uniform - complete with the Gryffindor crest now emblazoned on her robes - and made her way down to the common room, early morning light was streaming through the tower windows. The Gryffindor common room looked exactly like James had described it: all warm reds and golds, squashy armchairs around a crackling fireplace, notice boards plastered with announcements for Quidditch tryouts and study groups.

A few older students sat hunched over textbooks, quills scratching on parchment. One seventh-year was asleep in an armchair, snoring softly.

Normal. All perfectly, boringly normal.

Lily crossed to the portrait hole. The Fat Lady's portrait swung open - "Have a lovely day, dear!" - and she clambered out into the corridor.

Hugo was waiting outside, already dressed and clutching his bag like a lifeline.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Ready," Lily confirmed, though she wasn't sure what she was supposed to be ready for.

Hogwarts in the morning was a revelation. The castle bustled with noise and motion: suits of armour clanking as they shifted position, portraits calling out greetings or complaints as students passed, ghosts drifting through walls mid-conversation. A group of older Hufflepuffs rushed past, laughing. Somewhere above them, someone was practising a spell that kept making a sound like a distressed trumpet.

Lily tried to catalogue everything they passed, looking for anything suspicious. A tapestry of dancing trolls. A suit of armour that saluted as they walked by. A corridor that definitely hadn't been there last night.

"I'm completely lost," Hugo confessed as they turned down another identical stone hallway. "How does anyone navigate this place?"

"I think the staircases move," Lily said, remembering Dad's stories. "And some corridors change. We should probably get a map or something."

"There are maps?" Hugo asked hopefully.

"I don't know. Maybe? We can ask someone."

They eventually found their way to the Great Hall by following the general flow of students and the smell of bacon. The enchanted ceiling showed a pale blue sky with wispy clouds, and sunlight streamed through the tall windows.

Lily grabbed toast and jam, her stomach too knotted to handle anything heavier. Across the hall at the Hufflepuff table, she could see Hugo settling in with his new housemates. At the Slytherin table, she spotted Albus with Scorpius, and - there - Lark Prewett and Kieran Flint, sitting together and talking in low voices.

Suspicious.

Lily pulled out her schedule - the one McGonagall had given her last night - and scanned it properly for the first time:

Monday: Transfiguration, History of Magic, Herbology

Tuesday: Charms, Defence Against the Dark Arts, Astronomy

Wednesday: Potions, Transfiguration, Flying

"Defence Against the Dark Arts," she breathed. That one at least sounded promising. You didn't call it "Defence Against the Dark Arts" unless there were Dark Arts to defend against, right?

"What do you reckon they'll teach us?" asked the girl next to her - Bridget, the Irish first-year who'd been sorted last night.

"Hopefully something practical," Lily said. "Stunning spells, shields, maybe some counter-curses - "

"Theory, mostly," a seventh-year interjected, overhearing. "First-years always start with theory. You won't cast a proper defensive spell until second year at least."

Lily's enthusiasm dimmed. "Oh."

"Don't worry, it's still interesting," the older girl said kindly. "Professor McLaggen is brilliant. Just don't expect duelling practice right away."

Theory. Of course it would be theory.

Transfiguration was their first class. Lily's hands were sweaty as she followed the other first-years to the Transfiguration classroom. The room was exactly as she'd imagined: desks arranged in neat rows, a blackboard at the front, and a woman standing behind the desk with her arms crossed, watching them file in with barely concealed impatience.

Professor Edgecombe was younger than Lily had expected - maybe in her late thirties or early forties - with brown hair pulled back in a severe bun and sharp, watchful eyes. She wore dark purple robes that looked a bit outdated, and her face bore faint, oddly shaped marks across one cheek. Lily tried not to stare at them, though she couldn't quite make out what they were.

"Take your seats," the professor said curtly, the words coming fast and clipped. "Gryffindors on the left, Ravenclaws on the right. Quickly, please. We have a great deal to cover and I won't—I will not waste time on dawdling."

Lily slid into a desk near the middle and pulled out her wand, her textbook, and a fresh roll of parchment.

Her heart was beating too fast. This was it. Her first real magic lesson.

Professor Edgecombe began without preamble, her hands clasped tight in front of her.

"Transfiguration is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you will learn at Hogwarts," she said, her voice crisp and precise—overly so, like she'd rehearsed it. "Anyone messing around in my class will leave and not come back. You have been warned."

Lily's excitement faltered. She'd heard Dad quote Professor McGonagall saying those exact words in his first Transfiguration lesson.

Professor Edgecombe demonstrated by transforming her desk into a pig and back again. The pig oinked indignantly before becoming polished wood once more. A few students gasped. Lily's mouth fell open—but not entirely from amazement.

Dad's first lesson. McGonagall had done the same thing. Desk into pig, warning about complexity and danger, then—

"Now," the professor continued, "you will not be transfiguring desks into pigs today, or indeed this year. We will begin with the basics. Simple inanimate objects. Today's goal is to transform a match into a needle."

Lily stared at the match that appeared on her desk. Match into needle. The exact same first assignment Dad had described from nearly three decades ago.

The curriculum hadn't changed at all.

She distributed matches to each student with a wave of her wand. Lily's match landed neatly on her desk.

"The wand movement is a sharp quarter-turn, like so." She demonstrated, her movements quick and exact. "The incantation is *Mutatis*. Precision is key—absolutely key. Transfiguration is about intent and focus. If your mind wanders, your magic will reflect that. No exceptions. Begin."

Lily pointed her wand at her match. "*Mutatis*." She turned her wand sharply.

The match quivered slightly but remained stubbornly match-like.

She tried again. "*Mutatis*." Sharp quarter-turn.

The match turned silver at one end.

Progress!

She kept at it, becoming absorbed in the work despite herself. By the end of the lesson, her match was half-silver and pointy, if not quite needle-shaped. A few students had managed full transformations - Nova Blackwood's needle was

perfect, which earned a rare nod of approval from the professor. Most students, like Lily, had achieved varying degrees of partial success.

"Homework," Professor Edgcombe announced as the bell rang. "Read chapter one of *A Beginner's Guide to Transfiguration* and write twelve inches on the principles of transformation. Due next week."

Lily packed up her things. The work had been challenging, and part of her felt satisfied by the progress she'd made.

But it was the same lesson. The same demonstration, the same warning, the same assignment Dad had done in his first class. And Hogwarts was still teaching first-years to turn matches into needles.

Even the curriculum was predictable.

History of Magic was next, and within ten minutes, Lily understood why James had told her to bring a book to hide inside her textbook.

Professor Binns was a ghost - literally. He'd apparently died in his sleep decades ago and got up the next morning to teach, not realising he'd left his body behind. He droned on about goblin rebellions in a monotone that could put a Dementor to sleep, and half the class had their heads on their desks within twenty minutes.

Lily tried to pay attention. She really did. But her mind kept wandering.

At this point in his first year, Dad had already met his best friend on the train. He'd stood up to Draco Malfoy. Everyone was talking about him - the famous Harry Potter. Things were already happening around him.

What had she done? Made no particular impression on anyone. Struggled with a match in Transfiguration. And now she was fighting to stay awake in History of Magic.

By lunchtime, Lily's initial excitement had worn thin. She ate quickly - shepherd's pie and peas, hot and savory - then headed outside for Herbology with Hugo and the other first-years.

The greenhouses sat on the edge of the grounds, glass structures gleaming in the autumn sun. As they approached Greenhouse One, the smell of damp earth and growing things reached them through the open door. Lily's spirits lifted slightly.

Professor Longbottom was there to greet them, beaming and covered in dirt as usual.

"Welcome, welcome!" he said cheerfully. "First-years, excellent! Come in, come in, find a spot at the benching - mind the Bouncing Bulbs, they're a bit excitable today - "

Indeed, several plant pots were rattling and bouncing on the shelves, emitting small squeaking noises. Lily grinned. Now this was more like it.

"Right then," Uncle Neville said once everyone had settled. "I'm Professor Longbottom, and this is Herbology, which is the study of magical plants and fungi. Now, I know some of you might think plants are boring - " He shot a knowing look at a few students who were already looking sceptical. " - but I promise you, magical plants are anything but boring. They can heal, harm, hide, or help, depending on how you treat them."

He gestured to a tray of small, spiky plants in front of him. "These are baby Fanged Geraniums. By the end of the year, they'll have teeth big enough to take your finger off if you're not careful. But today, whilst they're still small, we're going to learn how to repot them safely."

The lesson was hands-on and messy and actually fun. Lily's Fanged Geranium did try to bite her once, but it was small enough that it only left a tiny scratch. Professor Longbottom healed it with a casual wave of his wand and a murmured spell, then showed her the proper grip for handling temperamental plants.

"You've got a good instinct for this," he told her quietly. "Better than I was at your age, honestly. Thought I was rubbish at everything, but I blossomed in the end." He winked.

Lily felt a warm glow of pride.

Maybe she'd found her thing. Maybe she'd be brilliant at Herbology, and -

"Of course," Professor Longbottom continued, oblivious, "these days the most dangerous thing we grow is Venomous Tentacula, and even those are kept in Greenhouse Four with about seventeen different wards. Hogwarts has very strict safety protocols now. Can't have students getting hurt."

The warm glow fizzled out.

Safe. Everything was safe.

By the time dinner rolled around, Lily was exhausted and frustrated in equal measure. She'd learnt things, yes. The classes were interesting, technically.

But nothing happened. No mysterious disturbances. No strange encounters. No danger.

Just... school.

She sat at the Gryffindor table, pushing food around her plate. James was off with his fifth-year friends. Rose sat with third-years, deep in conversation. Her eyes drifted to the Slytherin table, where Albus sat with Scorpius over a Gobstones board.

Before she could think better of it, Lily stood and walked across the hall. Whispers followed her—a Gryffindor first-year heading for Slytherin.

Albus looked up, amused. "Nicely done, Lil. You found the right table."

Lily gave him a wry smile. "Good thing I'm not a Hufflepuff."

"Bit of a faux pas to sit at another house's table," Albus said. "But I guess it doesn't matter for you."

Lily slid onto the bench across from him. Down the table, she spotted Lark Prewett chatting animatedly with an older student. "So what's her story?" Lily asked, nodding in Lark's direction.

"Lark?" Scorpius raised an eyebrow. "She's muggleborn."

"Half-blood," Albus corrected. "Related to us through Grandmother Weasley—distant cousin. Her dad made millions with some muggle interwebs thing. Massive estate near Bristol. Right prat, if you ask me."

"Oh, the unicorn company?" Scorpius said, perking up slightly. "That's highly illegal without proper licensing from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures—"

"No," Albus interrupted with a sigh. "It's just a muggle term. Nothing to do with actual unicorns."

Scorpius blinked. "Oh." A faint flush crept up his pale cheeks. "Right. Muggle thing."

"She's been flying since she was five," Scorpius added, quickly moving on. "Had a professional Quidditch coach and everything. Talks about it constantly."

"Right, because her dad can afford the best of everything," Albus said with a dismissive wave. "Thinks she's better than everyone."

Lily frowned but changed the subject. "What about him?" She nodded at Kieran Flint, eating alone. "What's his story?"

Scorpius and Albus exchanged a glance. "His family's complicated," Scorpius said quietly. "Marcus Flint, his father, played Quidditch for Slytherin back in your dad's day."

"Death Eater family," Albus added. "He keeps to himself. Can't blame him—everyone expects him to be some kind of Dark wizard in training."

Lily looked back at Kieran, who seemed completely unaware he was being discussed. He just looked... tired. And lonely.

She turned back to Albus. "So you judge Lark for her family's money and Kieran for his family's past. That's not very Slytherin of you - I thought your house valued ambition and cunning, not just looking down on people."

Albus's expression darkened. "That's not what I—"

But Lily's face had flushed with anger. "That's not very nice, is it? Any of it?" She felt heat rising in her cheeks. "You know that technically we're a half-blood family too, living off Dad's inherited wealth. And our family's got plenty of complicated history."

Albus blinked, taken aback. "I didn't mean—"

But Lily was already standing, her chair scraping loudly against the stone floor. "I'm going to sit over there," she declared, pointing at the Ravenclaw table.

She marched across the hall, aware of even more eyes on her now. The Ravenclaw students stared as she approached, a mix of surprise and curiosity on their faces. Nova Blackwood was there, looking up from her dinner with wide eyes.

Lily sat down with a defiant smile. "I will sit wherever I want."

Behind her, Albus muttered something to Scorpius—probably about her taking after Mum.

The Great Hall slowly returned to its normal buzz of conversation. Lily served herself some roast chicken, trying to look more confident than she felt. A few Ravenclaws nodded at her politely. Nova gave her a small, tentative smile.

After a few minutes, Lily caught sight of James entering the hall. He spotted her at the Ravenclaw table and his eyebrows shot up. She could see him laughing and shaking his head as he headed for Gryffindor.

Maybe she'd made her point. Or maybe she'd just made herself look ridiculous.

With a sigh, Lily stood and made her way back to the Gryffindor table. She pushed her food around her plate, thinking about what Albus and Scorpius had said.

Lark: wealthy, confident, every advantage. But maybe just annoying.

And Kieran - Death Eater family, everyone staring at him. But Scorpius had said "Can't blame him, really." Maybe Kieran wasn't plotting anything. Maybe he was just trying to survive.

Maybe Lily was looking for mysteries that weren't there.

She pushed her plate away. She'd come expecting mysteries and danger. Instead, she was finding people who didn't fit into neat categories of "suspicious" or "safe."

The thought was almost as disappointing as the lack of adventures.

After dinner, Lily wandered back to Gryffindor Tower, taking the long route so she could explore. The corridors were quieter now, most students settled in their common rooms or the library. Portraits dozed in their frames. Suits of armour stood silent.

She turned down a corridor she hadn't seen before, one lined with windows overlooking the grounds. The sun was setting, painting the sky in shades of orange and purple. The Forbidden Forest stretched dark and vast on the horizon.

Now that looked promising.

Forbidden. Dangerous. Full of mysteries.

Maybe that's where the adventure was. Not in the castle, but beyond it.

"Lost, are we?"

Lily spun round. A ghost had materialised behind her - Nearly Headless Nick, she realised, recognising him from descriptions. His head lolled slightly to one side, held on by a thin strip of ghostly flesh.

"No," she said. "Just exploring."

"What an admirable Gryffindor feature," Nick said approvingly. "Though I'd recommend returning to your common room soon. It's nearly curfew, and the prefects do get rather tetchy about first-years wandering after hours."

"I know where I'm going," Lily said, even though she absolutely didn't.

Nick smiled - or at least attempted to, which was unsettling given his half-severed head. "Of course you do. You're a Potter, after all. Your father had the same independent streak. Though I do hope you won't inherit his talent for finding trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Oh, the usual. Three-headed dogs. Dark wizards. Basilisks. You know." Nick spoke as if these were everyday occurrences. "Though I daresay those days

are behind us now. Hogwarts is quite safe these days. Boring, even, some might say."

Lily's heart sank.

Even the ghosts thought it was boring.

"Right," she said. "Thanks."

She found her way back to Gryffindor Tower - with only two wrong turns - and collapsed into an armchair by the fire. A few other first-years were scattered around, working on homework or chatting quietly. Bridget waved at her from across the room, where she was struggling with her Transfiguration essay.

Lily pulled out her own parchment and stared at it.

The principles of transformation include...

She couldn't concentrate. Her mind kept drifting to the Forbidden Forest, to Kieran Flint's behaviour, to Lark Prewett's confidence. To the nagging feeling that she was missing something.

Or maybe she wasn't missing anything.

Maybe this was it. Maybe Hogwarts really was just school now.

The thought was unbearable.

Lily set down her quill and stared into the fire, watching the flames dance.

Tomorrow, she decided. Tomorrow she'd pay closer attention. Watch people more carefully. Find the cracks in the ordinary façade.

Because there had to be cracks.

There had to be.

— CHAPTER FOUR —

Grounded

Lily had been dreading Wednesday since she first saw her schedule.

Flying lessons.

She'd tried to convince herself it would be fine. Maybe she'd improved since the last time she'd attempted to fly. Maybe it had just been a bad day. Maybe the problem had been her family's old training brooms, and a proper school broom would make all the difference.

Maybe she was lying to herself.

"I'm sure you'll be brilliant," Hugo said encouragingly over breakfast. He'd come to sit at the Gryffindor table for moral support, house divisions be damned. "You're a Potter. Flying's in your blood."

"That's the problem," Lily muttered, pushing her porridge around her bowl. "Everyone expects me to be brilliant."

Her father had been the youngest Seeker in a century. Her mother had played professionally for the Holyhead Harpies. James was Gryffindor's star Chaser. Even Albus, who claimed to hate Quidditch, was a decent flyer when he bothered to try.

And then there was Lily, who could barely get three feet off the ground without her broom developing opinions about where it wanted to go.

"What's the worst that could happen?" Hugo asked.

Lily could think of several scenarios, each more humiliating than the last. "I could fall off and break my neck."

"The brooms don't go that fast - "

"I could lose control and crash into the castle."

"Well - "

"I could be so bad that Madam Hooch bans me from flying for ever and then everyone will know I'm a failure and James will never let me hear the end of it."

Hugo paused. "Okay, that one's actually possible."

Lily dropped her spoon. "You're supposed to be encouraging me."

"Sorry! Sorry. Look, you'll be fine. Even if you're not great at flying, it doesn't mean anything. Plenty of witches and wizards are rubbish at flying and they do perfectly well. My mum hates it, and she's the Minister for Magic."

This was true, but it didn't make Lily feel any better. Aunt Hermione wasn't expected to be good at flying. She was expected to be brilliant at everything else, which she was. Lily was expected to be good at flying specifically because of who her parents were.

The weight of legacy felt particularly heavy this morning.

At least Potions had been cancelled - Professor Slughorn had sent word through the prefects that he was unwell and the first-years' Wednesday morning class would be postponed. It meant one less thing to worry about today, though Lily suspected the reprieve was temporary.

By the time Wednesday afternoon arrived, Lily's shoulders were tense. All the first-years gathered on the grounds near the Quidditch pitch, where a collection of school brooms lay waiting in neat rows on the grass. The afternoon air smelled of fresh-cut grass and autumn leaves, and wind rustled through the trees at the forest's edge.

The brooms looked ancient. Lily could see the worn handles, the slightly bedraggled twigs. These were clearly not the Nimbus 2000s or Firebolts that the Quidditch teams used. These were the brooms that Hogwarts had probably been using since Dad's day.

Maybe even before that.

Madam Hooch strode across the grass towards them, her short grey hair gleaming in the afternoon sun, her yellow eyes sharp as a hawk's. She wore robes in a severe shade of grey and carried herself with the confidence of someone who'd been teaching nervous first-years for decades.

"Good afternoon, class!"

"Good afternoon, Madam Hooch," they chorused.

"Welcome to your first flying lesson. Now, I don't want any showing off, and I don't want any foolishness. Flying is a serious magical skill that requires focus, discipline, and respect for the broom. Understood?"

A murmur of agreement rippled through the group.

"Excellent. Everyone stand by a broom. Go on, quickly now."

Lily positioned herself next to the nearest broom, eyeing it warily. The grass was cool and slightly damp beneath her feet. The broom lay there, perfectly innocent.

But she knew better. Brooms were not to be trusted.

"Now," Madam Hooch continued, "stick your right hand over the broom and say 'Up!'"

"UP!" chorused dozens of voices.

Hugo's broom leapt immediately into his hand. Several others followed suit - Nova Blackwood's broom rose smoothly, and even some of the more nervous-looking students managed to get their brooms airborne.

Lily's broom rolled over slightly.

"Up," she said more firmly.

The broom quivered.

"UP!"

This time it jumped about an inch off the ground before falling back down.

Across the grass, she could see Kieran Flint already holding his broom, looking bored. Lark Prewett's broom had flown into her hand on the first try, and she was examining it with the critical eye of someone evaluating a purchase.

"Up," Lily said through gritted teeth.

The broom finally, reluctantly, rose into her hand.

It felt wrong immediately - too light at one end, too heavy at the other, the handle slightly rough under her palm.

"Good!" Madam Hooch called. "Now, mounting is crucial. I want you to grip the broom firmly with both hands, swing your leg over, and sit as if you're riding a very thin horse. Don't squeeze too tight or you'll restrict the broom's movement, but don't sit too loose or you'll fall off."

This seemed like a contradiction, but Lily did her best. She swung her leg over the broom and settled into position, feeling immediately precarious.

The broom wobbled under her.

"Excellent, Mr Granger-Weasley. Miss Blackwood, adjust your grip slightly - yes, like that. Mr Flint, stop looking so bloody pleased with yourself."

A snicker ran through the group. Kieran's expression didn't change.

"Now," Madam Hooch said, walking amongst them to check positions, "when I blow my whistle, I want you to kick off gently - GENTLY, Mr MacDougal - rise about three feet, hover for a moment, then lean forwards

slightly to come back down. We're not racing. We're not doing tricks. We're learning control. Ready?"

Lily's hands tightened on the broom handle. She could do this. It was just three feet. Barely higher than standing on a table.

Madam Hooch raised her whistle.

Lily's heart hammered.

The whistle blew.

Lily kicked off.

For one perfect second, she was airborne. The ground dropped away beneath her, and she felt the dizzying freedom of flight. The broom responded to her weight, rising -

And rising.

And not stopping.

"Whoa!" Lily gasped, pulling back on the broom, but it ignored her completely. She shot upwards like a rocket, the ground shrinking rapidly below her. Wind whipped through her hair. Everything tilted.

"MISS POTTER!" Madam Hooch's voice seemed very far away. "LEAN FORWARDS! PUSH THE HANDLE DOWN!"

Lily tried. She really did. But the broom had other ideas. It seemed to have decided that up was the only acceptable direction, and it pursued this goal with single-minded determination.

She was at least twenty feet up now. Maybe thirty. The other students looked like ants below her. She could see over the Quidditch stands, could see the Forbidden Forest stretching dark and vast in the distance.

Okay, Lily thought, fighting down panic. Okay. This is fine. I just need to -

The broom stopped.

Not gradually. Not with a smooth deceleration.

It just... stopped. Dead in the air.

And then, as if reconsidering its entire existence, it began to spin.

Lily shrieked and clung to the handle with both hands as the world became a blur of sky and ground and castle. Her legs slipped, and for one horrible moment she was hanging on by her hands alone, her body swinging wildly beneath the spinning broom.

"HOLD ON!" Madam Hooch shouted. She'd pulled out her wand and was pointing it at Lily, but seemed reluctant to cast anything that might startle the broom into worse behaviour.

The broom stopped spinning.

Lily managed to get her legs back around it, gasping for air, her heart threatening to burst out of her chest.

And then the broom tilted forwards and dived.

It wasn't a controlled descent. It was a plummet. The world inverted. The grass rushed up to meet her with terrifying speed.

"ARRESTO MOMENTUM!"

The spell hit her just before impact. Lily's downwards momentum vanished instantly, and she dropped the last six inches onto the grass in an ungainly heap.

The broom clattered beside her.

For a moment, she just lay there, face-down in the grass, trying to remember how breathing worked.

"Miss Potter!" Madam Hooch appeared above her, looking simultaneously furious and relieved. "Are you hurt?"

Lily did a mental inventory. Everything seemed to be present and unbroken, though her dignity had definitely sustained fatal damage. "I'm fine."

"Up you get then." Madam Hooch hauled her to her feet with surprising strength. "That was the worst flying I've seen in thirty years of teaching."

Lily's face burned.

Around her, the other first-years were staring. Some looked concerned. Some looked amused. Lark Prewett was whispering something to the girl next to her, both of them smirking.

"But," Madam Hooch continued, her expression softening slightly, "you held on. Most students who lose control that badly fall off within the first five seconds. You managed to stay mounted through a spin and a dive. That takes strength, if not skill."

Lily wasn't sure whether to feel complimented or insulted.

"However," Madam Hooch went on, her stern expression returning, "you will not be flying again until you've had private lessons to work on basic control. I can't have you endangering yourself or others. You'll stay on the ground for today and observe."

Lily nodded, too mortified to speak.

"The rest of you," Madam Hooch called, turning back to the class, "let that be a lesson in why we start slowly. Flying is not about power or speed. It's about control and communication with your broom. Now, let's try that again, and this time, I want a GENTLE kick-off. Mr Zabini, if you go higher than four feet I'll have you scrubbing the Quidditch changing rooms for a week."

The lesson continued.

Lily sat on the grass, her assigned broom lying beside her like an accusation, and watched as her classmates took turns hovering successfully. Hugo managed a decent hover, though he looked terrified the entire time. Nova Blackwood was perfect, naturally. Even Kieran Flint, despite Madam Hooch's earlier reprimand, flew with easy confidence that made it look effortless.

And Lark Prewett flew like she'd been born on a broom. She rose smoothly, hovered with perfect stability, and descended with the kind of control that came from expensive private lessons and quality equipment.

When she landed, Madam Hooch actually nodded in approval.

"Very good, Miss Prewett. Clearly you've had training."

"My father hired a professional coach," Lark said casually, as if this were perfectly normal. "I've been flying since I was five."

Of course she had.

By the time the lesson ended, Lily felt hollowed out with humiliation. The other students dispersed towards the castle, chattering about the lesson. A few shot sympathetic glances her way.

Most just seemed grateful it hadn't been them.

Hugo lingered. "That was... dramatic."

"Please don't."

"I mean, you didn't die, which is good -"

"Hugo."

"- and at least you made it memorable?"

Lily glared at him. He had the grace to look apologetic.

"Sorry. That was rubbish. Do you want me to walk back with you?"

"No," Lily said quietly. "I need a minute."

Hugo nodded and headed up towards the castle with the other Hufflepuffs, leaving Lily alone on the grounds.

She stared at the broom lying in the grass. It looked so harmless now. So innocent.

Just a stick with some twigs attached.

Dad was a natural. The first time he got on a broom, he was brilliant. Madam Hooch said he was a born Seeker.

And here was Lily, who couldn't even manage a simple hover without nearly killing herself.

"Quite a show."

Lily turned. Lark Prewett stood a few feet away, her expensive broom slung casually over her shoulder. Up close, she was even more intimidating - tall for eleven, with sharp cheekbones and eyes the colour of amber. Her robes were clearly tailored, probably cost more than everything in Lily's trunk combined.

"Did you need something?" Lily asked, more sharply than she'd intended.

Lark shrugged. "Just wanted to say that spinning thing was actually impressive. Most people would've fallen off."

"Madam Hooch already gave me that consolation prize."

"It wasn't meant as one." Lark studied her with unsettling intensity. "You're Harry Potter's daughter, right? I thought you'd be good at flying. That's supposed to be the Potter thing."

"Well, apparently I didn't get that particular gene," Lily snapped.

"Pity." Lark's expression was unreadable. "Must be hard, living up to all that. The Boy Who Lived's daughter, expected to be brilliant at everything."

There was something in her tone - not quite mockery, but not quite sympathy either. Something knowing.

"I'm managing," Lily said stiffly.

"Are you?" Lark tilted her head. "You've been watching me and Kieran all week. During meals, in the corridors. Trying to work out if we're up to something?"

Lily's face heated. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes you do." Lark smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "You're looking for a mystery. Something dangerous. Some big adventure like your dad had. But here's the thing, Potter - Hogwarts is different now. The war's over. There's no Dark Lord, no Death Eaters, no danger lurking round every corner. It's just school."

"I'm not - "

"Yes you are." Lark's voice was matter-of-fact, not unkind. "I've seen that look before. My older cousin was the same way when she started here. Thought

everything was a conspiracy. Spent her whole first year investigating 'suspicious' activity that turned out to be older students sneaking off to snog."

Lily wanted to argue, but the words stuck in her throat.

Lark shifted her broom to her other shoulder. "Look, I'm not trying to be mean. But maybe stop looking for monsters that aren't there and focus on, I don't know, learning to fly properly? Private lessons with Hooch are actually pretty good. My cousin had them."

She turned to go, then paused and glanced back. "Also, Kieran's not suspicious. He's just quiet because his dad's in Azkaban and everyone stares at him like he's going to turn into a Dark wizard at any moment. Cut him some slack."

With that, Lark strode towards the castle, leaving Lily alone on the grounds with her thoughts and her treacherous broom.

Lily stood there for a long time, watching the sun sink towards the horizon.

Lark was wrong. She had to be wrong.

Hogwarts couldn't just be... normal. It couldn't be just school, with classes and homework and learning to fly. There had to be more to it than that.

There had to be.

But as she finally picked up the broom and trudged back towards the castle, a small, terrible voice in the back of her mind whispered: What if there isn't?

What if this is all there is?

What if your year at Hogwarts is just... boring?

Lily pushed the thought away violently.

No. Absolutely not. She wouldn't accept that.

Even if it meant she had to create her own adventure.

She'd work something out.

— CHAPTER FIVE —

Pieces of Pottery

By her second week at Hogwarts, Lily had compiled a mental list of things her father's stories had never mentioned: the sheer quantity of homework, the way Madam Pince's eagle eyes could spot a whisper from three aisles away, and the fact that even moving staircases followed predictable patterns if you paid attention.

The list was growing longer by the day.

Wednesday morning brought her first Potions lesson with Professor Slughorn, and Lily found herself descending into the dungeons with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension. The classroom was large and dimly lit, its stone walls lined with shelves of gleaming glass jars. Various specimens floated in murky liquids, and the air smelled faintly of sulphur and something else Lily couldn't quite identify—damp stone and centuries of old magic.

Slughorn himself was a large man with a gleaming bald head and an enormous silvery moustache. He stood at the front of the classroom, beaming at the assembled first-years with evident pleasure.

"Welcome, welcome!" he boomed as they filed in. "First-years, please find a seat. My apologies for missing our scheduled lesson last week - a possibility of dragon pox, nothing serious, but at my age one can't be too careful. Madam Pomfrey *insisted* I rest. But I'm quite recovered now, and today we begin your journey into the subtle science and exact art of potion-making!"

Lily slid onto a bench near the middle of the room. The stone was cold and slightly rough beneath her. Around her, other students were unpacking their supplies, and she caught a glimpse of Kieran Flint sitting alone at the back, his expression carefully neutral.

"Now then," Slughorn said, pulling out a roll of parchment. "Let's see who we have here. I do so enjoy learning all my students' names..."

He paused occasionally to make a comment or ask a question. When he reached Lily's name, his eyes lit up with unmistakable delight.

"Ah, Miss Potter!" He set down the parchment, his smile widening. "The final piece, at last."

Lily's face went hot.

"I've had the pleasure of teaching your brothers," Slughorn continued, apparently oblivious to her discomfort. "I taught James before my retirement—excellent student, natural talent for brewing—and now I have Albus in his third year. Quite the collection, quite the collection indeed!"

Several students turned to look at her. Lily wanted to sink through the floor.

"And of course, your father was in my N.E.W.T. class," Slughorn went on, his tone growing almost reverent. "Brilliant man. Simply brilliant. And your mother—Ginevra Weasley, yes? Played for the Holyhead Harpies, if I recall correctly. Remarkable family, truly remarkable."

"Now I have the complete set, so to speak!" He chuckled at his own words, looking tremendously pleased with himself.

Lily managed a weak smile and focused very hard on her cauldron. *The final piece*. As if she were something to be collected, like a set of ornamental plates or a series of Chocolate Frog cards. Potter Number Three, completing Slughorn's collection.

He wanted her for her *name*. Not for anything she'd done, not for any talent she might possess—he didn't even know her yet. Just because she was a Potter. Because her father had defeated Voldemort, because her mother had played professional Quidditch, because her brothers sat in his classroom.

The lesson itself passed in a blur. They were meant to be brewing a simple potion to cure boils, but Lily found it difficult to concentrate. Slughorn circled the classroom, offering advice and commentary, but he seemed to return to her table more often than others, watching her stir with an intensity that made her skin prickle.

At one point, she glanced up and saw Lark Prewett a few tables over, frowning at her cauldron as her potion bubbled an unpleasant greenish-brown. Slughorn walked right past her without a word, his attention already fixed on returning to Lily's table.

"Very good, very good," he murmured, even though her potion looked nearly identical to everyone else's. "I can see the Potter talent runs in the family."

Lily gritted her teeth and said nothing.

By Saturday evening, Lily's second Transfiguration essay was finally finished, along with a diagram of the lunar phases for Astronomy and a frankly tedious two feet summary on the goblin rebellions of the eighteenth century for Professor Binns. She'd spent most of the afternoon in the library with Hugo, their heads bent over parchment and textbooks while Madam Pince prowled the aisles like a particularly stern cat.

"Dad never mentioned essay writing," Lily muttered as she rolled up her History of Magic parchment.

"Maybe he was too busy saving people and fighting Dark wizards to mention homework," Hugo said, not looking up from his own essay.

"Lucky him."

The library was beginning to empty as the evening wore on. When Madam Pince started snuffing candles with pointed looks in their direction, Lily and Hugo packed their things and headed for the exit.

"I know a shortcut," Lily said as they emerged into the corridor. "Gets to both our common rooms faster than the main staircases."

Hugo hesitated, his bag slung over one shoulder. "We're not supposed to—"

"It's just a shortcut," Lily said, already turning toward the stairs. "Come on."

Hugo followed, but she could hear the reluctance in his footsteps.

They climbed to the seventh floor and cut through past the tapestry of trolls in tutus attempting ballet. Lily lingered for a moment in that corridor, looking around as if something might happen. Nothing ever did.

"This doesn't make sense," Hugo said as they kept walking. "Your tower's up, mine's down. How is this faster?"

"The staircases shift," Lily said. "There's one that connects to the basement levels if you catch it at the right time."

Hugo muttered something about impossible geometry but followed her anyway.

She took the lead again, guiding them down a narrower corridor. Bare stone walls without the usual portraits or tapestries. Their footsteps echoed in the emptiness. The torches were spaced farther apart, leaving pools of shadow between circles of firelight.

They'd gone perhaps fifty paces when Lily heard it. A crash. Followed by the unmistakable sound of breaking glass.

She stopped so abruptly that Hugo nearly walked into her.

"What was that?" she whispered.

Another crash echoed down the corridor. A metallic clang rang against the stone walls.

Lily's heart began to race. *This was it.* Something was finally happening—strange noises in an empty corridor, the kind of thing Dad had described in his stories. This was how adventures started.

"We should go back," Hugo said quietly.

But the sounds were getting louder now. More crashes. Something heavy being knocked over. And was that... cackling?

"What if someone needs help?" Lily said, already moving forward. "What if it's dangerous and no one knows yet?"

"Then we should get a professor—"

"Just a quick look," Lily interrupted. "Don't you want to at least *see*?"

Hugo made a small noise of protest but followed her anyway. Lily felt a surge of affection for her cousin, even as she crept toward the source of the noise.

The corridor curved slightly ahead. The sounds grew louder with each step. Lily's palms were sweating. Her father had described moments like this—the anticipation, the uncertainty, the sense that something significant was about to happen.

She turned the corner.

Peeves.

The poltergeist floated in the middle of the corridor, surrounded by a debris field of broken pottery and scattered armor pieces. As Lily watched, he seized what looked like an ornamental vase. Hurling it against the wall with evident glee. It shattered spectacularly. Peeves cackled with delight.

"Oooh, that was a good one!" he crowed, already reaching for a piece of armor. "Let's see how far this one goes—"

Lily's excitement deflated so rapidly she felt almost dizzy with disappointment. Not a mystery. Not danger. Not even anything interesting. Just Peeves being Peeves, causing the exact sort of chaos everyone already knew he caused.

"Can we go now?" Hugo whispered urgently.

Before Lily could answer, a new voice cut through Peeves's cackling.

"What is going on here?"

Lily froze.

Professor Sinistra emerged from the opposite direction, her dark robes billowing behind her. She took in the scene with a single sharp glance: the destruction, Peeves still clutching a piece of armor, and two first-years who very definitely should not be in this corridor.

"You," Sinistra said to Peeves, her voice like ice. "Leave. Now."

Peeves pulled a rude face but vanished through the ceiling with a final cackle, leaving Lily and Hugo standing amid the wreckage.

Sinistra turned her full attention to them.

"What," she said, each word precise and cutting, "are you doing in this corridor? This area is off-limits to students."

"We were just—" Lily began.

"Taking a shortcut," Hugo finished miserably.

"A shortcut through a prohibited corridor?" Sinistra's eyebrows rose. "I think not. Come with me. Both of you."

She drew her wand with a sharp movement. A silvery shape burst from the tip and streaked away down the corridor.

Lily's stomach dropped.

The walk to the Headmistress's office was the longest of Lily's life. Professor Sinistra marched them through the castle in grim silence. Lily was acutely aware of other students watching as they passed. A pair of seventh-years whispered to each other. A group of third-years stared openly.

Hugo looked like he wanted to disappear into the floor.

The gargoyle outside McGonagall's office leaped aside as Sinistra approached. They climbed the spiral staircase with mounting dread. When they reached the door, Sinistra knocked once and, without waiting for a response, pushed the heavy door open.

The office was circular and full of delicate silver instruments that whirled and puffed tiny clouds of smoke. Portraits of former headmasters and headmistresses dozed in their frames, though Lily noticed a few had opened their eyes to watch. Behind an enormous desk sat Professor McGonagall, her square spectacles catching the candlelight.

She was not alone.

Professor Longbottom stood to one side, his arms crossed and his expression troubled. Professor Sprout occupied a chair near the desk, looking simultaneously weary and disappointed. Both of them looked up as Lily and Hugo were ushered in.

McGonagall and Longbottom exchanged a glance—brief but loaded with meaning. Lily saw something pass between them, something that might have been resignation.

Another Potter incident, that look seemed to say.

"Thank you, Aurora, we got your message," McGonagall said to Professor Sinistra. "You may go."

Sinistra nodded and departed, closing the door with an ominous click.

For a long moment, no one spoke. Lily became intensely aware of her own breathing, too loud in the silent office.

"Miss Potter," McGonagall said finally, her Scottish accent sharpening with displeasure. "Mr Granger-Weasley. Perhaps you would care to explain why Professor Sinistra found you in a corridor that is expressly off-limits to students?"

Lily opened her mouth, but Hugo spoke first.

"It was my fault, Professor. I should have—"

"With *respect*, Mr Granger-Weasley," McGonagall interrupted, "I suspect we all know who initiated this particular quest."

Lily felt her face grow hot. She risked a glance at Neville—Uncle Neville, who came to family dinners and brought her birthday presents and was Albus's godfather—and found him looking at her with something that might have been sadness.

"Miss Potter," he said quietly. "I expected better judgment from you."

The disappointment in his voice was somehow worse than anger would have been.

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I know the Potter tendency to... seek out adventure. Your father had it, your brothers have done it. But Lily, investigating strange noises in prohibited corridors isn't brave—it's reckless. And this—" he gestured at the office around them, "—isn't the kind of adventure worth having."

Professor Sprout shifted in her chair with a sound that might have been a sigh.

"I'm getting too old for this," she muttered, though her voice carried clearly in the quiet office. She fixed Hugo with a stern look. "A Hufflepuff should know better than this, Mr Granger-Weasley. Loyalty to one's friends is admirable, but *not* when it leads you into prohibited areas."

Hugo's face was scarlet. "Yes, Professor. I'm sorry, Professor."

"The corridors have been designated off-limits for your safety," McGonagall said, her tone brooking no argument. "These are not arbitrary rules designed to inconvenience you. They are security measures, put in place after... after many hard lessons were learned. You will respect them."

"Peeves was causing trouble," Lily tried to explain. "We heard the noise, and I thought—"

"You thought," McGonagall interrupted, "that you would investigate rather than inform a professor or prefect. You thought you knew better than the regulations we have established. And in doing so, you not only endangered yourselves but also dragged your cousin into your ill-advised scheme."

Lily wanted to argue that they hadn't been in any danger, that it was just Peeves, that the whole thing was ridiculous—but the words died in her throat under McGonagall's steely gaze.

McGonagall looked to Professor Longbottom, then to Professor Sprout. The silence stretched.

"Ten points from Gryffindor," Neville said quietly, and Lily felt the words like a physical blow. Coming from Uncle Neville, it was somehow worse than if McGonagall had said it.

"And ten points from Hufflepuff," Professor Sprout added, her voice firm. Hugo's face went even redder.

"You are both dismissed," McGonagall said. "Return to your common rooms—using the main corridors—and consider yourselves fortunate that the consequences are not more severe."

They fled.

Back in Gryffindor Tower, Lily collapsed onto her bed and stared at the canopy. Her roommates were downstairs in the common room, and for once she was grateful for the solitude.

Two weeks at Hogwarts. Just two weeks, and what did she have to show for it? Lost house points? Yes. Detention? No. An adventure? Not even close.

She'd been caught breaking a rule she'd known about—Hugo had tried to warn her, she'd cut him off—and for what? To watch Peeves smash pottery? To get lectured by Uncle Neville and escorted through the castle like a criminal?

Her father had investigated strange noises and discovered mysteries. Lily investigated strange noises and found a poltergeist doing exactly what everyone already knew poltergeists did.

The worst part, she thought, staring up at the red velvet above her, was that it had all felt so *routine*. The professors had handled Peeves like it was nothing, because it *was* nothing. Just another evening at Hogwarts, where the most dangerous thing was breaking a safety regulation.

And now ten points were gone from Gryffindor. And another ten from Hufflepuff. Just because of her. Twenty points lost in her second week for absolutely nothing.

Her father's stories never mentioned how much essay writing there was at Hogwarts. They also never mentioned how many rules there were, how many corridors were off-limits, how thoroughly the castle itself seemed designed to prevent anything interesting from happening.

Maybe this was just what Hogwarts was now. Safe. Supervised. Boring.

From somewhere far below, she could hear the muffled sounds of the common room—laughter, conversation, the crackle of the fire. Normal sounds. Normal students having a normal Saturday evening at school.

Lily closed her eyes and tried not to think about her father's first year, when strange noises in corridors meant trolls and mysteries and danger.

Nothing was going to happen. Nothing ever seemed to happen anymore.

— CHAPTER SIX —

The Invitation

By the fourth week of term, Lily had mastered the art of looking attentive while being thoroughly bored.

She sat in Potions on a Wednesday morning, watching Professor Slughorn demonstrate the proper way to dice shrivelfig. His enormous silvery moustache quivered with enthusiasm as he explained—for the third time—the importance of uniform pieces.

"Consistency, my dear students, is the cornerstone of successful potion-making!" He held up a perfectly diced cube. "Each piece should be precisely the same size, you see. Precision matters!"

Around her, students dutifully copied notes. Lily's quill moved across her parchment in the familiar rhythm of someone who had done this dozens of times before. Potions class. Transfiguration class. History of Magic with Professor Binns droning on about goblin rebellions. Herbology with Professor Longbottom, who at least made it interesting, but even magical plants followed predictable patterns once you knew what to look for.

The castle itself had become routine. The moving staircases shifted on schedule. The ghosts drifted through walls at the same times each day. Even Peeves's pranks followed patterns—avoiding the library during study hours, targeting the third-floor corridor on Tuesdays, never bothering Professor McGonagall.

Everything was so *predictable*.

"Now then," Slughorn said, setting down his knife with a flourish. "I want you all to practice. We'll be brewing the Herbicide Potion next week, and your dicing technique will be crucial."

Lily pulled her shrivelfig toward her and began cutting. The fruit smelled faintly sweet and fermenting. Beside her, Hugo was already halfway through his,

each piece carefully measured. Across the classroom, she could see Kieran working quietly, and—

Her eyes caught on Lark.

The other girl was frowning at her cutting board, her expensive robes pushed up to her elbows. Her shrivelfig pieces were uneven—some too large, some too small, none matching the perfect cubes Slughorn had demonstrated.

Slughorn swept past Lark's table without a glance.

He stopped at Lily's table, bending to peer at her cutting board. "Ah, excellent work, Miss Potter! Excellent! I can see you've inherited your father's attention to detail. And of course, your mother's determination—Quidditch players know all about precision, don't they?"

Lily's jaw tightened. Her pieces were fine but not exceptional. Certainly no better than Hugo's, which Slughorn had passed without comment.

"Thank you, Professor," she managed.

Slughorn beamed and moved on, launching into a story about a former student who had gone on to work at the Ministry's Potion and Plant Poisoning department. Lily glanced back at Lark, who was still frowning at her shrivelfig, her knife gripped too tightly.

For a moment, their eyes met across the classroom. Lark's expression was carefully neutral, but Lily saw something flash behind it—frustration, perhaps, or anger. Then Lark looked away, focusing intently on her cutting board.

Lily turned back to her own work, pushing away the uncomfortable mix of satisfaction and guilt that twisted in her stomach.

Flying lessons continued to be a special kind of torture.

Wednesday afternoon found Lily on the pitch, watching Lark Prewett execute a perfect barrel roll while Lily hovered uncertainly three feet off the ground, her broom wobbling beneath her like a nervous horse.

"Steady, Miss Potter," Madam Hooch called from across the field. "Don't grip so tight. The broom can feel your tension."

Lily gritted her teeth and tried to relax her white-knuckled grip. But every time she loosened her hold even slightly, the broom veered left or right, threatening to repeat the spinning disaster from her first lesson. She'd tried

confidence. She'd tried determination. She'd tried mimicking the grip and posture of every successful flyer in the class. Nothing helped. She could get the broom up, but controlling it was another matter entirely.

Lark landed nearby with easy grace, not even breathing hard. She didn't look at Lily, but Lily saw the small satisfied smile on her face as she remounted for another circuit.

Of course Lark could fly. Professional coaching since age five, expensive equipment, natural talent. Some people just had all the advantages.

The bitter thought surprised Lily, and she pushed it away. She focused on her broom, trying to hold it steady, but it continued to wobble uncertainly beneath her.

Madam Hooch sighed.

By Saturday morning, Lily's Charms essay was finally complete, though Professor Flitwick's requirement for "two feet of parchment on the Levitation Charm's practical applications" had somehow stretched well beyond that before she'd found enough to say. She'd spent most of Friday evening in the library with Hugo, both of them bent over their work while Madam Pince made her rounds, her sharp eyes catching anyone who dared speak above a whisper.

"I'm going to have nightmares about parchment," Hugo muttered as they packed up their things. "Just rolls and rolls of it, all needing to be filled with words about goblin treaties."

"At least you're not writing about the proper wand movement for Wingardium Leviosa," Lily said. "Pages and pages about swishing and flicking."

They emerged into the corridor, where autumn sunlight slanted through the high windows. October was settling in, bringing cooler air and shorter days. The Halloween decorations would start going up soon, Lily knew. Pumpkins and bats and all the usual magical flourishes that would feel special for about five minutes before becoming just another part of the castle scenery.

"Do you want to go to Hagrid's?" Hugo asked as they climbed the stairs. "He said we could visit on weekends if we wanted. Help him with the creatures."

Lily considered it. Hagrid was nice, and his stories about her dad's school years were interesting, but—

"Maybe later," she said. "I've got that Astronomy chart to finish."

Hugo nodded, heading toward the Hufflepuff common room while Lily continued to Gryffindor Tower. She took her usual route through the seventh floor corridor, past the troll tapestry. The Fat Lady was napping in her portrait, and Lily had to call the password three times before she woke with a start.

The common room was busier than usual, filled with students enjoying their Saturday freedom. A group of third-years had claimed the good chairs near the fire, and a few second-years were playing Exploding Snap in the corner. Lily spotted James with his fifth-year friends by the windows, deep in conversation about Quidditch strategy.

She headed upstairs to the dormitory, grateful for the relative quiet. Her roommates were elsewhere—Iris had gone down to the greenhouses with some older students, and Bridget was probably at the pitch watching flying practice.

Lily pulled her Astronomy chart from her trunk and spread it across her bed, but found herself staring at it without really seeing the constellation patterns she was supposed to be marking.

Four weeks at Hogwarts. A month.

Nothing had happened. Nothing interesting, nothing exciting, nothing remotely resembling the adventures her father had written about in such vivid detail. Just classes and homework and the same corridors over and over, the same faces, the same routine.

She thought about the Peeves incident, how her heart had raced at the sound of crashing and breaking glass, how certain she'd been that something was finally happening. And then—nothing. Just a poltergeist being a poltergeist, and a lecture from Uncle Neville about the "Potter tendency to seek out adventure."

Maybe he was right. Maybe she needed to accept that this was what Hogwarts was now: safe, supervised, and thoroughly, completely ordinary.

A tapping at the window made her look up.

A school owl sat on the sill, a cream-coloured envelope tied to its leg. Lily crossed the room and opened the window, and the owl hopped inside with a soft hoot, extending its leg.

The envelope was made of expensive parchment, heavier than the usual school notices. Lily untied it carefully, and the owl immediately took off, swooping out the window without waiting for a reply.

She turned the envelope over. Her name was written in elaborate script across the front: *Miss Lily Potter*.

Inside was a single card, also on heavy parchment, with words written in the same flowing hand:

Dear Miss Potter,

I would be delighted if you would join me for a small gathering in my office this Tuesday evening at seven o'clock. Light refreshments will be served, and I do so enjoy the opportunity to get to know my most promising students in a more casual setting.

Please let me know if you are able to attend.

Yours sincerely,

Professor H. Slughorn

Lily stared at the invitation, a complicated knot forming in her chest.

The Slug Club. She'd heard James mention it before—Slughorn's "little club" of select students, chosen for their talent or their connections or, more often, their famous relatives. James had been invited in his second year. Albus probably got an invitation the moment Slughorn learned his name.

And now Lily.

Not because she was particularly good at Potions. Not because she'd done anything exceptional. But because she was Harry Potter's daughter, and that made her valuable. Collectible. The final "piece" of Slughorn's Potter set.

She read the invitation again, her jaw tightening.

Part of her wanted to crumple it up and throw it away. To write back a polite refusal. To refuse to be collected like some kind of trophy.

But another part of her—the part that had been desperate for something, anything to break the monotony—whispered: *At least it's different. At least it's something.*

Maybe the gathering would be interesting. Maybe something would happen there, something worth the discomfort of being shown off. Maybe—

She caught herself. How many times had she thought "maybe" this term? How many times had she got her hopes up only to be disappointed?

But what else was there? Classes and homework and the same routine day after day? At least this was an invitation to something. Even if Slughorn's reasons were shallow, even if she hated the attention, at least it was *something*.

Lily looked down at the card again, at her name written in that elaborate script.

She thought about Lark Prewett, frowning at her shrivelfig pieces while Slughorn walked past without a glance. About Hugo, who would never get an invitation like this despite being smart and loyal and kind. About all the students Slughorn ignored because they didn't have the right surname or the right connections.

She thought about how much she disliked being valued for her name instead of herself.

But she also thought about four weeks of crushing routine, of watching and waiting for something—anything—to happen.

Lily set the invitation on her bedside table and pulled out a fresh piece of parchment.

Dear Professor Slughorn,

Thank you for your invitation.

I would be pleased to attend.

Yours sincerely,

Lily Potter

She sealed the response before she could change her mind and went downstairs to find an owl.

As she crossed the common room, James looked up from his conversation. "What's that?"

"Slug Club invitation," Lily said, more curtly than she'd intended.

James's eyebrows rose. "Already? Blimey, he didn't waste any time." He studied her face for a moment. "You going?"

"Yes."

"Fair warning—it's exactly as boring as you think it'll be. But the food's decent, at least."

Lily nodded and continued to the Owlery, James's words following her up the stairs.

Exactly as boring as you think it'll be.

Of course it would be. Everything was.

But at least it was different. And right now, different was the best she could hope for.

— CHAPTER SEVEN —

The Slug Club

Tuesday evening found Lily making her way through the entrance hall toward the ground floor corridor, dragging her feet.

Slughorn's office was tucked away in a quiet corridor off the main hall, far more comfortable than the dungeons where he taught Potions. She'd never been to this part of the castle before—most first-year classes kept them moving between the same familiar rooms and towers.

She stopped outside the heavy oak door, recognizing it from his directions. Warm light spilled from beneath it, and she could hear the murmur of voices inside—already there, then. She was late. Or maybe just last to arrive.

Lily took a breath and knocked.

"Come in, come in!" Slughorn's booming voice called.

She pushed open the door and stepped into what felt like an entirely different world.

The office was extraordinarily opulent compared to the sparse castle corridors. Rich burgundy curtains heavy as theatre drapes covered the stone walls from floor to ceiling, transforming the space into something that felt more like a gentleman's sitting room in London than a professor's office in a medieval castle. A fire crackled merrily in an ornate marble fireplace that looked like it had been imported from somewhere expensive, sending dancing shadows across the room, whilst comfortable armchairs upholstered in emerald velvet the colour of money clustered around low mahogany tables inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Everywhere Lily looked she saw photographs in elaborate gilt frames showing former students and important-looking wizards shaking hands with a younger Slughorn, and signed portraits with effusive messages written in expensive ink. The air smelled of crystallized pineapple and something else spicy-sweet like mulled wine or costly potpourri, the whole room creating an

atmosphere that spoke less of education and more of collection, of networking, of being among the chosen few who mattered.

And there, scattered throughout the room, were the other students.

"Ah, Miss Potter!" Slughorn bustled toward her, his enormous frame draped in plum-coloured robes that matched the room's décor. His silvery moustache gleamed in the firelight. "So delighted you could join us! Come in, come in—let me introduce you around." He beamed at her, positively glowing. "You know, when the Headmistress asked me to return this year, I was quite contentedly retired. But when she mentioned that all of Harry Potter's children would be here... Having taught three generations of members of the same extraordinary family. That must be some kind of a record." He chuckled warmly while Lily tried to control her composure. "Well, I simply couldn't refuse such an opportunity! How could I?"

Lily's eyes found James first. He was standing near the fireplace with a group of older students, a plate of tiny cakes balanced in one hand. He gave her a slight nod, nothing more.

"All three Potter children in one room!" Slughorn was saying, steering her deeper into the room with a hand on her shoulder. "Quite the occasion!"

As he guided her forward, Lily spotted Albus by the bookshelf with Scorpius Malfoy, both of them holding crystal glasses of what looked like pumpkin juice. Her brother glanced at her and gave a small nod—acknowledgment, at least—before Scorpius said something that drew his attention back. The blond boy gave Lily a polite smile before continuing his conversation with Albus.

It wasn't rejection, exactly. Just... distance. The same distance that had been there since the start of term, like they existed in separate worlds now.

"Ah, and Rose!" Slughorn continued, guiding Lily toward where her cousin stood with a group of third-years. "You two know each other, of course—two of Gryffindor's finest Chasers in the club this year! Rose's mother is the Minister for Magic, you know," he added to the nearby students, as if this were news. "Quite the family connections in this room!"

Rose smiled at Lily, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Hi, Lily. Good to see you." There was something complicated in her expression—not quite condescending, but not entirely welcoming either.

"Rose has quite the talent for Charms," Slughorn said proudly. "Top marks in her year. Takes after her mother, naturally."

Rose's smile tightened slightly, and she glanced at Lily with a look of weary understanding—*welcome to it*, the expression seemed to say—but she said nothing aloud.

Naturally, Lily thought. Everything came back to parents, to names, to who you were related to.

Slughorn spent the next several minutes introducing her to the older students—a seventh-year named Celeste whose grandfather had been Minister for Magic in the 1980s, a sixth-year boy whose aunt worked at Gringotts, a fifth-year whose parents owned a successful potions shop in Diagon Alley. Every introduction came with a pedigree, a connection, a reason they'd been chosen.

Finally, Slughorn released her with a gentle push toward a table laden with food. "Help yourself, my dear! We're all friends here."

Lily took a small plate and selected a few crystallized pineapple chunks, not because she wanted them but because it gave her something to do with her hands. Around her, conversations hummed—older students discussing N.E.W.T.s and career plans, third-years debating which elective classes were most useful, James and his friends debating the Holyhead Harpies' chances this season.

She felt utterly out of place.

"Surviving?" a voice said beside her.

Lily turned to find James, his expression somewhere between amused and sympathetic.

"Barely," she said quietly.

"You're standing by yourself eating pineapple you don't want. Classic first-timer." He popped a small cake into his mouth. "Gets easier. Slughorn means well, but he's exhausting."

"Why do you keep coming?"

James shrugged. "The food's good. The connections don't hurt—he's introduced me to people who work at the Ministry, at the Prophet. And Dad said Slughorn helped him a few times when he was at school. Annoying, but harmless."

"He keeps calling me 'Miss Potter' like I'm some kind of—" Lily lowered her voice further. "Like I'm collectible."

"You are collectible. To him, anyway." James's voice was matter-of-fact. "He taught Dad, he's taught me and Albus, now he's got you. Complete set. But like I said—harmless. Just smile, eat the food, and leave when you can."

Before Lily could respond, Slughorn's voice boomed across the room. "Now then, everyone, I do hope you're all getting to know each other! Miss Potter—Lily—come here a moment, would you?"

Lily forced herself to cross the room to where Slughorn stood with Celeste and two other seventh-years she hadn't been introduced to.

"I was just telling everyone about the extraordinary meeting I had with your father last year," Slughorn said, his eyes gleaming. "He came to discuss some Ministry business—can't say what, of course, confidential and all that—but we had the most wonderful conversation about his time at school. Did he ever tell you about the Felix Felicis he won in my class?"

"Yes, Professor," Lily said, forcing a polite smile.

"Remarkable luck, that potion! He used it to get a very important memory from me, you know. Played quite a role in defeating You-Know-Who." Slughorn's chest puffed out slightly. "I was happy to help, naturally. One does what one can in dark times."

The seventh-years were watching her with interest, and Lily felt her face growing warm. They weren't interested in *her*—they were interested in her father's story, in being able to say they'd met Harry Potter's daughter.

"What about you?" Celeste asked. "Are you good at Potions like your dad?"

"I'm... adequate," Lily said carefully.

"Oh, she's being modest!" Slughorn exclaimed. "Excellent work so far, excellent. The talent runs in the family, clearly. Her mother was a spectacular flyer, you know—played for the Holyhead Harpies. Do you fly, Miss Potter?"

Lily's jaw tightened. "Not particularly well, Professor."

"Ah, well, early days yet! I'm sure you'll find your strengths. The Potters always do."

He launched into a story about teaching her grandparents—Lily Potter, the one she was named after, who had been talented at Potions and Charms, and James Potter, who had been "spirited" and "occasionally challenging" but "showed great promise." Lily had heard variations of this story before, but Slughorn seemed to enjoy telling it, his voice warm with nostalgia. The fire

crackled behind them, and the sweet smell of crystallized pineapple lingered in the air.

Around her, the other students listened politely, but Lily could see some of them exchanging glances. They'd probably heard this story before too.

"Your grandmother saved my life once, you know," Slughorn said, his tone growing more serious. "Well, saved my reputation, at least. There was an incident with a Venomous Tentacula that I'd rather not detail, and she was kind enough to help me sort it out without alerting the Headmaster. Lovely girl. Terrible what happened to her."

An uncomfortable silence fell over the small group. Lily looked at her shoes.

"Anyway!" Slughorn's jovial tone returned. "That's all ancient history. The important thing is that we're here now, in much better times, getting to know the next generation of talented witches and wizards!"

He wandered off to check on the other students, and Celeste gave Lily a sympathetic look. "He means well. He just gets a bit... carried away with the family connections."

"I've noticed," Lily said quietly.

She was examining the photographs on the wall—dozens of smiling faces, all of them Slughorn's former students—when Albus appeared at her elbow.

"Hey," he said quietly. Scorpius stood just behind him, polite but reserved.

"Hey." Lily turned to face her brother, unsure what to say.

"How are you holding up?" Albus asked.

"It's... a lot," she admitted.

He gave a small, wry smile. "He's like this in Potions class too. Goes on about Dad constantly."

There was a pause, slightly uncomfortable. Scorpius glanced between them, then said, "It's exhausting, but he means well. Just a bit... enthusiastic about famous families."

"Right," Albus said. "Just don't take it too seriously. He's harmless, just a bit much."

Lily nodded, grateful for the advice even if it didn't make the evening any less awkward. "Thanks."

"And if he starts telling the story about the Felix Felicis again, you can just —" Albus made a subtle gesture of tuning out, and despite everything, Lily found herself smiling.

"Noted."

Another pause. Albus shifted his weight, looking like he wanted to say something else but didn't know how. Finally, he just said, "I'll see you around, yeah?"

"Yeah."

He and Scorpius drifted back toward the bookshelf, and Lily turned back to the photographs. It hadn't been much of a conversation, but it was something.

The evening continued in much the same pattern. Slughorn circulated through the room, telling stories, asking students about their families, dropping names of famous people he knew. The older students networked with each other, discussing summer internships and career opportunities. Rose stood near the bookshelf with other third-years, explaining her colour-coded note-taking system for Transfiguration—though Lily noticed she kept glancing toward Slughorn whenever he mentioned someone's mother or father, her expression carefully neutral.

James checked on her periodically, offering her food or making dry comments about Slughorn's storytelling, but mostly he stayed with his own friends. She didn't blame him—this was his social circle, after all, and she was the interloper.

At one point, a sixth-year boy asked Lily if her father had really fought a basilisk in his second year. At another, Rose approached her quietly and asked, "Is it strange? Being here after hearing all the stories?" There was something genuine in the question, like Rose actually understood. But before Lily could answer, Slughorn interrupted a nearby conversation about the Triwizard Tournament to mention that her father had been the youngest competitor in centuries, and Rose drifted away again.

Every question, every comment, every conversation came back to her name. Her family. Her father.

No one asked Lily about *her*.

She found herself watching the other students with growing understanding. Rose was here because of her mother. Celeste because of her grandfather. The boy by the window because his parents ran a successful business. Even Scorpius, she realised, was here because he was a Malfoy—the family might have a dark history, but they had prestige and wealth, and that was what Slughorn cared about.

They were all collections. All trophies. All here because of who they were related to, not who they were themselves.

The realization should have been comforting—she wasn't alone in this—but instead it made her feel worse. Was this all she was? Harry Potter's daughter? The final piece in Slughorn's set?

"More cakes, anyone?" Slughorn called out, his face flushed with pleasure at his successful gathering. "I had them specially made—the recipe is from a shop in Paris, absolutely divine!"

Lily took another piece of crystallized pineapple she didn't want.

By the time Slughorn started hinting that the evening was winding down—glancing at a ornate clock on the mantle, mentioning curfew in a jovial tone—Lily's face hurt from maintaining a polite expression.

Students began filtering toward the door, thanking Slughorn effusively. Rose hugged him, and Slughorn beamed like a proud uncle. The seventh-years shook his hand and promised to attend the next gathering. Albus and Scorpius headed out together, and as they passed, Albus caught Lily's eye and gave her a brief, almost apologetic smile before disappearing into the corridor.

James caught her eye as he headed out. "Not too terrible, right?"

"Exactly as boring as you said it would be," Lily replied.

He grinned. "At least you got the pineapples out of it."

When Lily finally reached the door, Slughorn stopped her with a gentle hand on her arm. "I do hope you'll come to the next gathering, Miss Potter. It's so wonderful to have all three Potter children in my little club. Your father would be proud, I'm sure."

"Thank you for having me, Professor," Lily said, because it was expected.

"The pleasure is entirely mine, my dear. Entirely mine."

She escaped into the corridor, where the quiet felt like a relief after the warmth and chatter of Slughorn's office. The other students had already dispersed, heading back to their common rooms in small groups. Their voices echoed through the entrance hall, fading into the distance.

Lily climbed the stairs alone, her footsteps steady on the worn stone.

She'd expected something *interesting* tonight. Not necessarily exciting—she'd learned by now not to expect excitement—but at least something different from the usual routine of classes and homework. A glimpse into another part of Hogwarts life, perhaps. A chance to feel special, even if she didn't want to admit that to herself.

Instead, she'd spent the evening being shown off like a prize horse, answering questions about her father, and listening to Slughorn's stories about people who were dead or famous or both.

But it had been, fundamentally, exactly what James had promised: boring.

Even the Slug Club—supposedly exclusive, supposedly special—was just another disappointment to add to the growing list.

She reached Gryffindor Tower and gave the password to the Fat Lady, who swung open with a sleepy greeting. The common room was still busy with students finishing homework or playing games, the fire crackling in the hearth. A few first-years looked up as Lily entered, and she caught one whispering to another—probably about where she'd been.

Even here, she couldn't escape being noticed.

Lily climbed the stairs to the dormitory, where she found her roommates already in their pajamas. Iris was brushing her hair, and Bridget was writing a letter home.

"How was it?" Iris asked. "The Slug Club thing?"

"Fine," Lily said, pulling her trunk out from under her bed. "Just... fine."

"Was there good food?" Bridget asked. "I heard Slughorn always has amazing food."

"The food was good."

She changed into her pajamas and climbed into bed, pulling the curtains partway closed. Through the gap, she could see the window overlooking the grounds, where moonlight silvered the grass and the Forbidden Forest loomed dark in the distance.

Four weeks ago, she'd arrived at Hogwarts with her father's stories in her head and adventure in her heart. She'd expected magic and mystery and moments that mattered.

Instead, she'd got homework and routine and professors who were competent enough to handle every problem before it became interesting. She'd got a Potions teacher who valued her name more than her actual work. She'd

got brothers who were too old or too distant to include her in their lives. She'd got a school that was safe and supervised and thoroughly, completely ordinary.

Tonight had been her chance to experience something different. Something exclusive. Something that might, finally, break the monotony.

And it had been exactly as boring as everything else.

Lily rolled over, facing the curtains, and closed her eyes against the disappointment that had become so familiar it barely hurt anymore.

At least tomorrow was Wednesday. Potions class, where Slughorn would probably mention tonight's gathering and make her feel like a trophy all over again.

She almost laughed at the thought, but it came out more like a sigh.

This is just what Hogwarts is now, she thought. Safe. Peaceful. Boring. Even when it pretends to be special.

From somewhere below, she heard the common room clock chime nine times. Curfew for first-years.

Lily pulled her blanket up to her chin and waited for sleep to come, already dreading another ordinary day tomorrow.

— CHAPTER EIGHT —

Halloween

By late October, the initial excitement of Hogwarts had completely faded into routine. So when Lily woke on Halloween morning, the knot of anticipation in her chest caught her by surprise.

October 31st. The date that had shaped her entire family's history. The night her grandparents had died defending her father. The night Voldemort had been defeated for the first time, broken by a mother's love and a baby who survived.

And, less dramatically but more relevantly to Lily's current state of mind, the day her father's Hogwarts adventures had truly begun.

She thought about Dad's Halloween story—the troll, the danger, the beginning of everything. *Halloween at Hogwarts*, he'd said. *Nothing will ever be normal again.*

Something always happened on Halloween.

She dressed quickly and headed down to the common room, where enchanted bats were already swooping lazily near the ceiling and carved pumpkins grinned from the windowsills. The decorations had been going up all week, but today they seemed more alive, more present, anticipating the evening's feast.

In the Great Hall, the usual breakfast buzz had an extra edge of excitement. Orange and black banners hung from the walls, and the floating candles had been replaced with hovering jack-o'-lanterns that cast flickering light across the tables. At the staff table, the professors looked relaxed and cheerful—even Professor McGonagall had a faint smile as she surveyed the decorations.

Lily sat down across the aisle from Hugo, who was already working his way through a plate of eggs and toast at the Hufflepuff table.

"Morning," he said through a mouthful. "Happy Halloween."

"Happy Halloween," Lily echoed, reaching for the pumpkin juice.

She couldn't shake the feeling of waiting. Something should happen today. Something always happened.

But breakfast passed without incident, and Lily headed to Herbology with the unsettling sense that she was watching for danger that wouldn't come.

Professor Longbottom was in an excellent mood, which somehow made Lily feel worse.

"Halloween!" he announced cheerfully as they gathered in Greenhouse Three. "One of my favourite days at Hogwarts. Tonight's feast is spectacular—you first-years are in for a treat."

He set them to work repotting Bouncing Bulbs, which required careful handling to avoid being smacked in the face by their enthusiastic roots. Lily worked mechanically, her attention only half on the plants.

Thirty-eight years ago today, her grandparents had died. Her father had survived. The wizarding world had changed forever.

And Professor Longbottom was cheerfully talking about Bouncing Bulbs.

"You alright?" Hugo asked quietly, steadying a bulb that was trying to bounce out of Lily's grip.

"Fine," Lily said. "Just thinking."

"About your grandparents?"

She nodded. Everyone knew the significance of the date for the Potter family. James had looked tense at breakfast, and she'd spotted Albus sitting with Scorpius at the Slytherin table, unusually quiet.

"That must be strange," Hugo said. "I mean, it's this huge historical thing, but it's also your family."

"I never met them," Lily said. "So it doesn't feel like grief, exactly. More like..." She struggled to find the words. "Like I'm supposed to feel something I don't actually feel."

What she did feel—and couldn't say—was anticipation. Expectation. The bone-deep certainty that something should happen on Halloween, and the growing frustration that nothing ever did.

By afternoon, the castle was fully transformed.

Lily's Charms class was dismissed early so the house-elves could finish decorating the Great Hall, and students spilled into the corridors with unusual freedom. Everywhere Lily looked, she saw enchanted decorations—bats swooping in coordinated patterns, pumpkins that rotated to follow passersby with their carved eyes, floating candles that flickered in colours that didn't exist in normal fire.

It was magical. Genuinely magical. And somehow, that made it feel even more ordinary.

She'd been wandering the corridors all afternoon, restless with anticipation. Twice already she'd found herself on the seventh floor, walking slowly past the troll tapestry, wishing desperately that something—anything—would happen. But the castle remained stubbornly normal.

Lily found herself drifting toward a window overlooking the grounds. The October afternoon was crisp and clear, the Forbidden Forest a dark mass in the distance, the lake reflecting the pale sky.

And there, barely visible in the forest, a flicker of light.

Lily leaned closer to the glass, her breath fogging the window. Had she imagined it? No—there it was again. A blue-white glow, deep among the trees, appearing and disappearing as if something were moving between the trunks.

Her pulse quickened.

"What are you looking at?" Nova appeared at her elbow, clutching a stack of books.

"The forest," Lily said. "Do you see that light?"

Nova squinted through the window. "Oh. Yeah, maybe? It's hard to tell from here. Could be anything."

"But don't you think it's strange—"

"Lily, it's probably nothing," Nova said gently. "You know how you get sometimes."

The light flickered again, longer this time. And was it her imagination, or were there more of them now? Multiple lights, moving in some kind of pattern?

"Are you coming to the library?" Nova asked. "I need to finish my Transfiguration essay before the feast."

"In a minute," Lily said, still staring at the forest.

Nova shrugged and left, and Lily stayed at the window, watching. The lights appeared and disappeared, never quite resolving into anything identifiable. Sometimes they seemed to be moving closer to the castle. Sometimes they vanished for long minutes before reappearing in a different location.

"Lily!" Hugo's voice made her jump. "There you are. Come on, McGonagall's making rounds and she'll give us detention if we're just standing around."

"Hugo, look at the forest—"

But Hugo was already pulling her along, and by the time Lily looked back, the lights had vanished again.

The Halloween feast began at seven o'clock, and by the time Lily entered the Great Hall, her nerves were wound tight as a bowstring.

The decorations were spectacular—thousands of live bats swooped overhead in great black clouds that wheeled and turned in coordinated patterns creating living shadows that danced across the tables below, hundreds of carved pumpkins floated at varying heights throughout the hall with faces ranging from terrifying to comical all flickering with internal candlelight that cast an orange glow, and the enchanted ceiling showed a perfect starlit October sky with a waning crescent moon hanging pale and ghostly against the darkness, whilst the house tables groaned under mountains of special food including whole roasted pumpkins stuffed with rice and herbs that sent up fragrant steam, apple tarts glazed with cinnamon and sugar until they gleamed, treacle pudding so dark it was almost black and smelled of molasses and spice, platters of turkey and stuffing that made Lily's mouth water despite her nerves, and more sweets than she'd seen since the Hogwarts Express trolley—crystallized pineapple and sugar mice and chocolate cauldrons and liquorice wands—all of it creating a feast that felt both celebratory and slightly eerie in that perfect Halloween way where magic and mischief lived together.

Students were laughing, eating, celebrating. The professors sat at the staff table looking pleased with the festivities. At the Gryffindor table, James was in animated conversation with his friends, gesturing with a drumstick. At the

Slytherin table, even Albus looked more relaxed than usual, smiling at something Scorpius said.

Everyone was having a wonderful time.

Lily sat down with Hugo and barely touched her food.

"You have to eat something," Hugo said, pushing a plate of roasted potatoes toward her. "It's really good."

Lily took a potato but couldn't bring herself to eat it. She kept glancing toward the windows, toward the door, toward the staff table. Waiting. Watching.

When would it happen? When would something go wrong?

Headmistress McGonagall stood to make a speech, and the Great Hall quieted.

"Halloween at Hogwarts," McGonagall said, her voice carrying easily through the hall. "A night to celebrate, to feast, and to remember. We remember those who were lost in darker times, and we celebrate the peace they helped create. This castle has seen many Halloweens—some joyful, some terrifying, some that changed the course of history."

Her eyes found the Gryffindor table and seemed to linger for just a moment on Lily before moving on.

"But tonight, we simply enjoy the safety and happiness we are fortunate enough to have. Please join me in a moment of silence for those we have lost, and then let us feast!"

The silence stretched across the Great Hall. Lily closed her eyes, thinking of grandparents she'd never met. Thinking of her father, age eleven, surviving the impossible. Thinking of trolls and danger and adventure.

Then the noise resumed, louder than before, and the feast continued.

Lily opened her eyes—and saw them.

The lights. Through the high windows, barely visible against the darkening sky, the blue-white lights were back in the forest. More of them now, moving in what looked like deliberate patterns. They seemed brighter than before, or perhaps it was just the gathering darkness making them more visible.

"Hugo," Lily whispered urgently. "Look."

Hugo glanced toward the windows. "What am I looking at?"

"The lights! In the forest!"

He squinted. "I don't see—oh, wait. Yeah, I see something. Maybe it's the centaurs? They live in there, don't they?"

"Centaurs don't glow blue—"

"Lily, please." Hugo returned his attention to his food. "It's Halloween. Can't you just enjoy the feast? Everything's fine."

But it wasn't fine. The lights were moving closer, Lily was sure of it now. Closer to the castle. And they pulsed and flickered with an eerie rhythm that made the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

She looked around the Great Hall. No one else seemed to have noticed. The professors were eating and talking, the students were laughing, the feast continued in all its noisy glory.

Didn't anyone else see them?

The lights flickered again, and this time Lily could swear they were at the edge of the forest, visible between the trees at the boundary of the grounds. Close enough to make out individual sources now—four, no, five distinct lights, moving in formation.

Her heart was pounding. This was it. This was the moment. Something was happening, finally happening, and no one else had noticed because they weren't looking, weren't expecting—

She stood up.

"Where are you going?" Hugo asked.

"I need to check something."

"Lily, no—"

But she was already moving, slipping away from the Gryffindor table as the feast noise covered her departure. She caught a glimpse of James glancing her way with a puzzled frown, but she was out the door before he could say anything.

The entrance hall was empty and eerily quiet after the chaos of the Great Hall. Lily's footsteps echoed on the stone floor as she hurried toward the main doors.

The lights in the forest. Halloween night. This was exactly like her father's first year—something dangerous happening during the feast, everyone distracted, only she had noticed—

She pushed open the heavy doors and stepped out into the October night.

The air was cold and sharp, her breath misting in front of her face. Her hands were already going numb. Above, stars scattered across a perfectly clear sky. The castle windows blazed with light behind her, but ahead the grounds lay dark and mysterious, and beyond them, the Forbidden Forest.

And there—the lights. Clearly visible now, blue-white and pulsing, moving among the trees near the forest's edge.

Lily's courage nearly failed her. The Forbidden Forest. Headmistress McGonagall had been explicit at the start-of-term feast: centaurs who didn't welcome intruders, acromantulas that could kill. Real dangers, not arbitrary rules. First-years weren't supposed to go anywhere near it, and Lily knew exactly why.

But her father had faced a mountain troll at eleven. And this wasn't even going into the forest—just investigating lights near the edge. Those creatures lived deeper in the forest, didn't they? She'd read in her father's journal about the centaurs: intelligent and noble, but intense and intimidating. *Don't ever think of them as pretty horses*, he'd written. *They find it deeply insulting*. If she stayed at the forest's edge, she wouldn't encounter anything dangerous. If she couldn't even do that...

She started walking across the grounds, her pace quick but not quite running. The lights seemed to be moving parallel to the forest edge, heading toward... toward Hagrid's hut? Yes, definitely heading in that direction.

The grass was damp with evening dew, soaking through her shoes. The noise from the Great Hall faded behind her until she could hear only her own breathing and the distant sound of the wind in the trees.

The lights were closer now. She could see them clearly—definitely magical, definitely moving with purpose. Four distinct sources, weaving between the trees. They pulsed in a rhythm that seemed almost like communication.

Lily's heart hammered against her ribs. This was real. This was happening. She was doing it—investigating, being brave, finally having an adventure—

"Oi! Lily. What in Merlin's name are yeh doin' out here?"

She jumped and spun around.

Hagrid emerged from the darkness near his hut, carrying what looked like a large bucket in each hand. He set them down heavily and fixed her with a stern look.

"Yeh should be at the feast! And yeh definitely shouldn't be wanderin' around the grounds after dark!"

"I saw the lights," Lily said breathlessly, pointing toward the forest. "In the trees. I thought—I thought something was happening—"

Hagrid followed her gaze and let out a bark of laughter that made Lily's throat tighten with premature dread.

"The lights? That's jus' the fairy lanterns I'm settin' up fer tomorrow's lesson. Got a colony of fairies that need relocatin' from the forest—they're attracted to the lanterns, see. Been workin' on it all afternoon."

He gestured toward the trees, and now that Lily looked more carefully, she could see the lights were hanging from branches, swaying gently in the wind. Not moving through the forest. Just... hanging there. Lanterns.

"But they were moving," Lily said weakly. "I saw them moving."

"Wind been pickin' up all evenin'," Hagrid said. "Makes 'em swing about. Plus the trees move in the wind too, so it probably looked like the lights were movin' around." He picked up his buckets again. "Now, yeh best get back to the feast before Professor McGonagall notices yer gone. I won't tell her if yeh hurry."

Lily stared at the fairy lanterns. Blue-white lights, hanging from trees. Swaying in the wind. Completely ordinary. Completely harmless. Preparation for a Care of Magical Creatures lesson.

Not dangerous. Not mysterious. Not an adventure.

Just lanterns.

"I..." Lily's voice came out small. "I thought..."

"I know what yeh thought," Hagrid said, and his expression softened. "Halloween an' all. Hard not to think of yer dad's stories. But there's no troll this year, Lily. No dark wizards. Jus' a feast and some decorations and me settin' up fer tomorrow's lesson." He paused. "That's a good thing, yeh know. It means yer safe."

Safe, Lily thought. Safe and bored and completely ordinary.

"Yeah," she said. "Right. I'll... I'll go back now."

She turned and walked back toward the castle. Her face burned despite the cold air. Behind her, she heard Hagrid's heavy footsteps retreating toward the forest, and the clank of his buckets as he continued his work.

Fairy lanterns. Of course. Of course it was just fairy lanterns.

By the time Lily slipped back into the Great Hall, the feast was winding down and the tables had been cleared for dancing. A band of skeletal musicians played jaunty music from a conjured stage, and students were laughing and spinning in the open space between the house tables.

Hugo spotted her immediately and hurried over. "Where did you go? What happened?"

"Nothing," Lily said flatly. "It was nothing."

"The lights?"

"Fairy lanterns. Hagrid's setting up for a lesson tomorrow."

Hugo looked relieved. "See? I told you it was fine."

"Right," Lily said. "Fine."

Relief should have come. Gratitude for safety, for peace, for the absence of trolls and dark wizards and mysterious threats.

It didn't. She felt hollow.

The dancing continued around her. Orange and black banners fluttered overhead. Enchanted bats swooped in perfect formations. Students laughed and celebrated Halloween at Hogwarts, and no one seemed to notice or care that Lily had just proved—once again—that nothing interesting ever happened anymore.

"Are you okay?" Hugo asked, peering at her face.

"I'm fine," Lily lied. "I'm going back to the common room."

"But the dancing—"

"I'm tired. I'll see you later."

She left before he could argue, pushing through the crowd of celebrating students and out into the entrance hall. The castle corridors were mostly empty now, everyone still at the feast or dancing. Her footsteps echoed as she climbed the stairs to Gryffindor Tower.

The Fat Lady was dozing in her portrait, and Lily had to say the password twice before she woke and swung open.

The common room was deserted except for a few older students who barely glanced at her as she crossed to the dormitory stairs. She climbed mechanically, went into the empty dormitory, and sat on her bed, staring at nothing.

Halloween. The most significant date in her family's history. The day her grandparents had died and her father had survived. The day trolls attacked and friendships formed and adventures began.

And she'd spent it chasing fairy lanterns.

She thought about her father's Halloween story again, the words she'd memorized years ago. *Nothing will ever be normal again*, he'd said, describing the excitement of an eleven-year-old discovering he was braver than he'd thought.

Everything is normal now, Lily thought. Everything is safe and supervised and so completely, utterly normal that even on Halloween—Halloween!—nothing happens.

Her hands clenched into fists.

She lay back on her bed, still fully dressed, staring up at the canopy.

The dormitory door opened, and footsteps crossed the room. Lily didn't bother looking to see who it was until a voice said, "Lily?"

She turned her head. Iris stood there, looking uncertain.

"Everyone's asking where you went," Iris said. "Hugo said you came back up here."

"I'm fine," Lily said automatically.

Iris hesitated, then sat down on the edge of Lily's bed. "My mum told me about your grandparents. About what happened on Halloween. That must be really hard."

Lily almost laughed. Everyone kept assuming she was upset about her grandparents, about grief and loss and family tragedy. But that wasn't it at all. How could she explain that she wasn't sad they were dead—she'd never known them—but rather frustrated that their deaths had made her father's life interesting while hers remained stubbornly boring?

"I'm fine," she said again.

"You don't look fine."

"I just..." Lily struggled to find words that wouldn't make her sound ridiculous. "I thought something would happen. On Halloween. Something always happens on Halloween."

"But nothing bad happened," Iris said gently. "Isn't that good?"

It should be good. Lily knew it should be good. But all she could think was: nothing happened. Again. Even on the one day when something should have happened, nothing did.

"Yeah," she said quietly. "It's good."

Iris squeezed her hand and left, and Lily rolled over to face the wall.

From far below, she could hear music and laughter as the Halloween celebration continued. The castle was safe. The students were happy. Professors were competent and prepared. Fairy lanterns swung in the wind, and first-year girls investigated mysterious lights that turned out to be nothing at all.

This is what Hogwarts is now, Lily thought. This is what it will always be.

And for the first time since arriving at the castle, she felt not just disappointed but resigned. The hoping, the watching, the expecting—it was exhausting. It was pointless.

Maybe it was time to stop waiting for something to happen and accept that nothing ever would.

She closed her eyes against the distant sounds of celebration and waited for sleep to come, already dreading another ordinary tomorrow.

— CHAPTER NINE —

The Quidditch Match

November arrived at Hogwarts like an uninvited guest who refused to leave. The castle grounds turned grey and sodden under constant rain, the sky pressing down low and heavy from morning until the early darkness of afternoon. The enthusiasm that had carried first-years through September and October evaporated like mist, leaving behind only the reality of homework, exams, and the long stretch until Christmas.

Lily went through the motions. Herbology, Transfiguration, Potions, Charms—each class blurred into the next. She completed her homework adequately. She answered when called upon. She nodded when Hugo talked, though she couldn't always remember what he'd said afterward.

"You've been weird since Halloween," Hugo announced one dreary Monday afternoon as they trudged back from History of Magic. "Maybe you need to do something fun?"

Lily glanced at him. His round face was creased with concern, and she felt a stab of guilt. "I'm fine."

"You're not." He adjusted his bag on his shoulder. "Come on. Gryffindor's first match is this weekend. Everyone goes! We should watch together."

"Quidditch?" The word felt heavy in her mouth.

"Yeah! Rose is playing, and James—it'll be brilliant! Cold, but brilliant." He grinned hopefully. "Better than moping in the common room."

Lily opened her mouth to refuse, then stopped. She'd been trying to care about *something*—anything—since Halloween had proven to be another spectacular disappointment. Maybe Quidditch would work. Maybe if she just... tried harder.

"All right," she said. "Yeah, let's go."

Saturday dawned grey and cold, the kind of November day that seemed designed to make you regret being outdoors. The Quidditch pitch rose from the soggy grounds like a skeletal monument, wooden stands packed with students bundled in scarves and cloaks. Their breath fogged in white clouds as they shouted and stamped their feet against the cold. The smell of damp wood and wet grass hung in the air, mixed with a hint of woodsmoke drifting from Hagrid's hut, and Lily's fingers were numb even before they found their seats.

Hugo pulled Lily toward a free bench, chattering excitedly about formations and strategies. "Rose has been practising this new feint with the left Chaser—James, probably—and if they can coordinate the timing with the Keeper's position, they might actually get past Ravenclaw's defence..."

Lily climbed the stands, found a seat, looked out at the pitch. The hoops gleamed dully in the flat light. Players mounted their brooms on the sidelines. Red and blue robes bright against the grey day.

She spotted James immediately. Tall, confident, tossing his broom from hand to hand as he talked to another Chaser. Rose stood nearby, shorter but equally assured, stretching her arms above her head.

The Potter-Weasley Chaser cousins. That's what people called them. The children of war heroes, the grandchildren of legends, dominating the Gryffindor team together.

"There they are!" Hugo pointed unnecessarily. "James and Rose—best Chasers Gryffindor's had in years, Dad says."

Madam Hooch's whistle pierced the air. The players kicked off. Wind and movement. The crowd erupted.

Hugo was on his feet instantly. Shouting with everyone else. Around them, students jumped and pointed and yelled advice. Lily remained seated.

She watched the players zoom through the air. Swift, graceful, completely in control. They wheeled and dove and climbed with the kind of easy confidence she'd never managed on her own disaster of a broom—wobbling a foot off the ground while everyone else soared, crashing into the grass while Lark Prewett watched with that infuriating smirk.

The memory hit her like cold water.

The Quaffle changed hands. James caught it mid-flight. Tucked into a dive. Passed to Rose without looking. She caught it seamlessly, spun past a Ravenclaw Chaser, hurled it toward the centre hoop.

The crowd screamed. Hugo grabbed Lily's arm. "Did you see that? That's the coordination I was talking about! That's exactly—"

Lily's chest felt tight. Her mother had played professionally—Holyhead Harpies, seven years. Her father had been the youngest Seeker in a century. Her brother was up there right now making it look effortless.

And she couldn't even hover without wobbling.

It was in her blood—Dad catching the Snitch in front of hundreds, Mum's professional career, James living for Quidditch, even Hugo understanding the game and loving it despite not being particularly athletic.

But Lily felt nothing.

Or worse. She felt angry.

The game continued. James scored. Rose scored again. Hugo provided running commentary—formations, fouls, something about the Beater's positioning. Lily's mind kept drifting.

Watching people chase a ball through the air didn't excite her. The strategy Hugo kept explaining sounded complicated but not interesting—like everyone else had been given instructions she'd somehow missed, and their roaring enthusiasm felt alien, incomprehensible.

What's wrong with me?

A voice cut through the general noise. Sharp, confident, analytical. Lily glanced sideways—Lark sat a few rows over with a cluster of other Slytherin first-years, gesturing at the pitch.

"That Chaser's grip is too tight." Lark pointed. "Watch—she's losing speed on the turns. And the Seeker needs to drop another five feet for a better angle. If there's a Snitch near the goalposts, he'll never see it from up there."

The students around her listened. Impressed. Someone asked a question. Lark answered with casual authority—the kind that came from years of expensive private coaching.

Lily looked away. Jaw tight. Of course Lark understood Quidditch. Flying since she was five. Professional trainers, custom equipment, everything money could buy.

The match wore on. The cold seeped through Lily's cloak. Rose executed a spectacular barrel roll around a Bludger. Caught the Quaffle. Scored again. Gryffindor erupted. Hugo jumped and cheered and turned to Lily with shining eyes.

"She's incredible, isn't she? That's my sister!"

"Yeah." Lily's voice flat. "She's great."

Hugo's expression flickered. "You're not even watching, are you?"

"I am."

"You don't have to pretend." His voice quiet suddenly. Deflated.

Guilt twisted in her stomach. "I'm sorry. I'm trying—"

"Rose just scored again. Did you see?"

Lily hadn't. She hadn't noticed at all.

Hugo sighed and turned back to the match, still enthusiastic but subdued now. Lily stared at her hands.

Then Lark's voice drifted over again, louder this time, tinged with mockery: "Of course the golden cousins play perfectly together. Must be nice when the whole team revolves around your family name."

The other Slytherins laughed. It wasn't cruel laughter, just house rivalry banter, the kind that always flew between sections during matches. Lark was probably just needling Gryffindor fans, nothing personal.

But Lily heard it. And something inside her cracked.

Golden cousins. From someone born with a golden spoon, Lily thought viciously. *Daddy's millions bought you everything but what actually matters.*

The thought was mean. She knew it was mean. But she couldn't stop it.

The noise was too loud. Everyone around her was cheering and excited and James and Rose were brilliant and Lark was smirking and Hugo kept explaining plays and Lily couldn't *breathe*.

She stood abruptly.

"Lily?" Hugo looked up. "Where are you going?"

"I'm cold. I'll see you later."

"But the match—"

She didn't wait for him to finish. She pushed past students' knees, climbed down the stands, and walked away. Behind her, the crowd roared. Someone had scored again. She didn't bother looking back.

Most of the students didn't notice her leave. They were too engrossed in the match, shouting and stamping and waving scarves. Only Hugo watched her go, confused and worried. Maybe one or two others glanced her way.

But to Lily, it felt like everyone had seen. Like the entire stadium had watched Harry Potter's daughter walk away from a Quidditch match because she couldn't even pretend to care.

She ended up in the library—quiet, nearly empty, blessedly free of Quidditch enthusiasm. Distant cheering echoed through the castle when one team or another scored, but here it was muffled, ignorable.

Lily sat at a table near the window and stared at the grey grounds outside.

What was wrong with her? Why couldn't she just... be normal? Like what she was supposed to like?

Her mother had loved Quidditch so much she'd played professionally. Her father had been naturally brilliant at it. James lived for the sport. Even Albus, who didn't play, at least *understood* it. Rose was a star. Hugo was enthusiastic and happy and knew all the rules.

And Lily felt nothing. No connection. No excitement. Just resentment that everyone expected her to care about something she couldn't force herself to love.

Another thing she didn't fit. Another way the Potter legacy didn't match who she actually was.

Footsteps echoed in the library. Lily looked up and saw Kieran Flint walking between the shelves, glancing over his shoulder like he expected someone to follow. He was carrying something wrapped in brown paper, tucked under his arm.

Their eyes met. Kieran paused, his expression shifting slightly—acknowledgment that he'd seen her, that he knew she'd seen him. Not guilty, but guarded. Then he continued toward the back of the library and disappeared into the Restricted Section alcove.

Lily frowned. What was he doing? What was he carrying?

Hugo's voice echoed in her mind: *Maybe he's just private? Not everyone is up to something.*

Maybe. But Kieran's father had been in Azkaban for years for abetting Death Eaters. And Kieran kept doing things that were just slightly... off. Nothing she

could point to, nothing concrete. Just a feeling that something wasn't quite right.

She watched the spot where he'd vanished, waiting to see if he'd come back. But after several minutes of silence, she gave up and turned back to the window.

The distant roar suggested Gryffindor had won. Good. James and Rose would be celebrating. Everyone would be happy.

Lily rested her forehead against the cold glass.

That night, the first snow fell.

Lily woke to Iris's excited voice echoing through the dormitory. "It's snowing! Actual snow!"

She got up, wrapped her blanket around her shoulders, and joined the other girls at the window. Outside, Hogwarts had transformed into something from a picture book. Snow covered everything—the towers, the grounds, the bare trees—soft and white and untouched. Fat flakes drifted past the window, catching the light from the castle.

Students were already outside, laughing and throwing snowballs. Someone had charmed a snowman to wave at passersby. A group of older students were building an elaborate snow fort near the greenhouses.

"It's beautiful," someone whispered. "Like something from a story."

The other girls murmured agreement, pressing close to the window, breath fogging the glass.

Lily watched the snow fall.

Beautiful. Yes. It was objectively beautiful.

But she didn't feel anything.

Even this—magic snow, Hogwarts transformed, winter arriving like an enchantment—couldn't reach past the grey numbness inside her.

What's wrong with me?

She let the others chatter and exclaim. She wrapped the blanket tighter and stared at the transformed grounds.

It just looked cold.

November dragged toward December. The castle grew colder. Homework piled higher. Everyone started talking about Christmas break, counting down the days.

Hugo tried to cheer Lily up a few more times. "Want to build a snow wizard?" "Want to go sledding on tea trays?" "Want to sneak extra food from the kitchens?"

She went along sometimes because she felt guilty saying no. But her heart wasn't in it.

He stopped asking eventually. Not angry—just sad. Like he'd run out of ideas.

In Potions, Slughorn mentioned an upcoming Slug Club gathering—the last before Christmas. "Just a small affair! Select students, excellent company, delightful refreshments..."

He beamed at Lily. "You'll receive your invitation soon, Miss Potter. I do hope you'll attend. Your grandmother was always such delightful company when she was your age."

Lily nodded automatically. Lark's hands tightened on her cauldron two tables over, but she didn't look up.

Classes continued. Snow accumulated. The term crept toward its end.

One night, Lily sat in the common room while other students played Exploding Snap and argued about their Transfiguration essay length requirements. James was at yet another Quidditch practice. The fire crackled warmly.

Outside the window, snow fell steadily, coating the grounds in white.

Lily watched the flakes drift past the glass. December was almost here. Christmas break approaching. She'd go home, see her parents, escape Hogwarts for a few weeks.

— CHAPTER TEN —

The Confrontation

The letter arrived at breakfast on a grey Tuesday morning in late November.

A large tawny owl landed in front of Lark Prewett at the Slytherin table. Expensive stationery, cream-coloured envelope. Lark opened it, read it. Her jaw tightened. She folded it precisely, tucked it into her bag, and pushed her plate away.

Lily looked away.

At the Gryffindor table, Hugo was explaining something about the Christmas Feast preparations, but Lily wasn't really listening. A school barn owl had delivered something for her, too: an invitation on heavy cardstock with Professor Slughorn's looping script.

Slug Club gathering, December 5th. Last social before Christmas break. Do come, Miss Potter! Your presence would be most appreciated.

*Best holiday season wishes,
Professor H. Slughorn*

Lily stared at the invitation. Maybe it would be interesting this time. Maybe meeting older students and accomplished people would be... something. Better than sitting in the common room feeling grey and disconnected. She tucked the invitation into her bag.

Defence Against the Dark Arts that afternoon was taught by Professor McLaggen with his usual combination of competence and insufferable smugness.

"Today," he announced, pacing at the front of the classroom, "we'll be learning the Knockback Jinx. Flipendo. Most professors save this for second

year, but I mastered it in my first week at Hogwarts—natural aptitude, really." He demonstrated with his wand, sending a practice dummy flying backward into the wall with a satisfying thud. "See? All in the wrist. Later refined the technique under Proudfoot at the Auror Academy—excellent instructor, that one. Personally recommended me for advanced defensive training."

"Now, I know this is rather ambitious for first-years," McLaggen continued, clearly pleased with himself. "But I believe in challenging my students. Can't coddle you forever, can we? Besides, if I could manage it at eleven, surely you lot can give it a decent attempt."

Lily exchanged a glance with Hugo. This was typical McLaggen—showing off, pushing them beyond what the curriculum called for, then acting like he was doing them a favour.

They paired up to practice. Hugo went with Marcus Finch-Fletchley. Lily ended up with Bridget Finnegan, who was enthusiastic but kept mispronouncing the incantation.

Across the room, Lark practiced with another Slytherin, her movements sharp and precise. Even upset, even carrying whatever was in that letter from her father, she was good at practical magic. Her jinx sent the practice dummy skidding backward with perfect control.

McLaggen noticed. "Excellent form, Miss Prewett! Reminds me of my own technique at that age—though perhaps a touch aggressive. Watch how I demonstrate control." He sent another dummy flying with precise force. "See? Power with finesse. That's the McLaggen approach."

Lark's expression didn't change, but Lily saw her jaw tighten.

The class continued. McLaggen critiqued everyone's technique, sometimes helpfully, sometimes just to hear himself talk. By the time he dismissed them, Lily's head ached from concentration and her wand arm was sore.

The classroom emptied quickly.

Lily packed her things slowly, letting the room empty. Hugo had already gone—something about meeting his study group in the library. Other students filed out in chattering groups.

Lark was still at her table, shoving books back into her bag with sharp, angry movements. Her wand lay on the desk beside her, forgotten.

They were alone except for a handful of students near the door.

Lily stood. She should leave. This wasn't her problem. Lark's father, Lark's struggles, whatever was eating at her—none of it was Lily's concern.

But something made her walk toward the Slytherin section instead of the door. The weeks of tension, the "golden cousins" comment that still burned in her memory, the way Lark had smirked when Lily crashed her broom—it all simmered under her skin like something waiting to boil over.

"You looked angry out there," Lily said. "During practice."

Lark looked up sharply. "What?"

"McLaggen's comment. 'Too aggressive.' Like he was doing you a favour pointing it out." Lily kept her voice level, but there was an edge to it. "Must be nice getting praised even when he's criticizing you."

The words were out before she could stop them. Mean, petty, exactly the kind of thing she shouldn't say.

Lark's eyes went cold. "Careful, Potter."

"Or what?" Something reckless rose in Lily's chest. "You'll make another comment about how everything revolves around my family?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The Quidditch match." Lily's voice sharpened. "'Golden cousins.' Ring a bell?"

Lark stared at her. "That was about the *game*—house rivalry, mocking Gryffindor, not—"

"Felt personal."

"Well, it wasn't, and not everything is about *you*, Potter, though I can see why you'd think that, given how Slughorn practically genuflects when you walk in."

"That's not my fault!"

"Isn't it?" Lark stood, shoving her chair back. "You could tell him you're not interested, skip his ridiculous club, but you don't." A pause. "Because you like being collected like some kind of trophy."

"I don't—" Lily's voice rose. "I didn't even want—you think I *like* being known only for being Harry Potter's daughter, having everyone expect me to be something I'm not?"

"Oh, poor you." Lark's voice dripped contempt. "Must be so hard—being famous, beloved, invited to exclusive parties you can't even be bothered to attend."

"At least I was invited! At least people want me there for something other than my father's money!"

Lark's face went white. Then red. "Don't."

But Lily couldn't stop—all the frustration from the past months, the boring classes and failed adventures and constant comparisons and the Quidditch match she couldn't sit through, all of it pouring out in sharp, cutting words she couldn't take back. "You can buy professional Quidditch coaches and custom robes and a mansion near Bristol." Her throat tight. "But you can't buy what I was born with—the name, people actually wanting you there for *you*."

"And YOU can't buy what I have!" Lark's voice cracked like a whip. She grabbed her wand—not threatening, just frustrated—but it was in her hand. "You stand there with your FAMOUS NAME and your LEGACY and your automatic invitations to everything..." A breath. "And you have the *audacity* to complain?"

Lily's hand went to her own wand. Reflexive. Not pointing it. Just holding it. Her jaw clenched. "You think having a famous name makes everything easy?"

The last few students by the door stopped. Watching. Someone murmured something. The door swung shut as they backed out quickly.

Alone now. Just Lily and Lark in the empty Defence classroom, months of tension finally breaking open, both holding their wands—not dueling, not threatening, just too angry to think about what it looked like.

"YOU HAVE THE NAME!"

Lark's voice echoed off stone walls. "Everyone knows who you are—you walk into a room and people *care* because you're Harry Potter's daughter, and you don't have to do anything, don't have to *be* anything, you just have to exist and you're special!"

"YOU HAVE THE MONEY!"

Lily shouted back just as loud, her face hot, hands shaking. "Your father bought you everything—professional coaches, custom brooms, you're brilliant at flying because you could *afford* to be, you have everything I don't!"

"Your father SAVED THE WORLD!" Lark's voice cracked. "Mine runs a tech company, wants me to run it with him, waste my magic on profit margins

and business plans..." Her hands shook. "Do you know what it's like?" Quieter now. "Being told your magic is just a *tool*?"

"Everyone expects me to have ADVENTURES!" Lily's voice broke slightly. "To be BRAVE! To save people! Everyone thinks I'm supposed to be like him and nothing HAPPENS and I can't even—I'm disappointing everyone just by being NORMAL!"

"NORMAL?" Lark laughed, harsh and bitter. "You get invited to everything! I work myself sick trying to be good enough and I'm INVISIBLE! Do you know what that's like?"

"You can FLY! You're good at everything I fail at!" Lily's voice cracked. "Your father has millions—mine just has a name I have to live up to every single day!"

"At least your father understands what being magical MEANS! At least he wants you to BE a witch!" Lark's voice was raw now. "Mine sent me a letter this morning about expansion plans. New markets. He sees Hogwarts as *networking*. I can FLY. I'm a WITCH. And he wants me to sit in an office doing whatever it is he does!"

"At least you can choose!" Lily shot back. "I'm supposed to be brave and heroic because that's what Potters DO!"

They were both breathing hard now, faces flushed, voices hoarse from shouting. And still holding their wands, though neither had pointed them at the other.

The silence after felt enormous.

The door slammed open.

Professor McLaggen stood in the doorway, his expression thunderous. "What is going on here?"

Lily and Lark both jumped, turning toward him. They still had their wands in their hands.

McLaggen's eyes went from Lily's wand to Lark's wand, his face darkening. "Dueling? In my classroom? After I *explicitly* instructed you on proper defensive protocol not twenty minutes ago?"

"We weren't—" Lily started.

"We were just—" Lark said at the same time.

"I don't want to hear excuses." McLaggen strode into the room, his voice sharp. "I've been teaching Defence for years—dealt with this sort of thing at the

Auror Academy as well. Wands out, raised voices, aggressive postures. Exactly the kind of reckless behavior I won't tolerate in my classroom."

"But we didn't cast anything!" Lily protested. Her face was hot with anger and embarrassment.

"The intent was clear. I'm trained to assess these situations, Miss Potter—seven years of Auror field work." McLaggen crossed his arms. "Twenty points from Gryffindor. Twenty points from Slytherin, Miss Prewett. Consider yourselves fortunate—at the Academy, I'd have written you up for disciplinary review without a second thought."

"That's not fair!" The words burst out of Lily before she could stop them. "We weren't dueling! We were just arguing!"

"With wands in hand," McLaggen said, as if explaining to a slow student. "After my lesson on the Knockback Jinx. In my considerable experience, this sort of thing escalates quickly. I've seen it dozens of times." He gestured toward the door. "Out. Both of you. If I hear about any further conflicts between you two, it will be detention and a letter home. Trust me, I write very thorough disciplinary reports."

Lily's stomach dropped at the thought of her parents getting a letter about this.

McLaggen waited, eyebrows raised. When neither of them moved immediately, he said, "Now, please."

They grabbed their bags and left. The door shut behind them.

Lily and Lark stood in the corridor, not looking at each other. Lily's face burned. Forty points lost.

"We weren't dueling," Lark said finally. Her voice was flat.

"I know."

Silence. Lily's hands were still shaking.

"He didn't even listen," Lark said.

"No."

They stood there. The anger had drained away, leaving only exhaustion.

"I didn't mean—" Lark started. "At the match. That wasn't—"

"Felt like it was."

"I wasn't even—" Lark's voice caught. "You just—everyone always—" She stopped. Started again. "I thought you had everything."

"You have—" Lily's throat was tight. "You're good at everything. You can fly."

"I can't—Potions is—" Lark made a frustrated sound. "Money doesn't—"

"I can't fly at all. I can barely hover."

Silence.

"I'm sorry," Lily said. Her voice came out rough. "For—what I said."

"Me too." Lark's voice was rough. "The broom thing. I was—"

She didn't finish. Didn't need to.

They stood there. Not hostile anymore. Just tired.

"I don't want—" Lily started.

"Yeah," Lark said. "Me neither."

Someone's footsteps echoed down a nearby corridor. They both tensed, but the sound faded away.

"We should go," Lark said. "Before McLaggen decides we need detention after all."

"Yeah."

They adjusted their bags, still standing in the corridor. Then hesitated.

"See you," Lily said awkwardly.

"See you," Lark replied.

They went separate directions in the corridor—Lily toward Gryffindor Tower, Lark toward the dungeons. But before Lily turned the corner, she glanced back. Lark was looking back too.

They didn't smile. Didn't wave. Just acknowledged each other with a slight nod and continued on their separate ways.

Hugo appeared through the portrait hole an hour later, slightly out of breath. He spotted Lily sitting by the window, staring at nothing, and hurried over.

"There you are! I waited in the library but you never—" He stopped, taking in her expression. "What happened to you? You look like you've been through a war."

"How did you get in?" Lily asked.

"Had to wait ages for someone to let me in. You changed the password again." He sat beside her, studying her face with concern. "Seriously, is something wrong?"

"Sort of," Lily said. "But maybe it needed to happen."

"What?"

She shook her head. "Long story. I'll tell you later."

"Are you okay?"

"I don't know," Lily said honestly. "But I think... I think maybe I understand some things better now."

Hugo waited, but she didn't elaborate. Finally he said, "What happened?"

"It's complicated."

Silence.

"Are you going to tell me?"

"Eventually. Not right now."

He nodded. They sat together in silence, watching the snow fall outside the common room windows.

"Oh, yeah," Lily hesitated, "The password's 'Fortis Fortuna' now."

That night at dinner, Lily caught Lark's eye across the Great Hall. They didn't smile. Didn't wave. The eye contact held for a moment.

Then Lark looked away first.

Lily looked down at her own plate. The Slug Club invitation was still in her bag.

She wasn't going to go.

Not because she was busy. Because she didn't want to be collected. Didn't want to be there as "Harry Potter's daughter" while Slughorn showed her off.

If she was going to be somewhere, it should be because *she* chose it.

The Great Hall hummed with conversation and laughter. Snow fell past the enchanted ceiling. Another ordinary evening at Hogwarts.

But something had shifted.

— CHAPTER ELEVEN —

Christmas

The Hogwarts Express rattled south through the Scottish countryside, so different from the journey north in September. Then, the compartments had been loud with excitement and nerves. Now, students slumped in their seats, tired and ready for Christmas break.

Lily sat by the window watching grey fields blur past. Hugo sat across from her, already halfway through a bag of Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans.

"Remember when Professor Flitwick's hair caught fire?" Hugo said. "During that demonstration in Charms? He was so surprised!"

"Yeah."

"And did you hear about the seventh-years' prank on Filch?" Hugo tried again. "They charmed his mop to—"

"Yeah," Lily said. "I heard."

Hugo ate another bean. Made a face. "Earwax."

The train swayed around a curve. Lily's reflection stared back from the window, ghostly against the winter landscape.

"You've been quiet," Hugo said finally.

"Just thinking."

"About what?"

"Everything." She pulled her knees up. "The term. All of it."

"It was good, wasn't it?" Hugo's face was hopeful. "I mean, classes were interesting, and the snow was brilliant, and—"

"Yeah. Good."

Hugo studied her. He ate another bean slowly, not even reacting to the flavour.

Down the corridor, someone shrieked with laughter. The drinks trolley rattled past. Normal end-of-term chaos, students comparing horror stories about homework assignments and making plans for Christmas.

Hugo didn't push. That was one of the good things about Hugo—he knew when to leave things alone.

The train began to slow. London's outskirts appeared through the window—buildings and roads and grey winter sky above it all.

"King's Cross soon," Hugo said, stuffing the rest of the beans into his pocket and grabbing his trunk from the overhead rack.

The train jolted to a stop. Students poured into the corridor, dragging trunks, calling goodbyes, pushing toward the doors. Lily followed Hugo through the crush, out onto Platform Nine and Three-Quarters where parents crowded the platform waiting for their children.

Her father spotted her first. Harry Potter, wearing an ordinary jacket and jumper, waved from beside Mum. James was already there, talking loudly about the final Quidditch practice. Albus stood slightly apart, hands in his pockets.

"There she is!" Ginny pulled Lily into a hug. "How was the term? Any cursed objects? Rogue Defence professors? Secret chambers?"

"Fine."

"That's not an answer to my questions."

"It was good. Nothing exciting."

Her father's expression flickered—concern, maybe, or just tiredness. "Ready to head out?"

"Yeah."

"Actually," Ginny said, adjusting her bag, "we're not going home right away. We're having Christmas at Grimmauld Place this year. More room for everyone."

Lily blinked. "Grimmauld Place? Everyone?"

James's head snapped around. "Wait, *Grimmauld Place*? But that place is—"

"We've done some renovations," Harry said quickly. "It's much better now."

"Are you sure?" James looked genuinely concerned. "Last time I was there —"

"We've made improvements," Ginny said. "Creative ones. You'll see."

"Ron and Hermione will be there soon. Teddy's coming. It'll be nice." Harry smiled. "Come on, we'll take the Tube."

Albus looked curious. Lily was just confused. But Mum was already herding them toward the barrier and out into the muggle part of King's Cross station, and there wasn't really time to ask questions.

The muggle side of King's Cross was heaving with holiday travellers—families dragging wheeled suitcases, couples holding paper cups of coffee, a group of teenagers in matching scarves singing something off-key near the ticket machines. Nobody so much as glanced at the Potters. Dad walked ahead with his hands in his jacket pockets, looking like any other father collecting his kids from school.

That was the strange thing about Dad outside the wizarding world. No one stared. No one whispered behind his back. No one did that awkward thing where they pretended not to be looking at his forehead. He was just a bloke in a jacket, weaving through the crowd toward the Underground.

James was grumbling to Albus about having to take the Tube with their trunks. "Could've at least Side-Along Apparated us," he muttered, struggling to keep his owl cage level as they pushed through a knot of commuters.

"Too many of us," Mum said briskly. "And your father enjoys it."

Dad did indeed seem to enjoy it. He tapped his Oyster card at the barrier with the ease of someone who'd done it a thousand times, then held the gate open for Lily's trunk. She watched him navigate the crowd—an ordinary man doing an ordinary thing on an ordinary late December afternoon—and felt, unexpectedly, a pang of something she couldn't quite name.

Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place looked like it belonged in a different century—tall and narrow and grey, squeezed between its neighbors on a street that felt trapped in permanent twilight despite the afternoon hour, the kind of building that whispered of old money and older secrets and centuries of accumulated history pressing down on anyone who dared approach.

Dad touched his wand to the door. It swung open with a heavy creak.

The entrance hall was grand in a faded sort of way—high ceilings soared above them disappearing into shadow, dark wood paneling the colour of old blood covered walls that had witnessed generations of Blacks come and go. There was a sense of age pressing down from every corner, like the weight of all those years couldn't quite be lifted no matter how much cleaning and redecoration had been done. The very air was thick with the smell of old wood and older magic and something musty that spoke of locked rooms and forgotten

things. But also, fighting against that oppressive history: Christmas garland wrapped cheerfully around the bannister, warm golden light spilling from the rooms beyond, voices calling greetings that echoed off the ancient walls, the contrast between the house's dark past and its attempted present creating an atmosphere both welcoming and slightly unsettling.

And, oddly, a television mounted on the wall playing BBC World News.

"Why is there a telly in the hallway?" Lily asked.

"Don't turn it off," Mum said quickly. "The noise keeps her quiet."

"Keeps who quiet?"

Harry gestured at the television. "There's a portrait underneath. Walburga Black. She's... difficult."

"Difficult?"

"She screams," James said cheerfully. "Really loud. Obnoxiously."

Ginny explained; "We keep the telly on to entertain her. Or at least the noise seems to drown her out."

Lily stared at the television. A newsreader was discussing something about Parliament, very serious and calm. Underneath that was a *portrait*? A screaming portrait?

"It's got a Permanent Sticking Charm," Harry said. "Can't remove it. Muggle solution to a magical problem." He shrugged. "Works surprisingly well."

Albus looked fascinated. "Does she really scream?"

"Don't even try to find out," Ginny said firmly.

The hallway was noticeably lacking in the house-elf heads Lily vaguely remembered Dad mentioning once. Some redecoration had clearly taken place. The whole house felt lighter than she'd expected, less oppressive, though there was still something heavy about it—like history you couldn't quite shake off.

"Come on," Dad said. "Everyone's in the kitchen."

They followed him through to a large basement kitchen where Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione were already unpacking dishes, and Teddy Lupin—unmistakable with his currently bright blue hair—was helping levitate plates to the table.

"Wotcher, Potters!" Teddy grinned. His hair shifted to bright purple as he turned. "How was term?"

"Brilliant," James said immediately.

Albus just nodded.

Lily managed, "It was fine."

Ron looked up from a casserole dish. "Fine? That's what Hermione used to say when she was lying about something."

"I never—" Hermione started.

"You absolutely did."

"Lily's had a long term," Mum said diplomatically. "Let her breathe."

"Besides," Hermione said, stirring something on the stove, "we've got plenty to do before tomorrow. Christmas dinner won't cook itself—I'm not as good as Molly with the cooking charms."

The kitchen filled with noise—plates clattering, people talking over each other, someone laughing.

It felt overwhelming.

Lily drifted back toward the hallway.

"Want to see something?" Dad's voice came from behind her.

She turned. He was standing by a doorway she hadn't noticed.

"The drawing room," he said. "There's something in here I thought you might like to see."

The drawing room was large and shabby-elegant, with heavy curtains and furniture that looked expensive but worn. On the far wall hung an enormous tapestry—faded and ancient, covered in names and connecting lines like a family tree.

"The Black family tapestry," Dad said. "It's got a Permanent Sticking Charm too. Can't take it down. But we updated it."

Lily stepped closer. The names were written in elaborate script, branching and connecting across generations. Some of the older names looked scorched or damaged.

And there, near the bottom, in thread that looked newer than the rest:

Ginevra Molly Weasley

The name branched from an older section—the Weasley line had been there all along, one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight pureblood families. But beside Ginny's name, in equally new thread:

Harry James Potter

And below them:

James Sirius Potter—Albus Severus Potter—Lily Luna Potter

Her name. On an ancient tapestry, centuries old, with all these people she'd never met.

"See?" Harry said quietly. "You're connected to all of this. Through your mum's side—the Weasleys have been on here for centuries. And through other branches too." He pointed to another section. "Sirius was my godfather. His line connects to the Potters further back. It's all tangled together."

Lily stared at her name. The gold thread gleamed against the dark fabric.

"Is that Teddy?" She pointed to another new name.

"Through his mum. Tonks was Andromeda's daughter." Harry touched the tapestry lightly. "This used to be a monument to blood purity. Now it's just... family. All of us, whether the original Blacks would've approved or not."

"Do they know? The portraits?"

"Probably. But they can't do anything about it." Harry smiled. "Come on. Hermione wanted to get started on dinner."

Lily followed him back to the kitchen, but she kept thinking about the tapestry. Her name, permanently stitched into history.

Rose and Hugo arrived about an hour later, dragging their trunks through the front door with their usual chaos.

"Finally!" Ron called from the kitchen. "Thought you'd got lost. We need help with the Christmas Eve preparations."

"We nearly did," Hugo said. "The traffic was terrible, and then the taxi driver kept circling the street. He was so frustrated—kept saying he *knew* it was here but couldn't find it."

"Poor man," Rose added. "He was going on about The Knowledge and how he'd never missed an address before. We had to get out and walk up and down until the house just... appeared after he drove away."

Hermione looked up from the dishes, interested. "Really? Still having that problem?"

"Must have been so easy to hide this place originally," she mused. "Fidelius Charm, Unplottable, all the protective enchantments layered on top of each other. But un hiding it after the war..." She shook her head. "Took months of

careful spell work. We thought we'd removed all the concealment charms, but apparently there's still some residual magic confusing muggles."

"At least there's no reason to keep it hidden anymore," Harry said.

Rose spotted Lily after hearing Harry's voice and looked surprised. "You're here too? I thought we were just meeting up with Mum and Dad."

"Apparently it's a whole thing," Lily said. "We didn't know either until we got to King's Cross."

"Same," Hugo said. "Mum just said 'family gathering' but didn't mention who would be here."

Rose looked around the entrance hall, taking in the TV playing news and the general atmosphere. "This place is... different from what I expected."

By evening, the house had settled into comfortable chaos. Teddy's girlfriend Victoire had arrived at some point, apologising that her parents couldn't make it — "They're visiting Oma and Opa for the holidays."

"Is Uncle Neville coming?" Albus asked when the gathering was still forming.

"Can't," Harry said apologetically. "Hannah needs his help at the Leaky Cauldron. Christmas is their busiest time."

Albus looked disappointed but nodded.

The adults congregated in the kitchen and drawing room, talking and laughing. Lily found herself wedged on a sofa between James and Rose, listening to them debate Quidditch tactics while Hugo sat on the floor shuffling Exploding Snap cards.

An owl tapped at the window.

Aunt Hermione got up to let it in. The owl dropped a Ministry envelope on the table and flew off.

"Is that from Viktor?" Ron said immediately.

Hermione opened it. "Yes, actually. The Bulgarian Ministry's response about the revised regulations."

"Of course it is."

"Ron."

"What? I'm just saying, he's very prompt with you."

Hermione didn't look up. "He's professional. It's literally his job to coordinate with our office."

"Uh-huh."

"Ron, it's been over twenty years."

"I know that!"

"Do you?"

Harry was grinning. Ginny rolled her eyes. Even Teddy looked amused.

Lily glanced at Hugo. He mouthed, *What's happening?*

She shrugged.

"I'm not jealous," Ron said. "I just think his handwriting is annoyingly neat."

"His *handwriting*?"

"It's smug handwriting."

Hermione closed the letter with exaggerated patience. "I'm filing this with the other documents. You're being ridiculous."

"I'm not—"

But another owl arrived before he could finish, and Hermione groaned. "That's also from Viktor. The amendment notes."

Ron's expression was priceless. Harry actually laughed.

"Are all adults this weird?" Lily whispered to Hugo.

"I think it's just our families," Hugo whispered back.

Later—after dinner, after the table was cleared—the adults settled into telling stories.

"Remember the troll?" Ron said. "First year. Halloween. Thing was massive—twelve feet tall, stank like you wouldn't believe."

"We were supposed to be in our dormitories," Hermione said, precise even in memory. "The protocol was explicit. But Harry and Ron came to warn me anyway."

"Nearly died doing it," Harry said. "That thing almost killed all of us."

"Yeah, but we got it in the end," Ron said, warming to it. "Knocked it out with its own club. And second year—blimey, the Basilisk. Hermione got

petrified stiff as a board. And you went down into the actual Chamber of Secrets —"

They brought up Voldemort's name casually, like it didn't matter. Lily guessed it didn't anymore.

"Third year took a bit more time than usual," Hermione said. "Thirteen classes simultaneously. I was operating on approximately four hours of sleep per night for months."

"The Tournament." Harry's voice went quiet. "Cedric."

The room went silent for a moment.

"Then Umbridge." Ron said it like he was spitting. "Foulest woman I've ever met, and I *am* including Death Eaters in that."

"Everything that happened the next year ... and the hunt for Horcruxes," Hermione said. "Though we didn't fully understand the scope until later. The organisational challenge alone—"

"Right, well, we don't need to relive all of that," Ginny interrupted. She looked at Lily. "How was *your* first term?"

Lily's throat was tight. "Nothing happened."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing exciting. Classes. Homework. I learned to make a cactus tap-dance in Herbology."

"That's brilliant," Harry said.

"It's boring."

"It's safe," Hermione said, and her voice was firm. "We fought a war so you could be bored at school. That was rather the point."

Lily wanted to say that didn't make it better. But she didn't know how to explain that without sounding ungrateful.

"Be glad it's boring," Teddy said. He was lounging against the wall, his hair now a subdued brown. "My first year was normal too. It was great. No one tried to kill me."

"Low bar," James muttered. "High bar," Harry corrected. "The highest."

Christmas morning arrived with snow falling outside and the smell of cinnamon and pine from downstairs.

The drawing room had been transformed overnight—a massive tree dominated one corner, covered in ornaments both magical and mundane. Presents were piled underneath.

Lily sat with the others as gifts were distributed. Warm socks from Mum. A new set of quills from Dad. Books from various aunts and uncles. Everything thoughtful and nice.

Packages that had arrived by muggle post over the past week sat on the sideboard. Harry picked up one addressed to him and opened it. A plain grey towel.

"From your aunt and uncle?" Ginny asked carefully.

"Yep." Harry held it up. "At least it's an upgrade from the handkerchief they sent me one year at school. I still remember that."

Three more packages—smaller ones, addressed to James, Albus, and Lily.

Lily opened hers. Cheap socks. The kind you'd buy in a multipack at a supermarket. No card, no note. Just socks.

James got a notebook. Albus a pen set, still in its plastic packaging.

"That's from your grandparents," Harry said. His voice was carefully neutral. "Vernon and Petunia Dursley. They send something every year."

"They don't like us, do they?" Lily asked to no one in particular.

"They don't like magic." Harry set the towel aside. "But they send gifts. That's... something."

"Bargain bin socks are something," Ginny said. "Just not something worth bragging about."

"No," Harry agreed. "But my cousin Dudley tries. He wanted to be here, but his parents—it's complicated."

He opened another package—this one with an apologetic note attached.

Sorry I couldn't make it. Maybe next year?

Love to everyone from me, Claire and the kids.

Dudley

Inside was a book about the history of folklore and superstition in Britain for Harry, and smaller gifts for each of the kids—things that actually showed

someone had put some thought to whom they were for, even if they came from the muggle world.

The difference was obvious. Painful.

"Dudley's a good man," Harry said. "He's trying. His parents..." He shook his head. "Some people don't change."

Lily looked at the cheap socks in her lap. Even presents could be disappointing in ways that had nothing to do with adventures.

Later, when most people had drifted to other conversations, Harry found Lily by the window.

"Can we talk?" he asked.

They sat on the window seat, watching snow fall on the street outside.

"Your mum said you've been quiet," he began. "About your term."

"It was fine."

"Lily."

She didn't look at him. "Nothing happened. That's all. Classes were fine. I made friends. I learned things. It was completely normal."

"And that bothers you."

It wasn't a question. Rather a statement of a fact her father appeared to completely understand.

"You had adventures," Lily said. Her voice came out smaller than she meant. "Every year something happened. Something *mattered*."

Harry was quiet for a moment. "I spent most of my time terrified," he said finally. "Watched people die. I was hunted, I—" He stopped, jaw tight. "Spent a lot of time wishing things were boring."

"But you *did* things. Important things."

"I survived," Harry rubbed his scar absently. "That was about it."

"But what if I'm not anything special?"

Harry turned to look at her properly. "You don't have to be me." He said it simply, like stating a fact. "You don't need adventures to matter." He put a hand on her shoulder. "Just be yourself. That's... extraordinary."

The word sat wrong with Lily. *Extraordinary* was just a way of saying *ordinary* when you didn't want to use the simple word. Wasn't it?

But Harry looked uncomfortable—like he'd used up his quota of feelings-talk—and so sincere that Lily just nodded.

"Maybe next term will be different," she said.

"Maybe." Harry's shoulders relaxed slightly. "Different doesn't have to mean dangerous, though."

"Then what does it mean?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. You'll figure it out."

That night, Lily lay in the guest room staring at the ceiling.

In two weeks, she'd go back to Hogwarts. Spring term.

She wasn't excited like September. Wasn't dreading it either.

Just... ready. Ready to figure something out. Not what she was supposed to be. Not her father's daughter or the girl who couldn't fly or any of the other things people expected.

Just herself.

Whatever that meant.

Outside, snow kept falling. The house was quiet except for distant sounds of adults talking downstairs and the BBC news anchor's voice droning from the entrance hall.

Lily closed her eyes. Spring term. She'd figure it out then.

— CHAPTER TWELVE —

Return to Hogwarts

"Remember what we talked about," Dad said, pulling her into a quick hug. "You don't have to be me."

Platform Nine and Three-Quarters looked exactly the same as it had before Christmas—red Hogwarts Express gleaming, families clustered in small groups saying goodbye—but Lily felt different. Not dreading school like she had two weeks ago. Not desperately excited either. Just... different.

"I know," Lily said. And she meant it, even if she wasn't sure if she quite understood it yet.

James was already halfway down the platform with his friends, laughing about something. Albus stood nearby with Scorpius, quiet as usual. He caught her eye and gave a small nod. Lily nodded back.

The train whistle blew. Time to go back.

Hugo was already chattering before Lily had properly settled into their compartment. "—and Uncle George sent this thing that's supposed to turn your quill into a parrot, but Mum confiscated it—"

In the corridor, a Chocolate Frog hopped past. The Trolley Witch's cart mysteriously refilled itself. Two fifth-years tested spell combinations, sparks flying.

Just another normal trip on the Hogwarts Express.

"How was the rest of your Christmas?" Hugo asked.

"Good, actually. Different than I expected."

Hugo grinned and launched into another story. Through the window of another compartment, Lily saw Lark. Their eyes met for a half-second. Lark looked away first.

The landscape rolled by outside. Second term.

The Welcome Back feast was smaller than the start-of-term extravaganza. McGonagall's speech was brief—welcome back, second term begins tomorrow, the Forbidden Forest remains forbidden, the usual banned items list has been updated.

Nothing dramatic. Lily didn't feel disappointed anymore. She expected this by now.

The Great Hall ceiling showed a January snowstorm that wasn't actually happening outside. Floating candles bobbed overhead. Peeves was dropping water balloons on returning students. Sir Cadogan challenged someone's portrait to a duel. The ghosts were having a debate about proper haunting etiquette that involved a lot of transparent arm-waving.

"Just another normal evening at Hogwarts," Lily muttered.

"Normal?" Hugo looked around, eyes wide. "This is amazing!"

She barely registered the magical chaos anymore. Just another day at Hogwarts.

She spotted Kieran Flint at the Slytherin table, talking quietly with someone. First term Lily would have started planning an investigation immediately. Now? Blaaah! Probably nothing.

By Wednesday, classes had fully resumed with a strange mix of familiar and renewed routine. Walking to Potions, Lily passed the moving staircases (one shifted while students were on it—nobody even blinked), portraits gossiping about holiday scandals (apparently Sir Cadogan had insulted the Fat Lady's frame), and a suit of armour that waved as they went by.

"That's funny. Did that armour wave at us?" Hugo asked.

"Hmm? Oh yeah, they do that."

In Potions, Professor Slughorn was in excellent spirits. "Welcome back! I trust you all had marvellous holidays? Wonderful, wonderful." He rubbed his hands together enthusiastically. "You know, I must say, it has been quite refreshing to be back in the classroom after a few years away. We'll be starting with a simple refresher today—Pepperup Potion, nothing too challenging..."

His eyes found Lily almost immediately. They always did.

Lark was in the class too. When Slughorn called on her with a dismissive "Yes, yes, check your textbook, Miss Prewett," Lily's face felt hot. It wasn't fair, the way he ignored Lark.

"YOU HAVE THE NAME," kept bouncing in her head.

Lark caught her watching. Their eyes met over their cauldrons for a second before both looked away.

Lily's potion turned out well. Lark's was acceptable but not impressive. But Lark's wand movements were precise, controlled, confident in a way her academic work wasn't.

Between classes, Lily found Hugo in their usual spot near the library.

"You seem quieter," he said.

"Do I?"

"Yeah. Not bad quieter. Just different."

Lily shrugged. She didn't know how to explain it.

They saw Nova briefly—she was already worried about exams despite it only being January. "We should start revising now," Nova insisted, clutching her Transfiguration textbook.

"Nova, we just got back. The exams aren't until June."

"But if we start now—"

"How about we just focus on this week first?"

Nova considered this. "I suppose that's... reasonable."

Small smile. Nova hurried off to the library.

By the second evening back, routine had fully reasserted itself. Lily wasn't scanning for danger anymore. Wasn't expecting mysteries. Just going to class. Doing homework.

Her father's words kept coming back: *You don't have to be me.*

She still didn't know what that meant, exactly. But it didn't bother her as much as it had first term.

It was during dinner on the third evening that Lily heard it.

The Great Hall was full of noise—hundreds of students talking, clatter of dishes, the enchanted ceiling showing January stars, ghosts drifting between tables, Peeves causing distant chaos. Multiple conversations overlapping into a wall of sound.

Lily was eating with Hugo and some Gryffindor first-years, half-listening to someone's story about their holiday, when fragments of conversation from nearby older students drifted through the din.

"...Lord Tolkien's Balrog..."

Lily's attention caught. What?

More noise. Laughter. Someone asking for the salt. The moment passed.

Then another fragment, barely audible: "...Obscurus..."

She tried to focus on the older students—fourth or fifth years, a few seats down—but couldn't make out full sentences through all the other noise.

One more fragment, followed by laughter: "...Hagrid would definitely try something like that..."

Then they were talking about something else, or maybe Lily just couldn't hear anymore over the general chaos of dinner.

She turned to Hugo. "Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"Someone said something about Hagrid and... a Balrog?"

Hugo gave her a blank look. "A what now?"

"I don't know. Never mind." Lily tried to catch more of the conversation, but the older students had moved on or she couldn't hear through the noise.

Maybe she'd misheard?

No—she'd definitely heard "Balrog." And "Lord Tolkien's Balrog." And "Obscurus."

What was a Balrog? Or an Obscurus? Who was Lord Tolkien?

The words nagged at her.

Walking away from the Great Hall after dinner, Hugo asked, "What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing. Just... something I heard at dinner."

"The Ballrock thing?"

"Yeah."

"Want to look it up in the library?"

Lily hesitated. "Maybe tomorrow. If we have time."

Not urgent. Just curious.

That night, lying in her four-poster bed, the fragments circled in Lily's mind.

"Lord Tolkien's Balrog."

Strange words. She'd never heard of either—not in any creature book, not in any lesson, not in any conversation before tonight.

And "Obscure." That word nagged at her, just out of reach. She'd heard it somewhere before, but couldn't quite place it.

Maybe tomorrow she'd look them up. Just to know.

It was probably nothing. It usually was.

But still.

What *was* a Balrog?

The thought followed her into sleep.

— CHAPTER THIRTEEN —

The Bal Rogs

Lily woke thinking about the fragments from dinner.

"Lord Tolkien's Balrog." "Obscurus." "Hagrid would definitely try something like that."

Not with excitement like September. More like: I just want to know what those words mean.

At breakfast, Hugo looked up from his porridge. "Still thinking about that Balrog thing?"

"I barely heard what they said. I just want to know what it actually is."

The enchanted ceiling showed a winter sunrise nobody was looking at. House hourglasses adjusted themselves mysteriously. Portraits argued about frame positions. Someone's toast turned into butterflies. Nearly Headless Nick drifted through the Gryffindor table.

Just another normal breakfast.

"Library after Herbology?" Hugo asked.

"Yeah. Just to look it up."

The library was busy with students catching up on homework or getting ahead on reading. Madam Pince sat at her desk like a stern guardian of knowledge, watching everyone with suspicious eyes.

Lily and Hugo headed to the Magical Creatures section—massive shelves full of reference books, field guides, bestiaries.

"Where do we even start?" Hugo asked.

"Let's look for anything about Balrogs. And... I need to figure out what 'Obscurus' means too."

"And who Lord Tolkien is?"

"Right. All of it. I only caught pieces."

They pulled down *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* first. Lily flipped through the index. Nothing.

The Monster Book of Monsters literally tried to bite them when Hugo opened it, but it had no entry for Balrog either.

Dragons, Doxies, and Dark Creatures—nothing.

A Compendium of Dangerous Magical Beasts—no mention.

Rare and Extinct Species of the Wizarding World—nothing there either.

Growing confusion. Not panic, just puzzlement.

Hugo frowned at his stack of books. "Maybe it's really obscure?"

"Or maybe it doesn't exist."

They approached Madam Pince nervously. She was intimidating at the best of times.

"Excuse me, Madam Pince? Do you have any books about... Balrogs?"

Madam Pince looked up sharply, spectacles glinting. "Balrogs? Never heard of such a thing. Are you certain that's the correct name?"

"That's what I heard. Someone mentioned Lord Tolkien and—"

"Lord Tolkien? No wizard by that name in our collection." She frowned thoughtfully. "Perhaps you misheard? There's Baal — a Canaanite deity, in the Mythological Entities section. Similar sound, and the name translates to 'Lord.'"

Lily and Hugo exchanged glances. That didn't sound right, but...

"We could check?" Hugo suggested.

They found the section. Baal was definitely not what they were looking for — an ancient deity, nothing to do with creatures Hagrid might be teaching.

Back at Madam Pince's desk, Lily shook her head. "That's not it."

Madam Pince pursed her lips. "Then I cannot help you. Check the indices if you must, but I've never heard of either Balrogs or this Tolkien person."

She paused, then added with the air of someone reciting library protocol: "And if such information were somehow located in the Restricted Section, you would require a signed note from a professor in the relevant subject before I could permit access."

She returned to her cataloguing. Dead end—in multiple ways.

Hugo whispered, "Maybe we misheard?"

"But I heard 'Balrog' clearly. And 'Lord Tolkien.'"

"Should we ask Hagrid? Maybe it's a really rare creature?"

Lily hesitated. "I guess. But if it's not in any library book..."

What ARE they talking about?

"Let's go ask Hagrid."

The walk across the grounds was cold—proper January weather, with snow on the ground and the Forbidden Forest dark in the distance. The air was sharp and clean with winter cold. Smoke rose from Hagrid's hut chimney. High-pitched yapping started up before they even knocked.

The door swung open, and Hagrid's massive bearded face split into a grin. "Lily! Hugo! Come in, come in! What brings yeh here?"

Inside was warm and cosy, if a bit cramped for Hagrid's size. A miniature schnauzer—grey, wiry-furred, and about the size of a large teapot—bounced around their feet, still yapping. Hagrid beamed down at it. "Down, Nipper! They're friends!"

He immediately offered tea and rock cakes. Lily and Hugo exchanged glances—Hagrid's rock cakes were notorious—and carefully declined.

"Just had lunch, Hagrid, thanks," Lily said quickly.

"Suit yerselves! Now, what can I do fer yeh?"

"We heard a rumor," Lily said. "About your lessons."

Hagrid looked intrigued. "Oh? What's that then?"

Hugo jumped in: "That you might be bringing a Balrog to class?"

Hagrid's expression went confused. "A what now?"

"A Balrog. We couldn't find anything in the library."

Hagrid scratched his beard, genuinely puzzled. "Balrog... Balrog... never heard of it. What's it supposed ter be? Where's it from?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out. We only heard the name. Someone said 'Lord Tolkien's Balrog' and that you'd try to bring one to class."

"Lord Tolkien?" Hagrid scratched his beard more vigorously. "Can't say I know the name. An' I definitely haven't got any Balrogs planned fer lessons!" He laughed, a booming sound that made Nipper yap excitedly. "Though if someone's got one, I'd love ter meet it!"

Despite not knowing what it was, Hagrid looked fascinated. "Sounds interestin' though! A creature I've never heard of!" Classic Hagrid—curious

about anything that might be a creature. "If yeh find out what it is, come back an' tell me, won't yeh? Always good ter learn about new magical creatures."

"We're not even sure it's magical," Lily admitted.

"Well, that's even more interestin' then!"

At least they'd confirmed Hagrid didn't know what it was and definitely wasn't planning to bring one to class. But that left them exactly where they'd started.

Oh—wait. "Hagrid, what about an Obscurus? Is that something for class?"

Hagrid's face changed immediately. The jovial expression disappeared, replaced by something serious. He set down his massive teacup carefully.

"An Obscurus? No, no, definitely not."

His tone was so unlike normal Hagrid that Lily felt chastised. "That's not a creature, Lily. That's... well, it's tragedy. Dark magic, but not the kind yeh study. It's what happens to young witches an' wizards who suppress their magic. Terrible thing. Wouldn't ever teach about that. Too sad. Too dangerous."

"Oh," Lily said quietly. "Sorry. I didn't know."

Hagrid softened. "Not yer fault. Yeh were jus' askin'. But no, nothin' like that in me lessons. Don't even like ter think about it, ter be honest."

They left shortly after, trudging back through the snow. The mystery felt less mysterious now—just confusing. Balrogs didn't exist in any book. Lord Tolkien wasn't a known wizard. Obscurus were real but tragic and completely unrelated.

What had those students actually been talking about?

"Maybe 'Tolkien' is an old dark wizard?" Lily mused as they walked toward the castle. "Or a historical figure?"

Hugo perked up. "Professor Binns would know about historical dark wizards!"

"You want to voluntarily talk to Professor Binns?"

"You have a better idea?"

Fair point.

They found Professor Binns in his classroom—or rather, floating through it in that vague ghostly way of his. He barely noticed students most of the time, but they approached nervously anyway.

"Professor Binns? We have a question about a historical figure."

Binns drifted in their direction, looking vaguely in the space around them. "Historical figure? An excellent topic, Miss... er..."

"Potter, sir. Lily Potter. We're trying to find information about someone called Tolkien?"

There was a long pause. Ghosts thought slowly. Lily wondered if they'd lost him entirely.

"Tolkien... Tolkien... yes, I believe I recall that name."

Lily perked up. "You do?"

"Muggle professor. Oxford, wasn't it?" Another pause. "Philology, I believe. Languages. Medieval literature. Died in... 1973? Or was it '74? Time runs together when you're dead."

"What about his... creatures? Or dark lords?"

Binns gave her a blank ghostly stare.

"I deal with history, Miss Potter. Biographical facts. What he taught, when he lived." He waved dismissively. "As for what he wrote... my subject is History of *Magic*. I deal with facts, not Muggle fiction."

The phrase echoed something Lily had heard in family stories—Binns dismissing Aunt Hermione's questions about the Chamber of Secrets. Same tone, same dismissiveness.

"You'd need to ask someone who studies Muggle... literature."

He drifted back to whatever ghostly contemplation he'd been doing before they interrupted.

Outside the classroom, Hugo said, "So Tolkien was real. But wrote... fiction?"

"Muggle fiction about magic?"

"Who would know about Muggle books?"

They looked at each other and said simultaneously: "Muggle Studies!"

"Where do we even find the professor?" Lily asked. "I have no idea where those classes are held."

"Neither do I. Let's just... ask around?"

They'd come this far.

Finding the Muggle Studies classroom took longer than expected. They had to ask several portraits for directions—some didn't even know where it was. "Muggle Studies? Is that still taught?" one painting asked disdainfully. Finally, a helpful portrait of a witch reading a book directed them to a somewhat out-of-the-way corridor.

The classroom itself was tucked into what felt like a forgotten corner of the castle.

Lily knocked.

"Come in!"

They entered to find a classroom completely unlike typical Hogwarts spaces. Instead of stone walls and ancient fixtures, the room was decorated with Muggle artifacts—posters showing Muggle technology, charts about Muggle culture, a bookshelf absolutely crammed with what must be Muggle books.

Behind the desk sat a younger professor with a friendly face and warm eyes. She looked up with genuine interest.

"Hello! How can I help you? Wait—you're first years, aren't you?"

"Yes, Professor. We had a question about... Muggle literature?"

The professor's face lit up. "Muggle literature? That's wonderfully unexpected!" She stood, moving around the desk. "I'm Professor Rowle, by the way. What specifically are you curious about?"

Lily explained haltingly: "We're looking for information about 'Balrog' and 'Lord Tolkien'?"

Professor Rowle's expression transformed into pure delight. "Oh! I know exactly what you're talking about!"

Relief flooded through Lily. Finally, someone who understood!

"You're asking about J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*!" Professor Rowle gestured enthusiastically toward her bookshelf. "Balrogs are creatures from his books. Fire demons, essentially—well, not demons exactly, more like fallen spirits of fire, but that's complicated. Part of a fantasy world called Middle-earth that Tolkien created."

She pulled a book from the shelf, handling it with obvious affection. "Tolkien was a Muggle professor at Oxford. He wrote fantasy novels about an imaginary magical world—created entire languages, histories, mythologies."

She gestured expansively. "Hobbits, elves, dwarves, wizards, orcs, Balrogs... all completely fictional, but incredibly detailed."

"So... not real creatures?" Lily asked.

"Not even in our world. Pure imagination."

Hugo looked confused. "But why would Muggles write about magic if they don't have it?"

Professor Rowle's smile was warm and understanding. "Because humans—magical or not—love stories. Muggles create fantasy worlds because they can't experience magic. It's their way of imagining what's possible."

Lily explained the fragments she'd overheard at dinner. "'Lord Tolkien's Balrog'... 'Obscurus'... 'Hagrid would definitely try something like that.'"

Professor Rowle laughed—not mocking, just understanding. "Ah! Students must have been discussing the books over holiday. Many Muggle-born students read Tolkien—it's quite popular in the Muggle world. Someone probably joked that Hagrid would try to bring a Balrog to class if they existed." Her eyes twinkled. "Very Hagrid, honestly!"

Lily felt her face flush. "So I investigated a rumor about a fictional creature."

"You investigated something unfamiliar," Professor Rowle corrected kindly. "That's curiosity, not foolishness."

She went back to her bookshelf and pulled down three thick volumes—clearly well-read, with worn covers and cracked spines. "If you're interested, I could lend you my books. You won't find them in the Hogwarts library."

She held them out. Lily stared at them, surprised and uncertain.

"I... I've never read Muggle novels before. Not like this." Lily hesitated. "My dad just got a Muggle folklore book for Christmas though."

"Then this would be an excellent place to start!" Professor Rowle's enthusiasm was infectious but not pushy. "Fair warning: they're quite long. And Tolkien uses a lot of description. But the world-building is extraordinary."

Extraordinary. Lily tried not to wince. Adults loved that word.

Professor Rowle brightened. "And you should definitely ask your father about that folklore book! It's fascinating to see how Muggles imagine magic when they don't experience it themselves."

"Could I read them too?" Hugo asked.

"Of course! You're both welcome to borrow them."

Lily took the books. They were heavy in her hands—three thick volumes with strange titles: *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, *The Return of the King*.

"I spent all day chasing a made-up creature from a Muggle book."

Hugo looked at the books. "Well, we learned what a Balrog is."

Lily looked down at them too. "Not even real."

"Not just any Muggle book," Professor Rowle said gently. "One of the most beloved stories of the last century. Millions of people—Muggle and magical alike—have read these books and loved them."

Lily found herself smiling despite the disappointment. "It's kind of funny actually."

"I think it's wonderful," Professor Rowle said warmly. "You could have dismissed it, but you investigated. That curiosity—that's what learning is."

Lily hadn't thought about it like that.

"Thank you, Professor," Lily said, clutching the books.

"Return them when you're done. No rush." Professor Rowle smiled. "And if you have questions about Muggle culture—any time. You don't have to wait until third year to be curious."

Hugo asked, "Do a lot of students ask about Muggle things before taking the class?"

Professor Rowle's smile turned wistful. "Not really. Most pure-bloods don't think to ask. Which is a shame. There's a whole world most witches and wizards never learn about."

Lily had never thought about that before.

Walking back through the corridors, Lily carried the books carefully.

"Are you actually going to read them?" Hugo asked.

"I think so. Maybe."

"They're really long."

"Professor Rowle said they were good."

Hugo was quiet for a moment. "Do you think other pure-bloods know about Muggle books?"

"Probably not. I never thought about it."

Back in the Gryffindor common room that evening, Lily set the books on a table. Other first-years noticed immediately.

A Muggle-born student's eyes went wide. "Oh! You have *Lord of the Rings*!"

"You know it?" Lily asked.

"Everyone knows it! Where did you get them? They're not in the library."

"Professor Rowle lent them to me."

"They're amazing!" The student looked excited, then turned to explain to a confused pure-blood first-year. "It's this incredible fantasy epic with elves and wizards and—"

"Wait, elves?" The pure-blood frowned. "Like house-elves?"

"No, tall ones. Immortal." The Muggle-born waved dismissively. "It's different."

Lily watched the divide. The pure-bloods looked confused. The Muggle-borns were excited and surprised Lily hadn't heard of it.

Weird. She knew magical creatures and spells and wizarding history. They knew... this. Muggle stuff.

Aunt Hermione probably knew all this. She'd grown up with Muggles.

Lark's father was a squib who ran a Muggle tech company. Lark probably knew this stuff too.

Lily looked down at the books in her hands. Maybe she'd actually read them.

That night, lying in bed, Lily looked at the three books sitting on her bedside table. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. *The Two Towers*. *The Return of the King*.

She'd spent all day investigating a fictional creature from a Muggle book.

Should have felt stupid. But mostly she just felt... curious.

"Balrog," she thought, rolling the word around in her mind. Strange word.

Tomorrow she might start reading. Or maybe the day after.

Outside, snow was falling on Hogwarts. Inside, she was warm and safe and had three books she'd never heard of until today.

Weird day.

— CHAPTER FOURTEEN —

Heat and Hearts

Lily woke to Iris squealing.

"Three cards! Look, Bridget got three!"

"Let me see—oh, that one's from Marcus, I'd recognize his handwriting anywhere—"

"Do you think anyone sent me one?"

The dormitory had transformed overnight. Pink and red banners hung from the ceiling, and tiny floating hearts drifted through the air like lazy bubbles. One popped against Lily's nose as she sat up.

Valentine's Day. Right.

She got dressed while the other first-year girls compared notes on who might have sent what. Someone's quill had turned pink and kept trying to write poetry on the curtains. Lily grabbed her bag and escaped before anyone could ask if she'd received anything.

The corridor was worse. Nearly Headless Nick was attempting to serenade a portrait of a shepherdess, who looked distinctly unimpressed. A suit of armour held a drooping bouquet. Peeves swooped past overhead, pelting students with heart-shaped confetti that stuck to everything.

Lily brushed pink paper off her shoulder. Another day at Hogwarts. With more pink.

She turned toward the seventh floor corridor—the quickest route to the stairs. The troll tapestry depicting Barnabas the Barmy's foolish attempt to train trolls for ballet hung opposite the blank stretch of wall everyone said used to be important during the war. Another Hogwarts celebration. At least this one doesn't promise adventure I'll never get.

The Great Hall ceiling showed sunrise with heart-shaped clouds. Someone had enchanted the breakfast foods into heart shapes. Lily's toast was literally a heart. She bit off a corner and looked for Hugo.

He was already at the Hufflepuff table, looking uncomfortable as a girl from his house giggled about something. He spotted Lily and waved, relief visible on his face.

Owl post arrived in a flurry of wings. Cards and packages landed on tables to squeals and groans. A small envelope dropped in front of Lily. She opened it.

To a special someone. From a secret admirer.

She tucked it away and caught Hugo's eye. He shook his head—nothing for him.

Across the hall, the Slytherin table was its usual composed self. Lark sat between two other first-years, no cards visible near her plate. For a second, their eyes met.

The awkwardness from two months ago hadn't entirely faded. But it wasn't hostile anymore. Just... uncertain.

"Right," Lily muttered. "Potions today."

The dungeon classroom smelled like sulfur and old stone. Professor Slughorn swept in, unusually jovial.

"Valentine's Day, my dear students! A day for..." He paused dramatically. "Brewing Amortentia!"

Several students gasped.

Slughorn chuckled. "Just kidding, just kidding. Much too advanced for first-years. No, today we'll be brewing a simple Healing Draught. Partners, please."

He consulted his list. "Miss Potter, you'll work with Miss Prewett today."

Lily's stomach dropped.

Across the room, Lark had frozen mid-step.

"Wonderful collaboration!" Slughorn beamed, oblivious. "The Potters and the Prewetts together. Your families have such history!"

Both girls made their way to the shared table without speaking. They set out ingredients in careful silence.

"Could you pass the..." Lark started.

"The unicorn hair?" Lily handed them over. "Here."

"Thanks."

Silence. Lily focused intently on measuring wormwood. Lark organised the unicorn tail hair with unnecessary precision.

They worked. The potion began to simmer.

"It's getting too hot," Lark said quietly.

Lily was already reaching for the flame. She turned the knob up—

"Lower," Lark said. "Not higher."

Lily's hand stopped. Her first instinct was to bristle, but—Lark was right. The potion was overheating, not under-heating.

"Oh. Right." Lily adjusted the flame downward. "Thanks."

The potion settled to a proper simmer. They worked in tandem, adding ingredients in careful alternation. Lily stirred counter-clockwise while Lark carefully added shredded dittany. At the table beside them, Marcus Finch-Fletchley's potion burped ominously.

"You're good at the stirring pattern," Lark said suddenly.

Lily looked up, surprised. "You noticed?"

"Hard not to. You've got rhythm."

"You're really good at the temperature stuff."

Lark smiled slightly. "I notice patterns."

The moment felt almost normal. Not quite comfortable, but... warmer than before.

Then the wall caught fire.

A section of stone near the door burst into flame with a sharp sizzle. Students gasped and stepped back from their desks. The fire danced across the stone for five, maybe ten seconds—bright orange and crackling—then extinguished as suddenly as it had appeared. Scorch marks remained on the wall, and the smell of smoke filled the dungeon.

"Pay no attention to the firewall," Slughorn said without looking up from his rounds. "Things are under control. Old castle, containment charms, perfectly normal occurrence. Back to work, everyone."

Students exchanged uncertain glances but returned to their potions.

Lily stared at the scorch marks. Odd. But then, Hagrid's classes had stranger things happen weekly. She'd seen moving staircases, talking portraits, and ghosts passing through walls for months now. A wall briefly on fire? Just Hogwarts being Hogwarts.

"Funny," Lark said. "Muggles actually have firewalls too."

Hugo, working at the table beside them, looked up in alarm. "Isn't that extremely dangerous? Having walls on fire?"

Lark laughed and shook her head. "No, not like that. Digital firewalls."

"Digital what?" Lily asked despite herself.

"Software protection barriers. In computer systems." Lark gestured with her stirring rod. "They keep dangerous code contained, prevent it from spreading. Like... magical protections, but for data and programs. My dad's company has them. Keeps hackers out, malware contained."

"So it's a barrier that protects without burning?" Hugo sounded fascinated.

"Exactly. Sandboxing, containment, firewalling—all the same idea." Lark looked between them. "Keeping dangerous things separated. So the dangerous stuff can't reach the important stuff."

Lily thought about that. Keeping dangerous things separated. "Huh," she said.

"Fascinating," Hugo added. "Muggle technology is extraordinary."

"Extra ordinary," Lily muttered. "Super normal."

Lark snorted—an actual laugh—and quickly covered it with a cough.

Their potion was turning the correct shade of silver. Slughorn swept over, beaming.

"Excellent work, Miss Potter, Miss Prewett! Collaboration at its finest!" He swept away to inspect other cauldrons. Both girls cringed slightly but said nothing.

They finished the potion and bottled their samples. Packing up happened in continued awkward silence, but it wasn't hostile silence. More like... unsure silence.

"That wasn't terrible," Lark said finally, very quietly.

Lily looked at her. "No. It wasn't."

Not friends. Not yet. Maybe not ever. But not enemies either.

That was something.

The library was quieter than usual. Madam Pince had glared at the Valentine's decorations until they retreated to only the entrance. Inside, the usual scholarly atmosphere prevailed.

Lily spread out her Transfiguration essay. Hugo joined her, followed shortly by Nova, who looked more fidgety than usual. She kept glancing toward the library entrance, chewing her lip, tapping her quill against her notebook.

"Nova, you okay?" Lily asked.

"What? Oh. Yes. Just... no." Nova pulled out a different notebook—not her homework one. "Do you ever notice temperature differences?"

"What?"

"In the corridors. Some are warmer than they should be."

Hugo glanced up. "It's an old castle. Heating charms must be uneven."

"That's what everyone says!" Nova's frustration was clear. She opened the small notebook. Pages filled with dates, locations, temperature descriptions. "I've been tracking it since October."

"October?" Lily leaned forward. "That's months."

"Four months." Nova turned pages rapidly. "And it's getting worse. Look—October, I noticed it twice a week. Now it's every other day. Specific corridors, mostly near the seventh floor. Cold spots. Warm walls. Scorch marks on tapestries. Torches flickering in patterns."

Lily studied the detailed entries. Dates going back months. Locations carefully noted. Temperature observations. "Unseasonably warm," "cold spot," "fluctuating."

"You've been tracking this all year?"

Nova looked defensive. "I know it sounds paranoid—"

"No." Lily meant it. "This is detailed. Really detailed." Nova's handwriting was precise. Her observations systematic.

"Have you told any professors?" Hugo asked.

"Professor Edgecombe said it's 'castle quirks.' Professor Slughorn said heating charms settle unevenly. Everyone dismisses it."

Lily kept studying the notebook. Most incidents clustered near one specific seventh floor corridor. The one she walked through most mornings. The one with the troll tapestry.

"Actually," she said slowly, "today in Potions, a wall literally caught fire."

Nova's head snapped up. "A wall caught fire? In the dungeons?"

"Just for a moment." Hugo added. "Left side of the room. Mid-morning. Professor Slughorn said something about a firewall, like it was normal."

Nova pulled the notebook closer. Flipping pages rapidly. "The dungeons are below ground. Beneath the castle." She was thinking aloud now, scribbling notes. "If there's heat somewhere and it's being displaced—like something offsetting warmth to colder parts of the castle."

"You think the warm corridors and the dungeon fire are connected?" Lily asked.

"Heat doesn't just appear randomly." Nova pointed at her data. "If the seventh floor is getting warmer, that heat has to come from somewhere or go somewhere else when it builds up. Look at the pattern—the more incidents on the seventh floor, the more odd things elsewhere."

Hugo looked uneasy. "So something's pushing the heat around? Like... squeezing it?"

Nova nodded emphatically. "Yes! Like pressure. Something's wrong with the castle's... I don't know, basic structure?"

Lily looked at the pattern of incidents. Clustering. Accelerating. Building toward something.

But what?

"Keep tracking it," she said. "Show me if anything changes."

Nova's relief was visible. "You believe me?"

"I believe you've noticed something," Lily shrugged. "Whether it means anything... but yeah. Keep me updated."

Nova looked like she might cry from relief at finally being taken seriously.

On the table, Lily's copy of *The Fellowship of the Ring* sat bookmarked about a quarter through. She'd been reading it slowly—dense, but interesting. Professor Rowle had been right about Tolkien's world-building.

"Is that the book Professor Rowle lent you?" Nova asked.

"Yeah. It's... it's a lot. But interesting."

"What's it about?" Hugo asked.

Lily tried to explain. Hobbits, wizards, quests, rings, dark lords. It came out jumbled.

"Sounds extraordinary," Nova said.

Lily winced. "Don't use that word."

"What word?"

"Extraordinary. It means extra-ordinary. Super normal."

Hugo sighed. "That's not what it means and you know it."

"Well that's how it sounds."

They studied for another hour. Nova kept her tracking notebook nearby, occasionally adding notes. Hugo practiced wand movements for Charms. Lily worked on her essay but kept thinking about the scorch marks on the dungeon wall, the pattern in Nova's notebook, the seventh floor corridor she walked through every morning.

Movement caught her eye. Kieran, hunched over a table in the far corner, was surrounded by books. He looked stressed, his dark hair messier than usual. When another student walked past, he quickly closed the book in front of him and pulled a different one closer.

Lily watched for a moment, then turned back to her essay. Strange. But Kieran was always behaving strangely.

Patterns. Systems. Things building toward something. She shook her head. Or maybe just magical chaos everywhere, same as always.

When they finally packed up to leave, Nova looked uncertain. "I want to check that corridor again. The one near the seventh floor."

"I'm heading that way anyway," Lily said. "Gryffindor Tower."

"I'll come too," Hugo added.

They made their way through the castle, up staircases that shifted beneath their feet, past portraits arguing about Valentine's Day scandals from centuries past. Hugo walked beside Nova, pointing out a particularly dramatic portrait of a lovesick knight. Nova smiled, less tense than usual.

Lily noticed but said nothing.

The seventh floor corridor was quieter. The troll tapestry hung opposite the blank stretch of wall. Nova stopped halfway down the corridor, pulled out her notebook, checked her notes.

"Here," she said quietly.

Lily stepped closer. The stone wall felt... warm. Not dramatically hot, but noticeably warmer than it should be. She pressed her palm flat against it.

"You're right," Lily said. "It's warm."

Hugo touched the wall too. "Definitely warmer than last week when I walked past."

Nova's relief was visible. She wasn't imagining it. Someone else could feel it too.

"It's getting worse," Nova said, making notes in her book. "Definitely warmer than last week."

They stood there for a moment. The corridor was empty, quiet except for distant sounds of students elsewhere in the castle. The wall stayed warm under Lily's hand.

"Maybe mention it to Professor McGonagall? Or another professor?" Lily suggested.

Nova hesitated. "They'll just say it's an old castle."

"Probably. But maybe try?"

Nova nodded.

They continued to Gryffindor Tower. The Fat Lady let them through with a disapproving sniff about "young people these days and their socializing." A portrait two frames over muttered something about "back in my day" before dozing off mid-sentence.

The common room that evening had settled into comfortable noise. Some first-years were still showing off Valentine's cards. Others were pretending they didn't care. Lily found a spot near the fireplace and pulled out her Transfiguration homework.

Hugo dropped into the chair beside her. "So. You and Lark didn't kill each other in Potions."

"No. We actually worked okay together."

"That's progress."

"It's weird. She's still... Lark. But also — I don't know."

"People are complicated."

Lily looked at him. "When did you get wise?"

Hugo grinned. "Hufflepuff. We may not be Ravenclaws, but we aren't stupid, you know."

Nova smiled shyly, settling cross-legged on the floor to review her temperature notes with Lily. After a few minutes, she stood to head back to Ravenclaw Tower. "Thanks for the card, Hugo."

Lily waited until Nova was gone, then turned to Hugo with a wide grin. "I knew it!"

Hugo blushed, but said nothing.

The common room slowly emptied as students headed to bed. Lily stayed by the fireplace, watching the flames. She thought about the day. Valentine's silliness with its floating hearts and pink... everything. Working with Lark without it turning into a disaster. Nova's temperature tracking and that wall catching fire. Heat displacement. Systems under pressure.

School life. Complicated people. Patterns that might mean nothing. No adventures. No danger. People and puzzles.

Maybe that's okay.

She opened *The Fellowship of the Ring* and continued reading. The hobbits were heading deeper into danger they barely understood.

Funny. She'd spent months wishing for adventure. The hobbits in the book just wanted to survive and go home. So different perspectives.

The fire crackled. The common room settled into nighttime quiet. Outside, February cold pressed against the windows. Somewhere in the castle, a corridor was warmer than it should be. In the dungeons, scorch marks remained on a wall that had briefly caught fire.

Hogwarts was being Hogwarts. Lily turned the page and kept reading.

— CHAPTER FIFTEEN —

Fire on Stone

Lily woke to Thursday morning like any other: grey February light filtering through the dormitory windows, Iris already up and fussing with her hair, Bridget snoring softly in the next bed. Just another day at Hogwarts.

She dressed, grabbed her bag, and headed down to breakfast with Hugo. The Great Hall was loud with morning chatter, enchanted ceiling showing heavy clouds that promised no Quidditch practice today. A portrait on the way had been arguing with a suit of armor about last week's match scores. Someone's quill had turned into a parrot mid-essay and was now squawking Charms theory at its horrified owner. A moving staircase shifted while they were halfway up, and everyone waited patiently for it to settle.

"Thursday," Lily muttered.

Hugo was still watching the parrot with fascination. "Do you think it knows what it's saying, or is it just repeating—"

"Hugo. It's a quill."

"Right. Obviously."

They had a free period before lunch, so they headed to the library to work on their Transfiguration essay. Lily had her copy of *The Fellowship of the Ring* with her, bookmark about halfway through. Professor McGonagall had assigned two feet of parchment on the principles of inanimate-to-animate transfiguration, and Hugo was struggling.

"But why," he said, staring at his notes, "does the size of the original object matter if you're changing its fundamental nature anyway?"

"Because mass has to go somewhere," Lily said, not looking up from her own parchment. She wasn't Nova-level good at Transfiguration, but she understood the basics well enough. "You can't just make a mouse into an elephant. The magic doesn't work like that."

"But you can make a beetle into a button."

"Same approximate mass."

"Oh." Hugo scribbled something. "Makes sense, I suppose."

The library door opened, and Lark Prewett entered, scanning for an open seat. Most tables were occupied—it was a popular free period. Her eyes landed on Lily and Hugo's table. There was an empty chair.

She hesitated.

Lily looked up, met her eyes for a moment. It was still awkward between them, even after Valentine's Day Potions class. Not hostile anymore, just... uncertain.

"Is this seat taken?" Lark asked.

Lily paused, then shrugged. "Go ahead."

Lark sat down with her own homework—Charms, from the look of it—and pulled out parchment and quill. For several minutes, all three of them worked in silence. It wasn't comfortable, exactly, but it wasn't terrible either.

Then Lark noticed the book on Lily's side of the table.

"You're reading Tolkien?" she said, after a long pause.

Lily looked up, slightly defensive. "Professor Rowle lent them to me."

"I meant—" Lark hesitated. "Have you got to Khazad-dûm yet?"

"Finished that part last night."

A small, genuine smile crossed Lark's face. "That scene is terrifying."

"The way he describes it," Lily said slowly. "Shadow and fire from the deep."

"And the bridge scene..."

There was a moment of real connection between them. Shared knowledge that Hugo didn't have, for once.

"What's the point of Khazad-dûm?" Hugo asked, looking between them.

"Balrog. An ancient fire demon," Lark explained. "From before the world was young."

"Sounds extraordinary."

Lily winced automatically at the word. Lark caught it, and something that might have been a laugh flickered across her face before she stopped herself. But the moment had shifted something. The atmosphere felt less tense. They returned to their homework, but it was easier now.

Lily glanced around the library idly. Across the room, Kieran Flint sat alone at a corner table, surrounded by thick old volumes. He was taking notes rapidly,

and he looked terrible—messy hair, dark circles under his eyes. Another student walked past his table, and Kieran quickly closed the book he'd been reading, pulling a different one closer and trying to look casual. The moment the student passed, he reopened the first book.

"He's been acting really strange lately," Lily muttered.

Lark glanced over. "He's been here every day this week."

"Should we ask if he's okay?" Hugo said.

Lark shrugged. "He'd probably just say he's fine."

They went back to their essays, but Lily kept half an eye on Kieran. Something about his behavior was off. More than usual.

The library door burst open.

Nova rushed in, looking agitated. Her eyes scanned the room, landed on Lily, and she hurried over. Madam Pince glared from her desk but Nova was moving too fast to notice.

Hugo straightened in his chair.

"Lily!" Nova's voice was loud enough to carry. Several nearby tables looked up. A portrait on the wall shushed her. "It's happening again. Right now."

Lily looked up from her parchment. "What?"

"Wall on the Seventh floor. It's worse than last time." Nova was breathless, like she'd been running. "You need to see it before it stops."

"How much worse?" Hugo asked.

"There were actual flames when I passed. Still going."

Lark's eyebrows rose. "Flames? On stone?"

"Yes!" Nova sounded frustrated and urgent at once. "Just like the dungeon wall in your Potions class. But bigger. And it's still happening."

Lily understood. Nova wanted witnesses. Not just her word, not just her notebook—proof.

"Come on, hurry," Nova said as they gathered their things. "I don't know how long it lasts."

Lark stood too, gathering her Charms homework. "I'm coming."

Lily blinked. "You don't have to—"

"A wall caught fire earlier," Lark said, her expression uncertain but determined. "I want to see this."

Across the library, Kieran had stopped writing. His head was down, but he was clearly listening. His face had gone pale.

They left quickly, Nova leading the way. Lily glanced back once and saw Kieran watching them go, his expression ... not curious but afraid.

They moved fast through the castle corridors. Students passed them going the other direction, chatting about normal things—homework, Quidditch, weekend plans. A pair of third-years were arguing about whether a Hippogriff could beat a dragon in a fight. No one else seemed to notice anything wrong.

"It was so hot I could barely stand near it," Nova said as they climbed stairs. "And the smell—it was like something burning."

A staircase shifted mid-climb, and they waited impatiently for it to settle before continuing up. Hugo bent over, hands on his knees, catching his breath.

"It might stop before we get there," Nova said anxiously, looking back at Hugo.

"We're almost there," Lily said, then to Hugo: "You alright?"

"Too many... stairs," Hugo panted. "I'm fine. Keep going."

Nova hesitated a moment, then nodded and led them onward.

They reached the seventh floor corridor and hurried past the familiar tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy attempting to teach trolls ballet. Lily had walked this route dozens of times—it was a perfectly ordinary corridor. Until recently.

Nova led them toward a blank stretch of wall opposite the tapestry. The corridor looked normal. But as they got closer, Lily noticed the air wavering. Like heat rising off summer pavement.

"There." Nova pointed. "The wall."

The stone surface looked darker than the surrounding wall. Scorched. Heat radiated from it—Lily could feel it from several feet away. A faint smell of smoke.

Hugo stepped closer. "Like a fireplace."

Lark extended her hand toward the wall, then stopped before touching it. The stone radiated heat like summer pavement. "That's hot. Really hot."

"This is what you wanted us to see?" Lily asked.

"It was worse ten minutes ago," Nova said. "Actual flames on the stone. I saw them. Fire appearing right on the wall, then fading." The air smelled wrong—acrid, like burning metal.

"Fire on stone?" Hugo said doubtfully.

"I know how it sounds."

Footsteps echoed sharply behind them in the empty corridor, each sound bouncing off cold stone. They all turned.

Kieran Flint stood at the corridor entrance. His face pale. Expression strained. He was clutching a book so tightly his knuckles were white.

"You shouldn't be here," he said.

Lily blinked. "What?"

"This corridor." Kieran's voice was tight. "You need to leave."

Not hostile. Frightened.

"Why?" Hugo asked, still breathing hard from the stairs. "What's wrong with it?"

Kieran glanced at the scorched wall. Immediate recognition. Fear. He dropped his book. He knew what it was.

"Just—stay away from here," he said. "Please."

"You followed us from the library," Lark said.

Kieran didn't deny it.

"You know what's causing this," Nova said. Not a question.

Kieran was silent, clearly conflicted. He wanted to warn them but didn't want to explain.

Then the temperature shifted.

The warmth vanished. Sudden, sharp cold replaced it. Lily's breath misted. All five of them stepped back.

"Why is it so cold?" Hugo said.

Then the wall began to glow.

Faint orange light seeped through the stone. Like something burning inside it. The heat rolled back—stronger than before, hitting Lily's face, her hands. The smell of smoke intensified.

"It's happening again!" Nova said.

The orange glow brightened. Small flames appeared on the wall surface itself. Actual fire. On stone. They flickered and danced for several long seconds while the temperature fluctuated wildly—cold, then hot, then cold again.

Lily couldn't look away. This wasn't heating charms or "an old castle settling," this was something wrong.

The flames faded as suddenly as they'd appeared. The glow dimmed. Vanished. The temperature gradually normalized, but scorch marks remained on the wall, darker than before.

Five first-years stood in the corridor, staring at the scorched stone. None of them spoke for a moment.

"What, exactly, was that?" Hugo finally said.

"It's getting worse," Kieran said quietly. Almost to himself.

Lily turned sharply. "You DO know something."

Kieran looked panicked. "I can't—" He turned to leave.

"Wait," Lark said. "We're not going to tell anyone."

Kieran stopped but didn't turn around.

"Whatever you know," Lark said, "we need to know it too. Something dangerous is happening here."

Kieran's head stayed down, his shoulders tense. He was fighting with himself.

"You're *his* daughter," he said finally.

"Yeah," Lily said, annoyed. "So?"

"Not this." Kieran's voice was barely above a whisper. "Not. Not with you."

He walked away quickly, almost running. The five of them were left standing in the corridor, the wall still radiating residual heat, scorch marks visible evidence of what they'd all witnessed.

Dinner in the Great Hall felt surreal. Students ate and chatted normally, completely unaware that five first-years had just watched a stone wall catch fire. Lily sat with Hugo at the Gryffindor table, both of them quiet. She spotted Nova at the Ravenclaw table, still looking shaken. Lark sat at the Slytherin table, staring thoughtfully at her plate. And Kieran sat alone at the far end of the Slytherin table, not eating, just staring.

Five students from four houses, all thinking about the same thing.

After dinner, Lily and Hugo headed for the Gryffindor common room. Nova arriving shortly after. Then Lark appeared, someone whispering, "Slytherin at Gryffindor Tower?" Another student muttered, "Can't remember seeing that before."

The four of them gathered by the fireplace, away from the other students.

"We all saw that," Nova said quietly.

"Yeah," Hugo said. "We did."

"And Kieran saw it too," Lily said.

"He knew what it was," Lark said. "You could tell."

"He said 'it's getting worse,'" Nova pointed out. "That means he's been watching. Like I have."

She pulled out her small notebook, opened it to show the location marked on her list. "This is the worst incident yet. October it was just warm spots. Now it was actual flames."

"He ran away mentioning me being Harry Potter's daughter," Lily said, looking at Lark.

"Why would that matter?" Lark said thoughtfully.

Hugo leaned forward. "He said you'd understand. You know. Because of your father."

"I don't understand," Lily said. "What does Dad have to do with it?"

"His father is Marcus Flint," Lark said. "He's in Azkaban."

There was a pause.

"Death Eater?" Nova asked quietly.

"Hiding them," Lark said. "After the war. Sheltered fugitives for years before they caught him. Kieran was quite young when it happened."

"So Kieran thinks..." Hugo trailed off. "What? That Lily won't talk to him because of that?"

"That's stupid," Lily said. "I don't care who his father is."

"Maybe it's not about whether you'd talk to him," Lark said slowly. "Maybe it's about what his father knows. Or what happened during the war."

"Something his father was involved in?" Nova said.

"Or his father's associates." Lark was thinking it through. "Death Eaters attacked Hogwarts during the Battle. That corridor—seventh floor—that's where lots of fighting happened."

"You think this is connected to the Battle?" Hugo said. "That was twenty years ago."

"Kieran's researching magical containment," Lark said. "Historical structures. What if something from the Battle never got fixed properly?"

Nova's eyes widened. "Something's being contained behind that wall. And the containment is failing."

"Temperature displacement, heat buildup, periodic releases," Lark said. "That's exactly what happens when a containment system degrades."

"Containing what?" Hugo asked. "For twenty years?"

No one answered. None of them knew. But Kieran might.

"We need to talk to him," Lily said.

"He won't talk," Nova said. "You saw how scared he was."

"We have to try. Whatever this is, it's getting worse. And five of us saw it today. We can't just ignore it."

"The question is how to approach him," Lark said. "He's absolutely terrified of something."

"Maybe not all of us at once?" Hugo suggested. "That might feel like an ambush."

"Lily should talk to him," Nova said.

Lily blinked. "Me? Why me?"

"He said you'd understand. Because of your father. Maybe that's important."

"I don't know what he meant by that."

"But he thinks you do," Lark said. "Or he thinks you can understand... something."

"We should tell a professor," Nova said.

"Which one?" Hugo asked. "Who'd believe us?"

"Every professor Nova's told has dismissed it," Lily pointed out.

"Old castle quirks," Nova said bitterly.

"We need more information first," Lark said. "Before we go to adults with 'we saw a wall glow.' They'll just say it was heating charms or something."

"But we all saw it," Hugo said. "Five witnesses."

"Five first-years," Lark countered. "Who happened to be there at the exact moment. Adults will think we're making it up."

"We need to figure it out better," Lily said. "Know what we're actually dealing with."

"Which means talking to Kieran," Nova said.

"Yeah."

"When?" Lark asked.

"I don't know. Soon. Tomorrow, maybe."

They weren't making a concrete plan. Just trying to make sense of what they'd witnessed. Four first-years from four different houses, and one more who'd run away. All of them sharing the same dangerous secret.

Later, after Nova and Lark had left, Lily sat with Hugo by the dying fire. Most of the other students had gone to bed.

"So," Hugo said. "We have a mystery."

"Yeah."

"You're going to investigate it?"

Lily paused. "I don't know. Not really looking for adventure any more. But something is actually wrong here."

"Yeah. It is."

"Nova's been tracking it for months. Adults aren't taking it seriously. And now walls are catching fire."

Hugo grinned slightly. "Lark's helping."

"Yeah. She is."

"That's... progress."

Lily smiled a little. "Yeah. It is. Funny."

She stared at the fire, thinking about the day. The conversation with Lark earlier had been easier than she'd expected. The flames appearing on solid stone—that had been real danger, not imagined adventure. Kieran's terrified expression when he saw the wall. Nova's tracking proven right after months of dismissal. Four of them working together across house lines.

She wasn't seeking adventure like on the first term. But something genuine was happening. And maybe they needed to understand it.

She thought about the Balrog from her book. "Ancient evil from the deep." Fire and shadow. Coincidental imagery. But the thought stuck with her as she headed upstairs to bed.

Tomorrow: classes, homework, normal routine. And maybe finding a way to talk to Kieran. Because whatever he knew, they might need to know too. Not for adventure, but because something was wrong.

And adults weren't seeing it.

— CHAPTER SIXTEEN —

The Spilled Beans

Friday morning, Lily spotted Kieran between classes in a corridor near the Charms classroom. He was walking alone, head down, clutching his bag like it might escape.

This was her chance.

"Kieran," she called, keeping her voice casual. "About yesterday—"

His head snapped up. Their eyes met for a split second, and she saw his face go pale. Then he turned and walked away quickly, almost running.

"Wait—" Lily started after him, but he'd already disappeared around the corner.

Hugo had witnessed the whole thing from a few steps behind. "That went well."

"He didn't even let me finish," Lily said, frustrated.

"Yeah. I noticed."

She tried again Friday afternoon in the library.

Kieran was at his usual table in the back corner, surrounded by the same thick volumes on magical containment and protective wards. Lily approached slowly, trying not to spook him. She sat down across from him without asking.

"Whatever you're afraid of," she said quietly, "we can help."

Kieran looked up. Saw who it was. His expression shifted immediately from concentration to panic. He started closing his books, shoving them into his bag.

"Wait, I'm not trying to—"

"You shouldn't be talking to me about this." Kieran's voice was tight, barely above a whisper. He was stuffing parchment into his bag with shaking hands.

"My father—" He stopped himself. Stood up, slinging his bag over his shoulder. "Just stay away from the seventh floor."

"Kieran—"

But he was already leaving, walking quickly toward the library exit. Half the students in the nearby area were staring now. Madam Pince glared at Lily from across the room.

Nova, who'd been studying at a table near the windows, looked up from her Astronomy charts. She'd seen the whole thing.

"He's really scared of you," Nova said quietly as Lily slumped into the seat Kieran had vacated.

"I noticed."

That evening, the four of them gathered in the Gryffindor common room—Lily, Hugo, Nova, and Lark, who'd arrived after dinner looking thoughtful. They found a corner away from the other students, voices low. While the other Gryffindors still found it odd that a Slytherin student was again at their common room, they accepted it and no longer were whispering behind their backs.

"He won't even let me talk," Lily said, still frustrated from the day's failures. "The second he sees me, he just... runs."

"You tried twice?" Hugo asked.

"Yeah. Both times he looked at me like I was going to hex him or something."

Lark was quiet, listening carefully.

"Maybe you should let someone else try?" Hugo suggested.

Lily's immediate reaction was defensive. "I can handle it."

"But he can't handle you," Nova said gently. "Because of your father. You are the daughter of perhaps the most famous member of Voldemort's adversaries from the last war. That's what scares him."

Hugo watched Nova for a moment, appreciating how carefully she'd said it.

Lily didn't like hearing that. Didn't want to accept that her name—her father's name—could be an obstacle instead of an advantage. "That's stupid. I'm not my father."

"But you are his daughter," Lark said. "Whether you want it to or not, that means something."

The words stung because they were true.

Silence settled over them. Other students laughed by the fireplace, oblivious.

"So what do we do?" Hugo asked.

More silence. Lily stared at the floor, thinking. She wanted to be the one who solved this. Wanted to be the one who convinced Kieran, who figured everything out. But that wasn't working. And continuing to push wasn't helping anyone.

"Let me try," Lark said quietly.

They all looked at her.

"You?" Lily couldn't keep the surprise from her voice.

"I'm Slytherin. So is he." Lark hesitated, then continued. "And I understand what it's like. Having a complicated family name."

"What do you mean?" Nova asked.

Lark took a breath. "My father's a Squib. Everyone in my house knows. Half the pure-blood families won't even talk to me because of it. The other half thinks I am... an interesting curiosity. I get judged for my family all the time. Just differently than you do." She looked at Lily. "Maybe Kieran needs someone who gets that."

Lily wanted to argue. Wanted to say she understood too. But watching Kieran flee from her twice today... maybe she didn't. Not in the way Lark did.

"Okay," she said finally. "Try."

Saturday morning, Lark found Kieran in the Slytherin common room.

Most students were still at breakfast or sleeping in. Kieran sat alone on one of the leather sofas near the fireplace, staring at a piece of parchment but not writing anything. He looked exhausted.

Lark sat down nearby. Not too close. Just close enough that he'd notice her.

For several minutes, neither of them spoke. The common room was quiet except for the crackle of the fire and distant sounds of the lake outside the windows.

"The Potter girl tried to talk to you," Lark said eventually. Not a question.

Kieran tensed but didn't leave. "I don't want to talk about it."

"I know."

Pause.

"I'm not asking you to talk to her," Lark continued. "But I think you should talk to someone. And I think you know we're right. Something dangerous is happening."

Kieran's hands clenched on the parchment. He still didn't look at her.

"Your father made software for Muggles," he said quietly. "Made a fortune doing it."

"Yeah."

"My father tried to kill Muggles. Fought with Voldemort. Tried to kill Harry Potter. He is in Azkaban because he failed."

"I know."

Kieran finally looked at her. "So you understand why I can't talk to *her*."

"I understand why you're scared," Lark said. "But I also understand what it's like. Having a parent everyone judges you for."

"Your father's famous for being brilliant."

"My father's a Squib," Lark said quietly but firmly. "You know what that means in - some circles. Especially in Slytherin. Half my relatives won't speak to us. My family has money because of Muggle technology. Some people think that makes us... lesser."

Kieran stared at her.

"We're both living with names that complicate things," Lark continued. "But that doesn't mean we're responsible for what our parents did. Or didn't do."

A long silence.

"It's not that simple," Kieran said.

"No," Lark agreed. "It's not."

More silence. The fire popped. Somewhere above them, footsteps crossed the dormitory floor.

"What I know," Kieran said slowly, "what my father told me... if I tell Harry Potter's daughter about it, they'll ask how I knew. And I'll have to explain about my father. About the Death Eaters causing this. And everyone will think I'm like them."

"Or that you waited too long," Lark said.

"Yeah."

"Or that you're somehow responsible."

Kieran nodded miserably.

"Are you?" Lark asked.

"I don't know!" The words burst out of him. "I've been researching for the whole year. Trying to understand if there's a way to fix it. Without having to explain everything. But it's getting worse faster than I expected. And I don't know what to do."

Lark let that sit for a moment. Then: "What's happening in the castle?"

Kieran looked at her. Fighting with himself. Wanting to tell someone but terrified of the consequences.

"There was a fire," he said finally. "During the Battle. Twenty-two years ago."

Lark waited.

"One of the Death Eaters' children. Vincent Crabbe. He was a student then." Kieran's voice was barely above a whisper now. "He released Fiendfyre in the Room of Requirement."

Lark's breath caught. She knew what Fiendfyre was—she'd read about it in her research. Cursed fire. Nearly impossible to control.

"It killed him," Kieran continued. "The fire. But everyone thought it burned out with him."

"But it didn't?"

Kieran shook his head. "The Room contained it. Has been hiding it for over twenty years. And now it is failing."

"How do you know this?"

Kieran pulled out letters from his bag. The parchment was old, the handwriting shaky. "I wrote to my father. He was there. During the Battle. Fought in that corridor."

"During the Battle?" Lark said slowly. "I thought he was in Azkaban for hiding people."

Kieran shrugged, tired. "That's the version people tell. Easier than the real one."

Lark took the letters carefully, read them. Marcus Flint's words confirmed everything. The Fiendfyre released. The assumption it had been contained. No one dealing with it properly because there was so much other damage, so many casualties.

"He said the adults back then were overwhelmed," Kieran said. "So much damage. So many dead. The Room was sealed and they moved on. Thought that was enough."

"But it wasn't."

"No."

Lark handed the letters back. "You need to tell the others."

Kieran panicked. "I just said—"

"Not the adults. Not yet." Lark looked at him steadily. "The others who saw the wall with us. Lily, Hugo, Nova. They need to know what we're actually dealing with."

"Potter's daughter—"

"Is just like us," Lark said firmly. "She's not her father. And if you explain what you explained to me, she'll understand."

"What if she doesn't?"

"Then we deal with that. Like it or not, we are Slytherin." Lark paused. "But right now, five first-years know something's wrong. And only one of us knows what it actually is. We need that information."

Kieran was still scared. But something in Lark's certainty, her calm acceptance, seemed to reach him.

"Today," Lark said. "Before dinner. We'll meet somewhere private."

Very long pause. Kieran stared at the fire, at his letters, at nothing.

Finally, he nodded. Small. Almost imperceptible. But a nod.

"Okay."

They met in an empty classroom on the sixth floor. Saturday afternoon, most students were outside enjoying the March weather or in the common rooms. The five of them gathered—Lily, Hugo, Nova, Lark, and Kieran. Through the window, they could hear someone's Remembrall rolling across the courtyard below, the owner chasing it and swearing.

Kieran looked sick. He wouldn't meet Lily's eyes.

Lily tried not to seem threatening. She'd deliberately sat away from him, giving him space. But the tension in the room was thick.

"Kieran has something to tell us," Lark said quietly. "About the seventh floor wall."

Kieran started haltingly. Explained about the Battle of Hogwarts. Vincent Crabbe releasing Fiendfyre. The Room of Requirement containing it. Twenty-two years of containment. Now failing.

He showed them his father's letters. The parchment passed between them—Nova reading carefully, Hugo's eyes widening, Lily's hands clenching.

"Fiendfyre," Nova said. "That's cursed fire."

"Nearly impossible to control," Kieran confirmed. "Destroys pretty much everything it touches. Crabbe couldn't stop it. It killed him."

"But the Room stopped it?" Hugo asked.

"Contained it. There's a difference. The fire's still burning. Has been for twenty-two years. Behind that wall."

Lily stared at him. "So the temperature changes Nova tracked—"

"Heat from the fire. Leaking through."

Nova looked at her notebook with new understanding. "And the cold spots?"

"Heat being pulled back toward containment. System trying to stabilize itself."

"Like a firewall degrading," Lark said. "Exactly like you said."

Kieran nodded. "That's why I was researching containment. Trying to understand if there's a way to reinforce it."

Lily's anger was building. She could feel it rising. "How long have you known?"

"About the Fiendfyre," Lily pressed.

Kieran froze.

"Since we entered Hogwarts," Kieran said quietly. "Since September."

Hugo's sharp intake of breath.

"All these months," Lily said. The anger was showing now. "You've known all this time that there's cursed fire in the castle. And you didn't tell anyone."

"I was trying to—"

"Trying to what? Figure it out yourself? We're eleven!"

"I know!" Kieran's own fear and frustration burst out. "But if I told the adults, they'd ask how I knew. And I'd have to explain about my father. About the Death Eaters causing this. And everyone would blame me!"

"So what?" Lily was standing now.

"So they'd blame me! Everyone always blames us. Death Eaters' kids. Like we chose our parents."

"You think I don't know about that?" Lily shot back. "About being judged for your parents? Everyone expects me to be my father. Everyone thinks I should be just like him. Want adventures, fight Dark wizards, save everyone. I didn't choose my parents either."

"It's not the same—"

"It's exactly the same!"

They were both shouting now. Hugo stood up. "Both of you, stop. Please."

His voice was calm but firm enough to cut through. They both turned to look at him.

"This isn't helping," Hugo said. "Fighting about it won't fix anything."

"He's right," Nova added quietly.

Silence. Lily and Kieran both breathing hard.

"Kieran was wrong to wait," Lark said, looking at Kieran without pulling punches. "You should have told someone sooner."

Kieran flinched but didn't argue.

"But he's telling us now," Lark continued, looking at Lily. "And we need that information."

Lily was still angry. But she recognized the truth in what Lark was saying. Took a breath. Outside, whoever was chasing the Remembrall finally caught it, judging by the triumphant yell.

"Okay," she said. "Okay. Fine."

To Kieran: "I'm still mad at you."

"I know. I knew you would."

"But Nova's right. Fighting doesn't help. So. Tell us everything else you know."

Kieran explained what his research had revealed. The Room of Requirement had been maintaining containment. Acting as a magical firewall, using Lark's term. But the Room was already damaged—from Dolores Umbridge breaking in back in 1996. Twenty-plus years of strain.

Fiendfyre needed to consume things to exist. The Room might have been feeding it somehow. Creating a feedback loop.

"How long until it fails completely?" Nova asked.

"I don't know. Could be weeks. Could be days. The incidents are getting worse faster."

"What happens if it fails?" Hugo asked quietly.

"Fiendfyre spreads. Through the castle. Consuming everything."

The weight of that settled over them. Five eleven-year-olds understanding, suddenly and completely, that they were talking about real danger.

"We have to tell the adults," Lily said. "Right now."

Kieran panicked again. "But—"

"I don't care about your father. Or mine. Or anyone's stupid legacy." Lily's voice was firm. "There's cursed fire in the castle. We tell someone who can actually do something about it."

"Who?" Nova asked.

"Professor McGonagall?" Hugo suggested.

Lily hesitated. "The Headmistress feels... formal."

"Professor Longbottom," Lark said.

Everyone looked at her.

"He fought in the Battle," Lark explained. "He knows the castle was damaged. He's approachable. And... I believe he's basically your family."

"Uncle Neville," Lily said. "Godfather of my brother James."

"But he wasn't in the Room when it happened," Hugo pointed out. "He wouldn't know about the Fiendfyre specifically."

"But he knows the Room of Requirement," Nova said. "Really knows it."

"What do you mean?" Lark asked.

"He lived in it. During the war. When the Death Eaters controlled Hogwarts. He'd understand how it works."

Lily realised Nova was right. "He'd know how it would work under certain situations."

"And he'd believe us," Hugo added.

"But he'll ask how we know—" Kieran started.

"Then we tell him the truth," Lily said. "All of it." She looked at Kieran. "Your father, my father, the whole thing. And if anyone blames you for it..." Pause. "I'll tell them they're wrong."

Kieran stared at her. "You'd do that?"

"You're telling us now, aren't you? That's what matters."

Not quite forgiveness. Acceptance.

The plan formed quickly. Tomorrow—Sunday—they'd approach Professor Longbottom. Before breakfast. All five of them together. Show him Nova's tracking data. Show him Kieran's research and letters. Explain everything they knew. Let adults handle the actual danger.

"All five of us go," Lark said. "Together."

"Agreed," Hugo said.

"Yes," Nova said.

Kieran hesitated, then: "Okay."

"Tomorrow morning. Before breakfast," Lily said. "His office or the greenhouses."

Small nods all around. Not excitement—this was serious. But also relief. Finally doing something. Finally telling someone who could escalate it properly.

After dinner, Lily walked with Hugo through the Entrance Hall.

"Could we go to your common room?" she asked.

Hugo looked surprised. "Really?"

"I don't want to be alone right now. And Gryffindor Tower feels... loud."

"Yeah. Okay."

They headed down toward the kitchens, past the fruit bowl portrait with the pear. Hugo tickled it—Lily had never actually seen how to get to the Hufflepuff common room before. The portrait swung open, revealing a passage, and the common room entrance was just nearby.

The Hufflepuff common room was completely different from Gryffindor Tower—lower ceilings created an intimate coziness that felt like being safely underground where nothing bad could reach you, round doors with burnished copper handles gleamed warmly in the lamplight, yellow hangings in shades ranging from pale cream to deep honey gold draped the curved walls and softened every corner making the whole space glow, and plants were everywhere, literally everywhere, hanging from the ceiling in copper pots trailing leaves like living curtains and climbing the walls in cascades of green and sitting in cheerful clusters on every available surface filling the air with the smell of earth and growing things and life, whilst comfortable overstuffed chairs the colour of butterscotch and warm toast clustered around small circular tables,

the whole space feeling warm and welcoming like the best kind of kitchen on a cold day, the sort of place where everyone was invited and no one was judged and you could just be yourself without any pressure to be impressive or brave or anything other than exactly who you were.

Most students had scattered—some still at dinner, others in the dormitories or outside. A Fanged Geranium on the windowsill snapped halfheartedly at a passing student, who absently patted it like a pet. Hugo found them a quiet corner with comfortable chairs near a window that looked out onto the grounds.

Lily noticed she felt safe here. Not because of anything dramatic. Just because it was Hugo's space, and he'd let her in.

They sat in comfortable silence for a while.

"You handled that well," Hugo said eventually.

"I yelled at him."

"You also stood up for him. At the end."

"He was wrong to wait."

"Yeah. But so was everyone who dismissed Nova. Adults didn't listen when she tried to tell them. Maybe Kieran thought they wouldn't listen to him either."

Lily hadn't thought about it that way. Considered it.

"He's scared," Hugo continued. "Not of the fire. Well, not just the fire. Of people blaming him."

"I get that." Pause. "I do get that."

More silence. The common room was peaceful. A few students drifted past, waving at Hugo, glancing curiously at Lily but not intruding.

Lily thought about the day. She couldn't get through to Kieran. Because of who she was. Who her father is. What her name means. But Lark could. Because she understood something Lily didn't. Shared experience of complicated legacy.

"I couldn't fix it," Lily said quietly.

"Lark could," Hugo said. "That's not a bad thing."

"No. It's not."

They sat together a while longer. Talking quietly about tomorrow. About what Neville might say. About the fact that five first-years from four houses were working together on something real.

Eventually, Lily stood to leave. "Thanks. For letting me visit."

"Anytime," Hugo said. He meant it.

Lily walked back to Gryffindor Tower alone. Through the corridors, up the staircases. Tomorrow would change things. Once adults knew, it would become their problem. But also—relief. They'd done the right thing. Convinced Kieran to come forward. Found the truth. Now someone who could actually help would.

That was good.

Back in her dormitory, climbing into bed, she thought about the day. She wasn't her father. Didn't need to save everyone herself. Just needed to do the right thing. And help others do it too. That was enough. More than enough.

And sometimes that meant visiting your friend's common room. Being in their space. Not always being at the center.

Sleep came easier than expected.

— CHAPTER SEVENTEEN —

Wheels Turning

Sunday morning, all five of them walked to Greenhouse Three together.

The sun was barely up. Most students were still sleeping in—it was the weekend after all. But Lily, Hugo, Nova, Lark, and Kieran crossed the grounds in silence, their breath visible in the cold February air.

Neville was already working when they arrived. The greenhouse smelled of rich earth and Dragon Dung fertilizer—pungent and unmistakable. He had dirt all over his hands and his teaching robes were rolled up to his elbows. A Bouncing Bulb squeaked indignantly from a nearby pot as he repositioned it. He looked up when they entered, surprised.

"Bit early for students," he said. Then he saw who it was. Five first-years from four different houses. His expression shifted. "What's wrong?"

"Uncle Neville," Lily said. "We need to tell you something. It's important."

He put down his trowel immediately. Wiped his hands on a rag, not very successfully—dirt still under his fingernails, a smudge across his cheek. "All right. I'm listening."

Nova clutched her notebook tightly.

"They'll listen," Hugo said quietly beside her. "Your tracking is good. Really good."

Nova glanced at him, then nodded and stepped forward. Opened her notebook. "I've been tracking temperature anomalies since October."

Neville took the notebook. Looked at the pages carefully. Graphs, measurements, dates. Months of data.

"This shows a clear pattern," he said slowly. "Escalation."

"It's getting worse faster," Nova said.

Kieran spoke next. His voice was unsteady. "My father told me... about the Battle. What happened in the Room of Requirement."

He pulled out the letters. Old parchment, shaky handwriting. Marcus Flint's account of that night.

Neville's face went pale. "Fiendfyre."

"Vincent Crabbe released it," Kieran said. "My father was there. He said everyone thought it burned out, but—"

"But the Room has simply contained it." Neville sat down heavily on a nearby stool. Behind him, a Fanged Geranium made a half-hearted attempt to bite his sleeve before settling back into its pot. "All this time. We never thought..."

"The containment's failing," Lark said. "Like a firewall degrading. My father's company deals with system failures. It's the same pattern."

Lily described the stone wall spontaneously catching fire in the dungeons. The flames that had been seen on the seventh floor. Hugo added the temperature swings they'd all noticed. Five students, five perspectives. All pointing to the same thing.

Neville was quiet for a long moment. His hands were shaking slightly—one still holding the dirt-stained rag, the other gripping the edge of the potting table. Dirt under his fingernails, but his face deadly serious.

"I lived in that Room," he said finally. "For months. During the war. If Fiendfyre's been burning there all this time..." He trailed off. Looked at Kieran's letters again. "This looks serious indeed."

"It's accelerating," Kieran said quietly.

Neville examined Nova's data again. The upward curve. The frequency doubling. "Your tracking is excellent, Miss Blackwood. This does show escalation."

Nova's face went pink. She looked down at her notebook, then up to find Hugo grinning.

Neville looked at Kieran. Not with judgment. Just focus. "Your father would know. He was there." Pause. "Thank you for coming forward. I know that wasn't easy."

Kieran looked like he might cry from relief.

"You did the right thing," Neville said to all of them. "All of you."

He stood up. Professional mode now. Professor Longbottom, not Uncle Neville.

"I need to take this to Professor McGonagall immediately. We'll need curse breakers. Ward specialists. The Department of Mysteries might need to be involved."

"How long will that take?" Nova asked.

"These things take time to investigate and verify properly," Neville said. "The Room's protections are complex. We can't just rush in."

"But the data—" Lily started.

"I know." Neville's voice was gentle but firm. "We'll handle this. That's what adults are for." He looked at each of them in turn. "Please stay away from the seventh floor for now. Let us handle this. You've done your part. Now it's our turn."

They left the greenhouse together. The sun was higher now, warming the grounds slightly. Walking back toward the castle, Lily felt something ease in her chest. A weight she hadn't even realised she'd been carrying.

"He believed us," Nova said. "Immediately."

"Of course he did," Lark said. "We had evidence."

Kieran didn't say anything. Just walked with them, looking lighter than Lily had ever seen him.

Hugo caught Lily's eye. Small smile. They'd done the right thing.

February ended. March arrived with rain and occasional sun. The grounds slowly turned green again. Students spent more time outside between classes, enjoying the longer days.

Easter was approaching. Exams too. June felt both distant and somehow too close at the same time. Third-years were choosing next year's electives, older students complained about O.W.L.s, and the library filled with studiers.

Classes continued. Homework. Essays. Quidditch practices when the weather allowed. The usual Hogwarts chaos—moving staircases, talking portraits, Peeves causing mischief, Chocolate Frogs escaping from the Great Hall.

Lily dismissed it all as boring normal.

But sometimes she saw signs of activity. Neville checking the seventh floor corridor. Measuring something with his wand. Taking notes on a clipboard.

Unfamiliar witches and wizards arriving at the castle—plain robes, no insignia, serious faces. "Unspeakables," someone whispered. Department of Mysteries. No one really knew what they were up to.

The seventh floor was cordoned off "for repairs." Enchantment barrier glowing faintly across the entrance. A sign redirected students to alternate routes. Portraits relocated temporarily.

But no urgency. No announcements. No panic. Most students barely noticed.

The five of them checked in occasionally. Library encounters. "Heard anything?" "Not yet." Passing in corridors. Quick glances. Shrugs. Nova was still tracking temperatures—couldn't help herself. Kieran doing research when he had free periods. Lark observing ward work when she passed the seventh floor.

Lily watched everything. Adults working methodically. Visitors consulting. Wards being reinforced.

They were handling it. Right?

Early April arrived.

Monday morning, Lily and Hugo were walking through the sixth floor corridor together when they spotted something. A large tapestry depicting a medieval feast hung on the wall. The edges were singed. Blackened. Threads hanging loose where burned.

"That wasn't there Friday," Lily said.

She touched the wall behind it. Warm. Hot, almost. Like standing near a fireplace. Her hand pulled back quickly.

Other students noticed too. Small crowd gathering.

Professor Flitwick passed by. Saw the damage. Tsked. Waved his wand casually. The tapestry repaired itself. Scorch marks faded.

"Some things always need fixing," he said cheerfully. "Off to class, everyone."

Lily and Hugo exchanged glances. That wall had been hot.

Tuesday afternoon in the library, Nova sat down at Lily's table. Opened her notebook.

The line curved sharply upward. Once per week in October. Now three, four times per day.

"Have you shown this to anyone?"

"Professor Flitwick. He said there's 'Nothing to worry about.'"

Nova stared at the page.

"They know what they're doing," Lily said. Didn't quite believe it herself.

Nova nodded. But neither of them looked away.

Thursday afternoon, Lily was heading to the library when she heard her name.

"—Potter's daughter brought it to us, apparently—"

She stopped. The voice was coming from inside a classroom—door slightly ajar, professors inside. She recognized Professor Flitwick's squeaky voice.

"—Longbottom took it to Minerva immediately—"

Another voice, older. Male. Flat. "How long for proper assessment?"

Flitwick: "The Unspeakables said at least three weeks. Can't rush this kind of analysis."

"Three weeks?" A woman's voice. "The data suggests—"

"Students aren't experts." The older male voice again. "We need professional verification before we act. One mistake could be catastrophic."

The voices moved away, deeper into the classroom. Lily couldn't hear anymore.

She stood frozen in the corridor. Three weeks. For assessment. Then what? Planning? More weeks?

Her hands clenched.

Friday after Herbology, Lily stayed behind.

"Uncle Neville, is everything okay? With... what we told you?"

He looked tired. Bags under his eyes. Distracted during class, which was unusual.

"We're working on it," he said. Voice reassuring but tired. "These things take time, Lily. We have to be careful. The Room's protections are complex and the magic unpredictable. We need to understand what we're dealing with before we can fix it."

"But it's getting worse—"

"I know." He put his hand on her shoulder. "We're aware. We're monitoring constantly. We're bringing in experts. Trust us. We know what we're doing."

His hand dropped. He looked at the dirt under his fingernails. Looked older than she'd ever seen him.

"Go on to your next class," he said gently.

Lily left. Somewhat reassured. Still worried.

Saturday afternoon, walking past the entrance hall with Hugo, Lily saw him.

Tall man with long red hair tied back. Dragon-hide jacket. Scarred face—burns along one side, old but visible. He was talking to McGonagall near the main doors, gesturing with his hands. A professional case sat at his feet, covered in magical locks. Behind them, a portrait of a medieval knight was snoring loudly, his helmet askew.

Lily stopped walking. "Uncle Bill?"

Hugo stopped too. Stared. "Why would he be here?"

Bill Weasley caught sight of them. His scarred face broke into a smile. He said something to McGonagall and walked over, nearly tripping over his case as it tried to follow him on its own. He caught it with practiced ease.

"Hugo! Lily!" He pulled Hugo into a quick hug, then squeezed Lily's shoulder. "Didn't expect to run into you two. How's first year treating you?"

"Fine," Lily said. Her eyes went to the case with magical locks. Back to his face. "Uncle Bill, why are you at Hogwarts?"

The smile faded slightly. "Consulting work. Complex curse assessment—might be here a few days." He glanced at McGonagall, who was watching. His case bumped against his leg impatiently. "Nothing for you to worry about. How're your parents, Hugo? Your mum still terrorizing the Ministry?"

"She's fine. Uncle Bill—"

"And Teddy sends his love, Lily. Saw him last week, he's doing well. Listen, I've got to go—meeting with the Headmistress. Good to see you both."

He walked back to McGonagall. They headed up the marble staircase together, talking quietly. The case with magical locks floating behind them, occasionally bumping the walls.

Hugo and Lily stood there in the entrance hall. Students passing around them. Everything looking normal.

"They called him in," Hugo said. Face pale. "For curse breaking."

Lily swallowed hard. "Maybe it's something else."

"Ancient curses. Dark magic. Gringotts security." Hugo looked at her. "That's what he does. They wouldn't call him for 'something else.'"

Adults were handling it. But they'd called in Uncle Bill. With specialized equipment.

That meant it was bad.

Saturday evening, the five gathered in their library corner. Not planned. Just ended up there. A first-year at a nearby table was trying to study while her quill kept spontaneously writing limericks instead of essay notes. She kept huffing in frustration and crossing them out.

Papers spread between them. Notes. Observations.

"Multiple times per day now," Nova said quietly.

"When it goes, it goes fast," Kieran said. "Like a dam breaking."

"Ward reinforcements help," Lark said. "But they're treating symptoms."

Silence.

"Three weeks," Lily said. "That's what the professors said. Minimum."

"My uncle was here," Hugo said. Face still pale from the afternoon. "They called him in."

Everyone looked at him. Behind them, the limerick-quill girl gave up and stormed off, leaving her parchment behind. It promptly wrote: *There once was a student quite distressed / Who found that her quill was possessed...*

"That's good, right?" Nova asked. "More experts?"

"It means they're worried," Hugo said.

More silence.

"It's accelerating," Kieran said quietly. "My father said it could fail suddenly. Once it reaches—"

"Three weeks for assessment," Lark said. "Then planning. Implementation."

"What if we don't have three weeks?" Hugo asked.

No one answered.

Lily stared at the papers between them. That curve heading nearly vertical.

"Should we do something?" The words came out before she could stop them.

Everyone looked at her.

"Like what?" Lark asked. Not dismissive. Genuinely asking. "We're eleven."

"I don't know." Lily's voice was small. "But we've been living with this. We see it every day. And they're being thorough, but..."

She couldn't finish.

"Thorough takes time," Nova said.

Long pause.

Five first-years looking at each other. Uncertain. Worried.

But feeling it. Would someone expect something from them?

Sunday morning, early. Lily asleep in her dormitory. Sun barely risen. Weekend morning. Should be quiet.

Commotion in the corridor. Running footsteps. Voices shouting.

Lily woke up. Other girls stirring.

A seventh-year prefect running past, banging on doors. "Everyone stay in common rooms! Do not leave!"

Voice urgent. Almost panicked. Very unlike normal prefect calm.

Something had happened.

Lily went to the window. Looked out over the grounds.

Professors running. McGonagall, Neville, Flitwick, others. Hurrying across the grounds toward the castle. Moving fast.

First time she'd seen them run.

Not methodical. Not careful. Urgent.

Hugo appeared at the portrait hole. Out of breath. Must have run all the way from Hufflepuff.

"Did you hear—?"

"I don't know what happened. But something did."

They stood at the window together. Watching professors converging.
Watching urgency. Watching everything they feared.

Looking at each other. Uncertain. Worried. Knowing.

They'd waited for adults to handle it. Trusted them to work methodically.
Believed proper channels would work.

Now they'd find out if that was enough.

— CHAPTER EIGHTEEN —

Fire and Shadow

The smoke was visible now.

Lily pressed her face to the dormitory window, watching grey wisps curl from somewhere on the seventh floor. Not much. Just enough to see against the pale morning sky.

"Everyone stay in common rooms!" The prefect's voice echoed again from below. "This is not a drill!"

Students crowded the stairs, voices rising. Someone was crying. A sixth-year tried to organise people away from the windows.

Lily pushed through to the common room. Hugo was already there, still catching his breath from his run across the castle. His face was pale.

"The seventh floor," he said quietly.

Through the windows, professors kept arriving. McGonagall's silver hair catching the early light. Neville running—actually running—across the grounds from the greenhouses. Flitwick hurrying after him. And others. People Lily didn't recognise. The Unspeakables in their plain robes.

First time all year she'd seen them run. Not walking quickly. Running.

"What's happening?" A third-year grabbed Lily's arm. "Is it an attack?" "Is that... *LAVA?*," someone else asked.

"I don't know." Lily pulled free. Kept watching.

Heat shimmer in the air. Visible even from here. Like looking at a road in summer. The air above the seventh floor distorting, wavering.

They'd warned adults. Adults were handling it. So why couldn't she breathe properly?

Twenty minutes later, Nova appeared through the portrait hole.

"How did you—" Hugo started.

"Secret passage. Third floor tapestry." Nova was breathing hard. "Everyone's confined to common rooms. Prefects overwhelmed. I slipped out."

She crossed to the window. Saw the smoke. Went very still.

Hugo watched her, his expression worried.

"It's really happening," she whispered. "The containment failed."

More running footsteps. The portrait swung open again. Lark climbed through, robes disheveled, face flushed.

"Dungeons are chaos," she said. "Heat coming through the walls. Like standing next to an oven." She looked at Lily. "Your friend Hugo told me where the Gryffindor common room was. Ages ago. Didn't think I'd need to remember."

Hugo managed a weak smile. "You're welcome."

Last came Kieran. He looked terrified. Hands shaking as he crossed the room. He'd clearly run the whole way—his robes were on backwards.

"I had to come," he said. His voice was barely a whisper. "I couldn't just wait in the Slytherin common room. Not knowing."

Five of them now. Five first-years from four houses, gathered in Gryffindor tower while the castle shook around them.

Other students stared. A second-year pointed at Kieran's backwards robes but seemed too panicked to comment. The prefects were too busy managing the chaos to notice or care.

Nova pulled out her notebook. Showed them the page.

The line had gone almost vertical.

"It's accelerating faster than I projected," she said. "Exponential curve went steeper than my worst case."

Kieran's voice shook. "My father said when it goes, it goes fast. Like a dam breaking."

Through the window: more smoke now. Orange glow behind the seventh-floor windows. Bill Weasley visible on the grounds—he must have stayed overnight—running toward the castle with his case of specialized equipment.

"The firewall's completely failing," Lark said. "What we saw before was nothing."

"They believed us," Hugo said. "They're doing everything they can."

"But is it enough?" Lily asked.

No one answered.

The decision crystallized in the silence.

"We need to see what's happening," Lily said. "Maybe we know something they don't."

"Are you barkin' mad? We're eleven," Lark said. But she was already standing.

"This is all mad," Hugo said. "You know that, right?"

"Completely mad." Lark straightened her robes. "Let's go."

Nova's practical voice: "Stay low. Smoke rises."

They slipped out during the confusion. Portrait hole. Down the stairs. Through corridors that should have been full of students but stood empty. Everyone locked in their common rooms. Prefects overwhelmed.

The heat increased as they climbed.

Fifth floor. Warm.

Sixth floor. Hot. The tapestry Lily had seen singed on Monday was blackened again. Worse than before.

Seventh floor.

The enchantment barrier was shattered. Pieces flickering weakly, like dying embers. Scorch marks all over the walls. Portraits fled from their frames. Empty canvases everywhere. A suit of armor had walked itself to the far end of the corridor, as far from the danger as it could get.

The troll tapestry was gone. Just ash and threads on the floor.

And the wall. The blank wall where the Room of Requirement should appear.

It was radiating heat. Visible shimmer in the air. Stone shouldn't glow like that—but this stone had a faint orange tinge. The floor felt hot through their shoes.

"Can't get closer." Hugo pulled Lily back. "The heat—"

"The Room won't open," Kieran said. "It's too busy. Can't respond to needs when it's using everything just to hold."

They stood in the corridor. Smoke stinging their eyes. Heat pressing against them. Physical force. Kieran wiped sweat from his forehead and his sleeve came away soaking wet.

"It's almost like a Balrog," Lily whispered. "Fire and shadow. Trapped under the mountain."

"From Tolkien? Really," Lark stared at her. "How do you even come up with that at a time like this?"

"She's been reading the books," Hugo said, still breathing hard from the climb. "It's a whole thing."

"Of course she is," Kieran muttered, wiping his face again.

And then Lily realised something.

She'd walked this corridor before. Dozens of times this year. Every week, sometimes more. Walking past the blank wall. Thinking. Hoping. Wishing.

I need something to happen. Something exciting. I need an adventure.

The Room responds to needs. That's what it does. That's its nature.

And all year, Lily had been walking past it, projecting her desperate, intense, repeated need for something exciting to happen.

While the Room was also trying to contain Fiendfyre.

While it was also trying to protect the castle.

She couldn't swallow.

"Lily?" Hugo's voice. Concerned. "What is it?"

"I walked past here." Her voice came out strange. Small. "Every week. Wishing something would happen."

The others looked at her.

"The Room was trying to give me what I wanted while it was also trying to hold the fire and protect everyone and—" She could barely get the words out.

She couldn't finish.

"This isn't your fault," Hugo said immediately.

"The Room was already failing," Lark's voice surprisingly gentle. "Twenty years of containing Fiendfyre. That's what broke it."

"You didn't know," Kieran said. "None of us knew."

Nova stepped forward. "But now you do know. That matters."

Lily's face was hot. Not just from the heat in the corridor. She wanted to fix it somehow, make it not true, but it *was* true—her need had been part of this, final straw on a failing system, not the cause but part of the pressure.

"What if," she said slowly, "that's how I can help?"

She understood the Room now. Better than anyone.

Because she'd been one of the things weighing on it.

The Room was trapped. Trying to serve contradictory imperatives as per Lark's description. Lily's need for adventure—intense, repeated, all year. The Fiendfyre's need to consume—dark magic seeking fuel. The castle occupants' need for safety—containment duty. Its own nature—responding to needs, providing what's asked.

Twenty years of trying to solve everything alone. Couldn't resolve the paradox. Breaking under the strain.

"I think I can talk to it," Lily said.

"Talk to a room?" Kieran stared at her.

"It responds to needs. That's how it works. You walk past, thinking about what you need, and it responds." She looked at the glowing wall. "What if someone thought about what the Room needs instead?"

"That's... not how magic works," Nova said. But she sounded uncertain.

"The Room's been trying to give me adventures all year," Lily said. "What if I tell it I don't need them anymore? That just containing the fire is enough?"

Lark was nodding slowly. "Remove one of the competing pressures. Like closing unnecessary programs so a system can focus on the critical task."

"Will that work?" Hugo asked.

"I don't know." Lily's hands were shaking. "But I understand it now. I know what it's been trying to do. And maybe..." She swallowed hard. "Maybe that's enough."

She stepped forward. Toward the blank wall. Heat pressing against her face. Eyes watering from smoke and something else. Behind her, she heard Lark mutter, "This is completely barking," but no one tried to stop her.

She thought about the Room.

Not what she wanted from it. What it was dealing with.

You've been trying so hard, she thought. For twenty years. Holding that fire. Keeping everyone safe. And I kept walking past, asking for more.

Another step. Heat almost unbearable. Her red hair was trying to escape in every direction at once—the scorching heat making it appear wilder than usual.

I'm sorry. I didn't know. I didn't understand.

She pressed her hand against the wall. Pulled it back—too hot—but kept projecting.

You don't have to give me adventures anymore. I don't need that kind of excitement. Just hold the fire. That's enough. You're already helping.

The wall pulsed. Something shifted in the air.

"The temperature," Nova said behind her. Voice sharp. "It's stabilising. Slightly."

The corridor reeked of smoke and something chemical, wrong. Lily kept going. Eyes closed now. Face wet—smoke, heat, everything.

You're not alone anymore. We see you. Adults are coming. Real help. You just have to hold a little longer.

The heat eased. Just slightly. Like the Room was... listening.

"It's working," Lark whispered. "The containment's holding better."

"You're talking to a room," Kieran said, amazed. "And it's listening."

Hugo moved up beside Lily. "What can we do?"

Nova was checking her notebook, the one where she'd tracked everything. "The stress points—the data shows where containment is weakest. Northeast corner. If the Room could focus there—"

Lark: "Prioritize the critical systems. Stop trying to serve everyone."

Kieran, voice still shaking but steadier: "My father said the fire seeks fuel. If the Room stops trying to provide things—stops creating anything new—it can focus purely on containment."

They worked together. Five first-years in a burning corridor, the faint crackle and hiss of Fiendfyre audible behind stone. Lily projecting understanding to the Room. Nova directing where help was needed. Lark explaining containment priorities. Kieran sharing what he knew about the fire's nature. Hugo keeping them focused, keeping them safe, pulling Lily back when she got too close to the heat.

Not fighting the fire. They couldn't fight Fiendfyre.

But helping the Room understand it didn't have to fight alone.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?"

McGonagall's voice cut through everything.

Lily turned. The Headmistress stood at the end of the corridor, face white with fury. Behind her: Neville, Flitwick, Bill Weasley, the Unspeakables. Flitwick had to levitate himself slightly to see over Bill's shoulder.

"You broke lockdown!" McGonagall's voice shook. "You could have been killed!"

"Professor—" Lily started, her voice coming out as a squeak from smoke inhalation, her throat burning with each breath.

"This isn't a game! This is Fiendfyre! Do you understand what that means?"

But Bill Weasley had moved past McGonagall. He was studying the wall. His scarred face intent.

"The containment's stabilising," he said. "It shouldn't be stabilising. The readings were catastrophic just ten minutes ago."

Flitwick stepped forward. Wand out, measuring. "He's right. The magical pressure is... decreasing."

Neville looked at Lily. At all five of them. Dirty, scared, tears on their faces from smoke and heat.

"What did you do?" he asked quietly.

"We talked to it," Lily said. Voice small. "The Room. We tried to help it understand it didn't have to do everything alone."

Silence.

Then the Unspeakables moved past them. Professional, quick. Wands out. They began proper sealing spells—things Lily didn't understand. Real containment protocols. Adult magic.

With the Room stabilised, they could finally access it properly.

Bill Weasley's case opened. Specialized tools, ancient runes, things that hummed with power. He worked alongside the Unspeakables, reinforcing wards, sealing breaches.

The five first-years stepped back. Let adults take over.

This part wasn't for them. But maybe—maybe their part had been necessary too.

McGonagall was still shaking. Fury and terror and something else on her face.

"You could have been killed," she said again. Quieter now.

"But we weren't," Lily said. "And the Room... it needed someone to understand."

Long pause.

"That was advanced magic," Bill Weasley said over his shoulder. "Conceptually extremely advanced. Talking to a magical space, getting it to reprioritize... that isn't really something they teach at Hogwarts."

Neville's face was torn. Anger and pride fighting. "Don't you EVER do something like this again."

Hugo, ever practical: "Can we sit down now? I think my legs stopped working."

Hospital Wing. Beds in a row.

Five first-years. Smoke inhalation, minor burns, magical exhaustion. Madam Pomfrey fussing over them with orange burn-healing paste and potions for their lungs. She kept muttering under her breath about "reckless children" and "exactly why I stock extra burn salve."

"Honestly," she said louder, dabbing paste on Kieran's singed eyebrow. "First-years. Every year something. Last year it was a boy who tried to duel a suit of armor. Year before that, someone hexed themselves trying to read a book backwards. Now it's running toward cursed fire. Running TOWARD it!"

Hugo's hand was wrapped in bandages—he'd touched the wrong wall, trying to steady himself. The burn wasn't bad. Would heal by tomorrow. "At least you didn't eat anything suspicious this time," Madam Pomfrey said to him. "Small mercies."

Adults came and went. Debriefing. What happened. How they knew. What they did.

Kieran told his whole story. The letters from his father. Months of guilt and fear and trying to decide whether to come forward. The adults listened. No one blamed him. Professor Flitwick thanked him for his courage.

"Your father's information helped us understand what we were dealing with," McGonagall said. "That took bravery, Mr Flint."

Kieran looked like he might cry again. Different reason this time.

Nova's tracking was validated completely. "Months of excellent observational work," Flitwick said. "The Department of Mysteries may want to review your methodology."

Nova turned pink. Clutched her notebook like a lifeline. From his nearby bed, Hugo smiled.

Lark's firewall concepts—the tech knowledge she'd brought—were recognised as crucial for explaining the situation to other students and even some adults. "A useful mental model," McGonagall admitted.

Hugo's steady presence throughout. His practical help. The way he'd kept everyone focused. "Hufflepuff through and through," Neville said. "Your mum would be proud."

And Lily.

McGonagall sat on the edge of her bed. Looked at her for a long moment.

"I fought in the battle," the Headmistress said finally. "I saw what that fire did. We thought the Room of Requirement had been destroyed beyond repair." Pause. "What you did today... I daresay even your father would be impressed."

Lily's voice came out rough. "He wanted me to find my own way. I think... maybe I did?"

"You did more than that," Neville said. He'd pulled up a chair beside her bed. "You found your own kind of brave."

Lily thought about that. All year she'd wanted adventure. Wanted to be like her dad. Wanted exciting things to happen.

And when they did, it looked nothing like she'd imagined.

No fighting. No spells. No dramatic confrontation with a dark wizard.

Just understanding. Empathy. Knowing what the Room needed and helping it get there.

"You'll serve detention for breaking lockdown," McGonagall added. Stern again. "Points will also be deducted."

Lily nodded. Fair enough.

"And points will be awarded," McGonagall continued. "For preventing what could have been a catastrophe. It's... complicated."

She stood. Looked at all five of them.

"Get some rest. You've earned it."

Evening. Gryffindor common room.

The five of them sat by the fire. Lark and Kieran visiting from Slytherin—no one stopped them today. Nova curled in an armchair, notebook finally closed. Hugo had claimed the chair closest to hers.

Other students gave them space. Word had spread. Not the full story, but enough. First-years who'd done something during the crisis. Something important.

The fire crackled. Normal fire. Safe fire. Just warming the room.

"So," Hugo said eventually. "That happened."

Lily watched the flames. Orange and gold, dancing over logs. Nothing like Fiendfyre. Just fire.

"Yeah," she said. "It did."

She'd spent all year wishing for adventure. And when it came, it looked nothing like she'd imagined.

Turned out that was okay.

"You alright?" Hugo asked quietly.

Lily thought about it. Was she? Exhausted. Scared—still, even now. Relieved. Guilty. Proud.

All of it at once.

"Yeah," she said finally. "I think so."

Lark stretched out her legs. Looked at Lily with something almost like warmth.

"Next year," she said, "maybe aim for boring?"

Lily almost laughed. Almost.

"Maybe," she said.

The fire crackled. Outside, the castle stood solid. The Room of Requirement finally resting. Properly contained now. Properly sealed.

And Lily Luna Potter, who'd wanted so badly to be like her father, had found her own way instead.

— CHAPTER NINETEEN —

Extra Ordinary Year

The weeks blurred together in the way they do at the end of term.

Detention meant scrubbing scorch marks off the seventh floor corridor. Without magic. Filch supervised, grumbling about rule-breakers and proper punishments, but he didn't seem to mind when the five of them talked and laughed while they worked. Maybe he was just glad someone else was doing the cleaning for once.

"Fifty points from Hufflepuff," Hugo said one evening, wringing out his cloth. "Fifty points to Hufflepuff. Same with every house. Perfectly balanced."

"Balanced out. Like we were never there," Nova added.

Lily looked at her four friends—Hugo's sleeves rolled up, Nova's notebook tucked safely away from the soapy water, Lark somehow making detention look elegant, Kieran quieter but present. "But we were," she said.

The Room of Requirement was properly sealed now. Unspeakables had worked on it for two weeks after the crisis escalated—complicated magic, things Lily didn't understand. When they were finished, the blank wall looked the same as it always had. But Lily could feel something different when she walked past. The Room was... resting. Not gone. Just... finished with what it needed to do.

A small plaque appeared one morning: *In memory of those lost in the Battle of Hogwarts* - with a rather long list of names, many of whom Lily recognised.

Exams came and went. Nova's months of anxious preparation paid off—she came out of every practical beaming. Lily did fine. Not outstanding, not terrible. Just fine. Somewhere between the start of the year and now, that had stopped feeling like failure.

Gryffindor won the Quidditch Cup. James was insufferable about it for approximately three weeks. Rose was nearly as bad.

And then, suddenly, it was the last day.

The Great Hall blazed with green and silver for Slytherin's House Cup victory. Lark caught Lily's eye across the room and gave a tiny, satisfied smile.

Lily found she didn't mind.

McGonagall's end-of-term address was brief. Something about challenges faced and courage shown, without naming anyone specific. A reminder that bravery took many forms. Looking forward to next year. A portrait behind the High Table applauded enthusiastically, then fell down in its frame with a thud.

Five first-years sat together at the end of the Slytherin table. No one stopped them. No one even seemed to notice anymore.

"Next year," Lark said, reaching for the treacle tart, "I'm aiming for boring. Actually boring."

"I'll settle for normal," Kieran said. He'd been lighter these past weeks. Still quiet, still careful. But lighter.

Nova was already making notes in a fresh notebook. "Normal would be nice. Though I might keep tracking temperatures. Just in case."

"You're going to track something," Hugo said. "That's just who you are."

Lily watched the enchanted ceiling—clear night sky, stars scattered across it. Down the table, James was celebrating loudly with his Quidditch teammates. At the Slytherin end, Albus sat with Scorpius, both of them looking relieved the year was ending. Rose was laughing with her friends at the Gryffindor table.

Everyone had their own stories. Their own years.

"I think I'm okay with boring now," Lily said. "Could even settle for extra ordinary."

Hugo groaned. "You keep using that phrase. I don't think it means what you think it means."

The Hogwarts Express rattled north to south, taking them home.

Five friends crammed into one compartment, legs tangled, sweet wrappers everywhere. The trolley witch had come and gone, leaving behind a small mountain of Chocolate Frogs, Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans, and Pumpkin Pasties. One of the Chocolate Frogs had escaped and was currently hopping along the luggage rack.

"My mum wants me to spend two weeks at the company," Lark said, pulling a face. "Learning about 'the family business.'" She made air quotes with her fingers. "I keep telling her I'm going to be a witch, not a software developer."

"Could be both," Hugo said through a mouthful of Cauldron Cake.

"That's what she says."

Kieran was quieter, staring out the window at the green countryside rolling past. "I'm visiting my dad this summer. Since I was born, he's been..." He trailed off, then shrugged. "It'll be strange."

Nova already had three books stacked beside her for summer reading. "I've got a list," she said when Lily raised an eyebrow. "History of Magical Containment. Transfiguration Theory and Practice. And this one's just for fun." She held up a brand new copy of *The Hobbit*.

Hugo looked at the book, then at Nova. "Summer reading, yeah?"

Nova met his eyes for a moment, then looked down at the book, her own smile appearing. "Yeah."

"Lark gave it to me."

Lily looked at Lark, who shrugged. "Seemed fair. She lent me her temperature data."

The landscape changed outside—hills flattening, buildings appearing, the distant sprawl of London growing closer. Hugo pressed his face to the window like he had on the way up in September, still amazed by everything.

Lily watched her friends. Hugo, loyal and steady. Nova, anxious and brilliant. Lark, sharp-edged but warming. Kieran, quiet but braver than he knew.

This, she thought. This was what Hogwarts was supposed to be about.

Not adventures. Not following in Dad's footsteps. This.

Platform Nine and Three-Quarters was chaos, as always. Steam and noise, families calling out, trunks being loaded onto trolleys, owls hooting indignantly.

The five of them gathered on the platform before separating. Addresses were exchanged (Lily's written on the back of a Chocolate Frog card). Summer plans confirmed. Promises to write.

"I'll write about the books I find," Nova said as she handed over her address.

"I want to hear about them," Hugo said, taking the slip of parchment carefully. His ears went slightly pink.

Lily caught Lark's eye. They both looked away, hiding grins.

Kieran's mother found him first—a tired-looking woman who pulled him into a hug that lasted a long time. He waved at Lily over her shoulder before disappearing into the crowd.

Nova's parents were next—a witch and wizard who looked exactly like Nova, all nervous energy and sharp eyes. She clutched her notebook and went to meet them.

Hugo spotted his parents and Rose near the barrier, Ron's red hair visible above the crowd. "See you at the Burrow?" he asked Lily.

"Obviously."

He grinned and was gone.

That left Lark.

Her father stood near the barrier, clearly uncomfortable. He wore a business suit and carried a briefcase, and had some sort of cloth thing covering his nose and mouth, looking wildly out of place among the robes and pointed hats. A squib at a magical station, waiting for his witch daughter.

"So," Lark said. "Still think it was the most boring year ever?"

Lily kept her face straight. "Absolutely. Nothing happened. Total waste."

Lark grinned—a real grin, not her usual sharp smile. "You *really* are a Potter." She paused, then added, more quietly: "See you in September, Lily."

And then she hugged her. Quick, fierce, surprising both of them before walking toward her father, waved once without looking back, and was gone.

Harry and Ginny were waiting with James and Albus near the barrier. James was mid-story, gesturing wildly—probably the Quidditch Cup again. Albus looked like he was counting the seconds until he could escape to his room.

"There she is," Ginny said, pulling Lily into a hug. "Survived first year?"

"Barely," Lily said.

Harry was watching her with that look he got sometimes—like he was trying to figure something out. "Who was that? The girl you were talking to?"

"Lark Prewett. She's in Slytherin."

"Prewett?" Harry's eyebrows rose. Ginny looked amused. "Did you really not know?"

"I knew the Prewetts were connected to the Weasleys, I just didn't—" Harry shook his head. "How did you two become friends?"

Lily considered this. "We yelled at each other about our families. And then we saved the school together. It's complicated."

"Really?"

They started walking toward the barrier, James still talking, Albus trailing behind. Harry fell into step beside Lily.

"McGonagall wrote to us," he said quietly. "Mentioned you helped with something. Some kind of magical containment issue?"

"We just talked to a room," Lily said. "It was having a hard time."

Harry looked at her like she'd grown a second head. "You talked... to a room?"

"The Room of Requirement. It was tired. It needed someone to understand what it was dealing with." Lily shrugged. "So we helped."

"You helped a room by... talking to it."

"She gets that from your side of the family," Ginny said.

James had finally noticed them. "Oi, Lily!" He jogged over, grinning. "Now we're away from all the prying ears in the common room—go on, tell me. Is it true you lot sealed the Room of Requirement?"

"Helped seal it," Lily corrected. "The Unspeakables did the actual sealing."

"I heard it was mad," James said. "Like fighting a fire demon or something."

Albus, who had apparently been listening after all, added: "Rose said you called it a Balrog."

"That was—" Lily started, then stopped. What was the point? "You know what? Sure. Yeah. I fought a Balrog. Whatever."

Harry looked completely lost.

"What's a Balrog?"