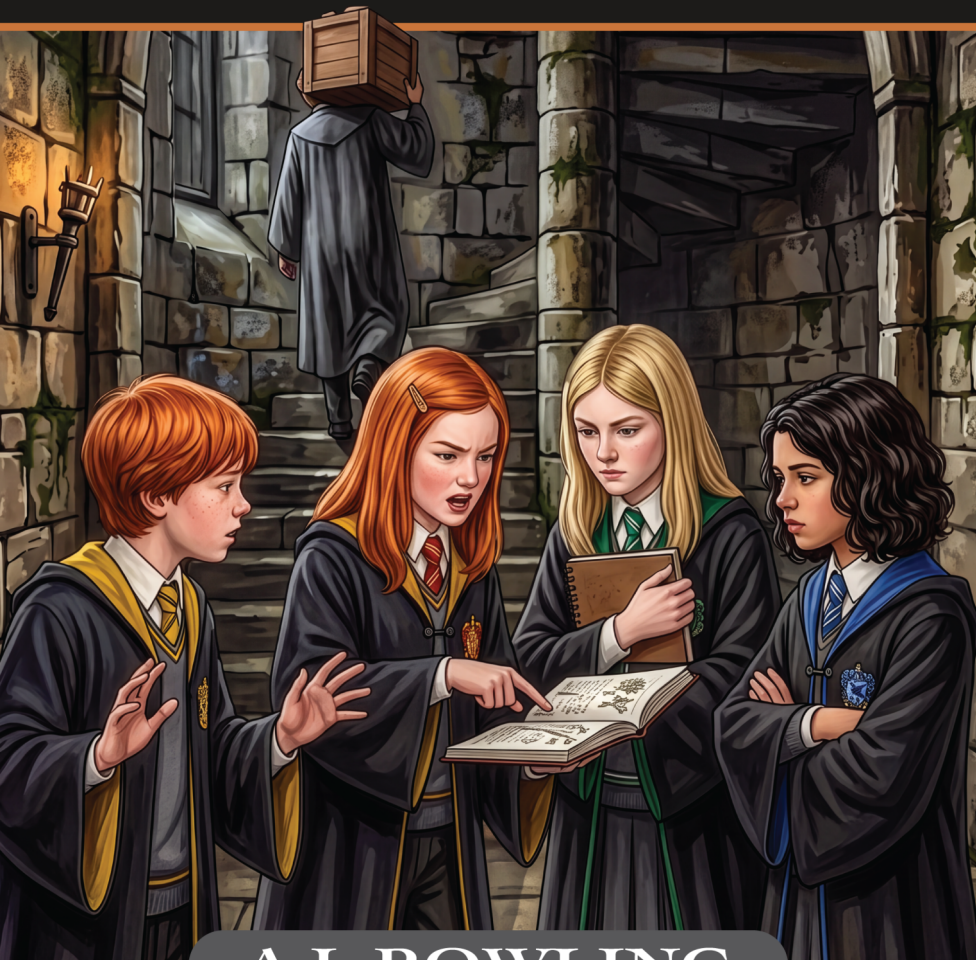


LILY LUNA POTTER

and the Ticking of the Clock



A.I. ROWLING

LLM-GENERATED

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— CHAPTER ONE —

Everything on the List

TICK. TOCK. TICK. TOCK.

The clock on the mantelpiece was ticking, but not fast enough for Lily.

Weeks. Weeks and weeks and weeks until the Hogwarts Express pulled out of Platform Nine and Three-Quarters again, and the holidays had reached the stage where every day was the same day with a different name on it.

It was a perfectly ordinary clock. Wooden, with a white face and a crack across the glass from some long-ago disagreement between James and a Quaffle. It did not chime or sing or tell you where anybody was. It told you the time, and then it told you again, and then again, a second at a time, as if it had all the time in the world and no intention of hurrying on her account.

Lily lay on the sitting-room rug with her feet up on the sofa and *The Hobbit* open on her chest. She had read the part where the dwarves arrive for tea twice already. The second time had been to see whether they arrived any faster. They hadn't.

Something tugged at her sock.

"Don't," said Lily, without looking.

James's socks went on marching. There were four of them, in two pairs, and they had got out of his bedroom the moment he left the door open and were now crossing the rug in single file, heading for the stairs the way they always did, with a determined little bounce in the heel. They came from a shop in Diagon Alley that sold socks guaranteed to find their own partners. Nobody had ever asked what they were meant to do once they'd found them. Lily lifted her legs to let them pass.

"Oi!" came a roar from upstairs. "Come back here, you traitors!"

The last sock reached the bottom step, hesitated, and hopped up it.

Ginny came in from the kitchen with a tea towel over her shoulder and looked at the socks, and at the clock, and then at Lily, who had put the book over her face.

"I can hear you being bored from the kitchen," Ginny said.

"I'm not bored," said Lily, into the book.

"You've been sighing at the ceiling since breakfast."

"It's *weeks*, Mum."

"It's the summer holidays. People used to look forward to those."

"People used to have something to do in them."

Ginny sat down on the arm of the sofa. "It's the Burrow on Sunday. Hugo will be there."

"Hugo's gone sea-fishing with his grandad. He's been gone *all week*."

"And he'll be back for Sunday."

"Sunday's *days* away," said Lily. On the train home she had said she could settle for extra ordinary. She had said it in front of everyone, and meant it. Nobody had mentioned that extra ordinary would come with a whole summer of it.

"Come and lay the table," said Ginny, and her mouth twitched. "You can be bored while you're doing something useful."

In the kitchen, Ginny took her wand out of her back pocket and flicked it at the stove, and the ring under the kettle caught with a soft *whump* of gold and blue. Lily found something very interesting to look at on the other side of the room until it had settled down into an ordinary flame. Nobody remarked on it. She laid out five knives, five forks, and a spoon for no reason at all, and took the spoon back.

It had started with the trunks, on the day they came home.

Not that she would have called it *starting* anything. Dad had carried hers in from the car, and James's, since James had somehow vanished at the exact moment of lifting. Then he'd reached for Albus's.

"I've got it," Albus had said.

He hadn't said it nastily. He hadn't said it at all, really, in the way that people say things; it had just come out, flat and polite, like a thing you say to a shop

assistant. And he'd taken the handle and started to drag it up the front steps by himself, with Dad's hand still held out in the air, a little way off the trunk, as though it had forgotten where it was going.

Lily had looked at Mum. Mum was looking at Dad's hand. Then Mum looked at Lily looking, and picked up the post from the mat and became extremely busy with it.

Bump, went Albus's trunk on the stairs. *Bump. Bump.* It took him a long time.

It was just Albus, Lily had decided. He got like that sometimes. He'd probably be himself again by teatime.

He hadn't been. Not by teatime, and not since. Albus came to meals, and said "pass the pepper" and "yes, fine", and spent the rest of the time upstairs with his door shut. At tea that evening, when James started on the story of the Quidditch final for what must have been the fortieth time that summer, Albus said nothing at all. He didn't even roll his eyes. That was what was odd. Albus *always* rolled his eyes at the Quidditch final.

Then a grey owl, sleek as a cat, tapped at the kitchen window. It was Scorpius's; Lily knew that owl, and its look of having been kept waiting. Albus got up, took the letter from its leg, and put it in his pocket without opening it.

"Love letter?" said James, delighted.

"Shut up, James," said Albus. Not loudly. And he went upstairs.

James opened his mouth to say something else, and shut it again, and looked down at his sausage.

That night, Lily lay on her back in bed with the window open and listened to the house settle. Her room was right above the sitting room. If she held her breath, she could hear the clock coming up through the floor, the same four notes, over and over, TICK, TOCK, TICK, TOCK.

The calendar on her wall had the rest of the summer on it in white squares, with a small train at the end that she had drawn herself. She got out of bed, found a pencil, and put a cross through today's. Then she stood and looked at it.

There was tomorrow's square, exactly the same. And the one after that. There wasn't a single thing she could do to make any of them go faster.

She got back into bed. TICK, said the floor. TOCK.

The summer went the way summers do when you are watching them. The letter from Hogwarts came, with a list in it. Lily read it through four times, in case it had changed. It hadn't. Then it was August, and one Saturday morning the whole family stood in the back room of the Leaky Cauldron, in front of the brick wall, while Dad tapped it with his wand.

"Everyone have their list?" said Mum.

"Yes," said Lily. Hers was in her pocket. It was very short: ink, parchment, and a second-year book for each lesson. She read it again in the queue for the brick wall, in case it had got longer.

The bricks folded back, and Diagon Alley opened out in front of them, bright and noisy and smelling of hot cobbles, parchment and something that might have been burnt toffee. A man was selling cauldrons from a barrow, loudly. A small girl was being pulled along by a leash attached to a bad-tempered pygmy puff. In the window of a hat shop, a row of pointed hats on stands were shouting at passers-by.

"Nice robes, shame about the face!"

"You there! Have you tried *not* having that hair?"

Lily walked past without looking up. They said the same thing every year.

"POTTERS!"

Half the Alley turned round. Lily did not have to look to know who it was. Uncle Ron was waving with both arms from outside the Magical Menagerie, his head sticking out of the crowd like a lighthouse, and behind him Aunt Hermione was pulling at the brim of a large floppy hat that was meant to make her look like nobody in particular and instead made her look exactly like the Minister for Magic in a hat.

"Ronald," said Hermione, through her teeth. "*Indoor voice.*"

"We're outside."

"Then an outdoor voice that isn't *that*."

Rose and Hugo hung behind them. Rose had grown, Lily noticed. A lot. She had her hair tied up and her arms folded, and when Albus came up level with her, the pair of them said "Hi" at exactly the same time, to the cobbles, and then went on walking on opposite sides of Uncle Ron. Lily noticed that, too. She didn't know what it was. She noticed it the way you notice a stone in your shoe.

"Look at the size of you lot!" said Ron. "James, you've grown. When did that happen?"

"Sunday, Uncle Ron," said James. "At the Burrow. You gave me a sausage roll."

"Well, it's *very* sudden," said Ron, with great dignity.

Nobody had planned to split up. It just happened, the way it does in Diagon Alley. James vanished into Quality Quidditch Supplies with Rose, and came out again talking at the top of his voice, so that people were turning to look. Albus drifted off with Mum to the apothecary. Aunt Hermione took Uncle Ron to Flourish and Blotts to make sure he bought something other than a cookery book, and that left Dad, who was patient, and Lily, who wasn't, and Hugo, who had found a bench.

It was outside Flourish and Blotts, in a patch of sun, and Hugo was sitting on it with something in his lap.

It looked like a bird's nest. A very small, furious bird's nest, made of fishing line, with a reel in the middle of it.

"What is *that*?" said Lily, sitting down beside him.

"A reel. Grandad's. I went sea-fishing with him in the holidays, for a week." Hugo did not look up. He had the end of one thread between his finger and thumb and was frowning at it. "I got it in a knot on the very last day."

"Just *magic* it."

"I can't. It's Muggle."

"It's *string*. Wave something at it. It'll sort itself out."

"It'll set the whole lot on fire or turn it into a pigeon. You know it will." Hugo teased a loop out from under another loop with his fingernail. "Grandad says never pull a tangle. If you pull it, it just gets tighter. You have to find the end."

"How do you know which one's the end?"

"You don't. You look."

Lily slumped. This was the most boring thing she had ever seen anyone do, and she had spent the morning watching a man sell cauldrons. She kicked her heels on the bench. Hugo's finger and thumb moved, and moved, and a loop came free, and then another. He wasn't hurrying. The sun moved a little across

the cobbles. Somewhere behind them, in the shop, Uncle Ron could be heard saying "Is it a *cookery* book? It's a bit of a cookery book."

Then a silver shape came down the Alley.

It came low and fast above the heads of the crowd, trailing light, and people stopped and turned to watch it go by, murmuring. It was no bigger than a ferret, and it didn't look like anything Lily knew. It went straight to Dad, who was standing at the window of the bookshop, and rose up to his ear. For a moment it stayed there, its mouth moving. Then it came apart into mist, and was gone.

Dad's face did something very quick and very quiet. It was there and then it wasn't.

"Ginny," he said. "I'm—"

"Go," said Mum, who'd come back round the corner with a paper bag in her arms. She didn't ask. He kissed the top of Lily's head on the way past, and he was gone through the crowd. Lily watched him go, and wondered why his shoulders looked as if somebody had put a coat on them.

"Work," said Mum, and took out a list and looked at it.

"On a *Saturday*," said Lily.

"It happens."

"It's been happening all summer."

"It has," said Mum, in a voice that meant *and that's all I'm saying*.

An owl landed on the back of the bench, brown and square-looking, with a Ministry seal on its leg. It hopped down the back of the bench and held its leg out to Aunt Hermione, who had come out of Flourish and Blotts with a stack of books and was now looking at it in the way you look at a wasp.

"Not now," said Hermione. She took the letter, put it in her bag without opening it, and walked on.

"That's the third one today," said Ron, coming out behind her with a book under his arm. It was a cookery book. "Harry's off, you're on. It's like a *relay*."

"I'll answer it later."

"You said that about the last two."

"Ronald."

Lily watched the owl fly off. There was a bit of a quiet in the air after it, in the way there is when a cloud goes over. She looked at Hugo. Hugo shrugged and went back to his knot.

Across the Alley, near the Owl Post Office, Albus was standing by himself.

He must have come out of the apothecary and slipped away. He was standing by the open front of the shop, hands in his pockets, with his head tipped back to look up at the owls. There were dozens of them on the perches inside, ruffling and shifting and blinking, and a stream of others coming and going over his head, and he stood perfectly still in the middle of it, like somebody waiting for a train.

Lily frowned. Maybe he was writing to Scorpius. Or he'd just gone to look at the owls. Albus liked owls. Or he'd liked them once.

She was just about to ask Hugo when he said "Got it," and held up a long, loose line of fishing thread. It ran out of the reel in one long, tidy piece, with no knots in it. He looked very pleased, and tried to hide it.

"That's it?" said Lily.

"That's it."

"That took ages."

"It took twenty minutes."

"That's *ages*."

Hugo began winding it in. It went in as smooth as a ribbon.

A shadow fell across the bench.

Lark Prewett was standing in front of it with her arms folded, looking down at them. She wore an enormous pair of sunglasses and a jacket that wasn't from any shop in Diagon Alley, and next to her, half behind her, stood Nova, clutching a bag of books to her chest, the way she'd clutched a notebook last year.

"Fancy seeing you here," said Lily. "Wouldn't you rather shop at 'Chemin de Louis Vuitton'?"

"If only," said Lark, with her smile exactly where it had been, and a beat too late. Behind the sunglasses, Lily couldn't see her eyes at all. She could see a muscle jump once in Lark's jaw, and then Lark looked past her at the shop window, as if the Alley had suddenly become very interesting.

She sat down on the end of the bench as if she had been invited, and took the sunglasses off. She looked well. She looked tanned, and about an inch taller, and had a long raw scrape up one forearm that she was clearly very proud of.

"Where'd you get that?" said Lily.

"Landing. I've got a coach, you know. Every morning, half past six, fifty laps, and then drills. He says that if I keep it up I'll be a Chaser by September." She said it casually. Then she said, "It's only a trial, mind. For the Slytherin team. I've been flying every day since the end of term. *Every day.*" She stopped. "I haven't been going on about it."

"You've said it twice already," said Nova.

"I've said it once. And a bit."

"Hello, Nova," said Hugo.

"Hello," said Nova, at the same time as he said it, and then they both looked very hard at the same cobblestone.

They had been writing to each other all summer, which Lily knew because Hugo went pink every time an owl turned up at the Burrow on Sunday. It was the first time they'd met face to face since the platform, and neither of them seemed to know what to do with their hands. Nova hitched her bag up. Hugo wound his line round and round the reel, and the reel went round and round, and a small pink flush crept up the back of his neck to the tips of his ears.

"I like your... bag," said Hugo.

Nova looked at the bag. It was a brown paper bag from Flourish and Blotts. "It's from the shop."

"Yes. I know. It's a good bag."

Lily caught Lark's eye. Lark pressed her lips together so hard they went white.

"*Very* good bag," said Lark, in a strangled voice.

"It's a really good bag," Lily agreed.

"Shut up," said Hugo, and Nova made a small noise into her book bag that could have been a sneeze.

Behind them, in the window of Flourish and Blotts, a large display had gone up since the morning. A pile of fat, identical books sat in a heap, with a banner above them that said, in letters that glittered:

A STUDY OF THE HOBBIT: ONE SQUIB'S SECRET CHRONICLE?

Did a Muggle author know more about the wizarding world than the Ministry would like? The scandalous truth about Gandalf, the Misty Mountains and the Ring!

Hugo pulled a battered paperback out of his jacket pocket. It had a cracked spine and a picture of a dragon on the front. "That's not even right," he said, with an air of long suffering. "It's a *story*. Nobody's secret chronicle."

"I'd buy it, honestly," said Lark. "Gandalf's got a hat, a staff and a beard. Of course he's a wizard."

"The book *says* he's a wizard," said Nova.

"That doesn't make it a *chronicle*," said Hugo.

Lily had her own copy in her bag, with the bookmark in the same place as three days ago. She did not take it out.

"You've still not finished it," said Nova.

"I've nearly finished it."

"You're on chapter two."

"It's a very long chapter two."

By the time the sun began to sink behind the roofs, and the Alley had turned the colour of honey, most of them were sitting at one of the round tables outside Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour, and the table was far too small for the number of people at it.

Uncle Ron had ordered a sundae the size of a bucket and was explaining the plot of the cookery book to a very patient Mum. Aunt Hermione sat with her bag on her knee, very upright, and sipped her tea, and did not look at her bag. Rose was explaining something complicated about a spell to James, who was nodding without listening. Lark and Nova had been invited, and Nova's mother hovered a few tables away, pretending not to watch. And in the middle of the table, Albus laughed.

He'd come back from the post office the same way he'd gone: quietly, sliding into his chair, as if he had never left. Uncle Ron had said something about a goblin and a sandwich, and Albus had laughed, a second too late, in just the right place. It was a perfectly good laugh. Lily looked at him for a while, and then at her own ice cream, which was going soft.

The light moved up the wall of the building opposite. Someone down the street was playing a tune on a little pipe that went round and round on itself. A waiter went by with a tray, saying "mind your backs".

Nobody mentioned the empty chair.

It stood between Mum and Albus, pushed in a little way from the table, with a spoon laid out in front of it. Mum had ordered his sundae anyway, and it was melting slowly into the glass, a pink and white puddle.

The sun slid down another inch. Lily licked her spoon, and watched the cherry on Dad's sundae slowly go under.

— CHAPTER TWO —

The Last Night

On the last night of the holidays, Ginny cooked as though the house were under siege.

There was a chicken the size of a small goat. There were roast potatoes, boiled potatoes, and a bowl of mash that she had made, she said, because there was a little bit of room left on the table, and there was not. There was a treacle tart cooling on the windowsill under a cloth, in case anyone was thinking of leaving the house without being fed first.

"Mum," said James. "It's *Hogwarts*. They have food there. It's mostly food."

"It isn't my food."

"Their food is extremely good, Mum."

"Eat your potatoes," said Ginny.

Three trunks stood in a row by the front door, like patients in a waiting room. On top of James's, tied together in a knot, sat his collection of socks, who were pretending not to be bothered about it. Lily's trunk had been packed for a week. She had unpacked it on Saturday, to check that nothing was missing, and packed it again; and unpacked it on Sunday morning, because she'd thought of something; and packed it again. It was the most interesting thing she had done in days.

Dad was home. That was the other unusual thing. He had come through the front door at six o'clock, six o'clock on a *Monday*, and taken off his boots, and sat down at the head of the table as if he had been doing it all summer. Mum had put a hand on his shoulder in passing, briefly, the way she did when she was pleased and didn't want to make a fuss.

"I'm saying," said James, "that sixth year is basically *fine*."

He was saying it at the sort of volume you would use to reach the back of a Quidditch stand. He had been saying things at that volume since the chicken came out.

"James, we're sitting two feet away," said Mum.

"I'm just saying, I'm not worried. Half of it's free periods. I'm very good at free periods. I might not even need to revise. I'll probably do Charms in my sleep, and Defence is—"

Albus ate his chicken. He ate steadily, the way you do when you are trying to finish something.

It had been like that for ages, with him and Dad. They were very polite to each other, the way you are to someone sitting next to you on a train. Nobody had ever said why, and Lily had stopped asking, the way you stop asking why the third stair creaks.

"Fourth year," said Dad, to nobody in particular. He said it lightly, and put down his fork. "It's a, er... it's a big one, fourth year."

"You're not selling it, Dad," said James.

"No. Well." Dad rubbed his forehead. "Dragons. A lake. I'd skip most of it, honestly. The food was good."

"The *food* was good," said Mum.

"It was very good food."

Lily laughed. So did James, a bit too hard. Mum's mouth went up at one corner. Albus looked at his plate and said, "I'm sure," in a perfectly polite voice, and the laugh went out of the room like a draught under a door. Somewhere behind them, the mantelpiece clock went on ticking.

"Anyway," said James, much louder, "has anyone seen my Cannons scarf, because I think the socks have hidden it."

After the tart, Dad folded his napkin and laid it by his plate and did not get up. "Al," he said. "Can I have a word? Upstairs. It won't take long."

As he said it, he looked down the table at Mum. Mum, who was stacking plates, gave one very small nod. It was the sort of nod grown-ups gave each other over the heads of children, and Lily had never once been able to read one.

Albus's spoon stopped halfway to his mouth. For a second he looked at Dad, and Lily couldn't have said what the look was. It wasn't angry. It was more like a boy looking at a long flight of stairs.

"Fine," said Albus.

"Lily," said Mum, still stacking plates. "Bath, then bed. Early start."

"It's not even dark."

"Then it'll be nice and light for it," said Mum.

The wall between Lily's room and Albus's was thinner than anyone had ever admitted. She knew when Albus was having a bath. She knew when he was turning pages in the middle of the night. She knew the exact sound his chair made when he pushed it back from his desk, and she knew it now, along with a creak on the landing, two sets of feet, and the soft click of his door.

She wasn't listening. She lay on her bed in her pyjamas, with her hair still damp, and *The Hobbit* open at the dwarves, who were still arriving, and read the same line three times.

Voices. Dad's, low and steady, the voice he used on frightened owls. A pause. Albus's, shorter. Then Dad again, longer, and so quiet that the words blurred into the wall and came through only as a sort of kindness, a murmur like a hand on the back of someone's head.

Lily turned a page she hadn't read.

Then Albus's voice went up, quite suddenly, so that for the length of one sentence the wall might as well not have been there.

"—but this? A *blanket*? A trinket from your past. *Really?*"

She sat up. The book slid off her knees.

Nothing. Then Dad's voice, saying something. She couldn't catch it. It might not even have been words; it might have been a breath, or the sound a person makes when they've put their hand down on something that wasn't there. And then nothing at all, a silence so heavy that she could hear her own ears.

A blanket? What blanket?

She turned it over. It didn't fit anything. It was like finding one odd sock in a drawer and not being able to say whose it was. Through the floor, the clock ticked. Four. Five. Six. She found that she was counting.

Albus's door opened, and shut again. Not a slam; she'd almost have preferred a slam. It was a gentle sound, a door being closed carefully by someone who didn't want to wake anyone. Footsteps crossed the landing. They went to the top of the stairs and stopped there for such a long time that she thought he'd turned round. Then they started down. They went down slowly, a step at a time, like somebody carrying something heavy that wasn't there.

On the other side of the wall, there was no sound at all. Not a page turning. Not the chair.

Lily got up and opened her door a crack.

James's door had come open a crack too. He was standing in the gap in his socks, the ordinary kind, and for once in his life he had nothing at all to say. They looked at one another across the landing. He shook his head, once, very slightly. *Don't.*

She went down anyway. Not all the way. She stopped on the sixth stair from the bottom, with the banisters round her like the bars of a cage, and sat down.

Dad was in the hall. He was standing by the newel post with one hand on it, as if the floor had tilted a little and he was waiting for it to settle. His glasses were crooked. He hadn't noticed. His face was a colour she didn't have a name for, somewhere between the tablecloth and the plaster, and he wasn't looking at anything, not at the trunks or the front door or the clock in the next room. Mum had come out of the kitchen with a tea towel still in her hands. She didn't say anything. She put her hand flat against his arm, just above the elbow, and left it there.

"I'll just..." said Dad. His voice was quite ordinary. It was the ordinary-ness that was wrong. "I'll just check the garden."

"Go on," said Mum.

He went down the hall to the kitchen. The back door opened and shut. It didn't make a sound.

Mum stood with the tea towel for a moment. Then she looked up the stairs and saw them: Lily on the sixth step, James on the landing above her, in the half-dark. Her face did something complicated and then stopped.

"Mum," said Lily. "What happened?"

"Your dad wanted a proper talk with Albus." Mum was still looking at the back door.

"But Albus said—"

"Lily." Mum looked at the stairs, and then at nothing. "Bed. Both of you. Please."

It was the *please* that did it. Mum never said please like that. Mum said please like she was holding open a door. She said it now like someone standing in front of one.

Lily got up. Mum had told her exactly one true thing, she realised, going up past James, and had said it carefully, the way you carry a cup that's too full. She waited for it to feel like something. It just felt like the stairs.

She didn't sleep.

The house settled in the dark the way it did every night, creaking a little, easing its shoulders. The window was open. Somewhere a long way off, a car went past. And through the floor came the clock, the same four notes as ever, TICK, TOCK, TICK, TOCK, as if nothing had happened, as if it were only a clock and tonight was only a night.

She had counted past four hundred before she thought to look out of the window.

Dad was in the garden. She could just make him out, a darker shape against the dark, standing by the back fence with his hands in his pockets. He wasn't doing anything. He wasn't looking at the stars or the shed or the house. He was just standing there with his back to everything, in the way you stand when you have gone outside so nobody has to see your face.

She watched him for a long time. He didn't move.

At last she went to the calendar on the wall and found the pencil. The very last white square before the little train she had drawn on it was today's. She put a cross through it. Tomorrow would be the square with the train in it, and the train didn't look like a promise any more. It looked like a drawing.

She got back into bed. Much later, after the crickets had stopped, she heard the back door open and close, soft as a breath. Footsteps in the hall. Then, directly under her floor, the old armchair in the sitting room gave one long creak, and went quiet.

She lay with her eyes open.

TICK, said the clock, under her. TOCK. It ticked for both of them.

— CHAPTER THREE —

A Situation That Requires Immediate Attention

The car was very quiet.

Dad drove, and Mum sat beside him with the map she didn't need open on her knee. James, in the back, was telling the window about a sixth-year Chaser who had once caught a Bludger in his teeth. Nobody was listening. Albus sat at the other end of the seat with his forehead against the glass and his hands tucked up his sleeves, watching London go by as if it were a film he had seen.

Lily sat in the middle, which was where she always sat, and found that she was looking at the back of her father's neck. It was a perfectly ordinary neck. She looked at something else.

Then it was King's Cross, and a trolley with a wobbly wheel, and the long walk past the Muggle crowds with their coffee and their phones, none of whom looked twice at three trunks on a trolley. Lily had her ticket in her pocket and did not once check that it was there. She was thinking about whether there would be treacle tart on the train. There never was, but one year there might be.

"Lily," said Mum, "you've gone straight past."

"Have I?"

She had. She'd walked right up to the barrier between platforms nine and ten and stopped with her trolley an inch from the brick, and it had not occurred to her to be nervous. A year ago she'd stood here with her heart going like a Bludger. This time she just leaned on the handle, said, "Sorry," to nobody in particular, and walked through the wall, the way you'd walk through your own front door.

Platform Nine and Three-Quarters opened round her in a roar of steam and owls.

It was exactly as loud as she remembered. The scarlet engine breathed out great white clouds that drifted along the platform and made everyone look as if they were standing in a bath. Parents were calling, trunks were thumping, a cat was escaping up somebody's sleeve. A first-year girl stood beside a pile of luggage with the haunted look of someone who has just realised that her mother is about to cry. Lily gave her a sympathetic nod. It was the nod of a veteran.

Albus was the last out of the car. He had been the last through the barrier, too, and by the time Lily turned round he had taken his trunk off the trolley himself, and set it down, and was looking along the platform for something.

He found it. Scorpius Malfoy was standing beside the third carriage, pale and upright, with the look of a boy who had been there for some time. He lifted one hand. Albus lifted one back. And that was that: he was already walking, with his trunk bumping along behind him, away from the family and the trolleys and the steam.

"Al," said Dad.

Albus didn't turn round. He may not have heard. It was very noisy.

Dad stood there with his mouth a little open on the next word, which did not come. His hand, which had come halfway up, stayed where it was, and then went into his pocket. Mum looked at the back of Albus's head, and then at Dad, and said nothing, and took Dad's arm.

"Right," said James, very loudly, in the voice of a boy who has just spotted something to say. "Look at that. Uncle Percy's here."

Lily was glad of it.

Uncle Percy was easy to find. He was standing on the platform in a dark overcoat as upright as a lamp-post, holding a gold watch in one hand and consulting it in a way that made other people look at their own wrists and feel late. Aunt Audrey stood beside him, small and cheerful, with her hair coming out of its clip. And in front of them, with her hands clenched at her sides and a trunk by her feet that was slightly too large for her, stood Lucy.

Lucy Weasley was Lily's age, give or take a few months. She should have been on this platform a year ago. Instead she had been left at home, and nobody in the family had talked about it much.

Lucy was fizzing. There was no other word for it. Her red hair stood out round her head like a dandelion clock; her freckles looked as if somebody had flicked them on with a brush; and her face wore the expression of someone

sitting on the lid of a very large box and trying to look calm about it. Behind her, a man's bowler hat lifted gently off his head, hovered, and settled back down again.

"Lucy," said Uncle Percy.

He said it in the way Percy said everything: as though it were being entered into a record. Lucy shut her eyes. The man put a hand to his head with an expression of mild offence, and looked round for who had done it.

"Lily!" shouted Lucy, with her eyes still shut. She opened them and waved, a big one-armed wave that nearly took her mother's ear off. "Lily, *hello!* I'm *going!* I'm actually *going!*"

"Hi," said Lily, and waved back, a bit late, and mostly with her fingers. It wasn't that she didn't want to. It was that Lucy was so very large, all at once, in the middle of a morning that already had quite a lot in it.

Aunt Audrey, tucking her hair back into its clip, said to Uncle Percy, quite cheerfully and not at all quietly, "She's been up since four, you know."

"Four-oh-seven," said Lucy, without opening her mouth very far.

"Four-oh-seven," agreed Uncle Percy, and looked at his watch.

There was no sign of Milly. Lily did not look for her very hard. Milly would have been through the barrier an hour ago, with her own trunk and a Slytherin tie and a face that said she was not to be seen with anybody in her family, thank you. She was the sort of cousin you saw across a table at the Burrow.

There was a last scramble of goodbyes. Mum hugged James so hard that he said "*Mum*", and Dad shook his hand and then pulled him in, one-armed, and James looked quite pleased about it, in spite of himself. Dad held Lily for a long time. He smelled of toast and cold air. She did not say *You look awful*, which she had been about to. Instead she said, "I'll write."

"You'd better," said Dad. His voice had a catch in it. He let her go, and straightened her collar, which didn't need straightening. His eyes went down the platform and came back.

"He'll be fine," said Lily, before she knew she was going to.

Dad looked at her as though she had put a hand in his pocket and taken out something he'd been carrying all week. He opened his mouth. "Yes," he said at last. "Yes. Course he will. And you. No funny business, ok?"

The whistle blew.

"Compartment!" said Hugo.

He was hanging out of the door of the third carriage from the front, one foot on the step, waving a Chocolate Frog card like a flag. Lily ran. She hauled her trunk the last stretch behind her with a thump, and heaved it in over the sill, and by the time she'd climbed up after it the train was moving and the whole platform had begun to slide away. She had a glimpse of Mum's hand, and a glimpse of Dad's raised hand. Then a bend, and the smoke, and nothing but brick.

It was the same compartment as last year. Not that Hugo had planned it. It was just that they had both gone to it, the way water runs downhill. Burgundy seats, a window, the smell of old dust and sherbet. Lily dropped on to the nearest seat and put her feet up on the other.

"Did you see Lucy?" said Lily. "Her mum said she'd been up since four."

"I saw. She was on the platform fizzing like a Catherine wheel." Hugo settled into the opposite seat. "She's going to be in Gryffindor, you know. Mum says it's not even a question."

"How would your mum know?"

"She doesn't, exactly. It's just that things go Lucy's way. They always have."

"That sounds horrible."

"You'd think. But she isn't, is the thing." Hugo screwed up his face, the way he did when he was trying to put something in the right order. "She's not a show-off, and she doesn't gloat. She just says 'Oh, good!' and gets on with it. Rose says it's like being friends with a weather system. You can't be cross with it."

"So why did she have to wait a year?"

"Uncle Percy found a clause. Something about preparing the magical faculties." Hugo lowered his voice, though there was nobody to hear. "But Mum says that wasn't the real reason. He wanted her to learn that rules are bigger than wanting. That you can want something as hard as you like, and the rules can still say *no*, and you just have to wait, and that's allowed to be the end of it."

Lily thought about a whole year at the kitchen table, being told no by a clause. "Did it work?"

"Dunno."

"She was up at four-oh-seven," said Lily. "She made a point of the seven."

"Then I'd say it's working," said Hugo. "Slowly. Right. What's the plan?"

"What plan?"

"For sweets. We need a plan." Hugo took a small notebook out of his jacket. He had written *SWEETS* across the top of a page, and underlined it twice. "Last year I got three of everything and ate too many in the first hour. This year I'm doing it in stages. Stage one, Pumpkin Pasties. Stage two, something sour to cut through it. Stage three, Chocolate Frogs, because Rose says there's a new Dumbledore card with a different expression. Then, if I'm still going, Cauldron Cakes."

"That's a lot of stages."

"It's a long train. What's yours?"

Lily thought about it. She thought for quite a while. "I'll have whatever's there," she said.

Hugo looked at her as though she'd said she was going to fly home. "You haven't got a *plan*?"

"I haven't got a plan."

"Not even a *little* one?"

"It's the Hogwarts Express, Hugo, not a heist."

Hugo wrote something in the notebook, and she was fairly sure it was *Lily: no plan*. She put her head back against the seat and watched the fields go by outside. They went by in the very slow way that fields do from a train, and there were cows in them, who also did not have a plan. She'd waited all summer for this. She'd have expected it to feel like something. And it did feel like something; it felt like being on a train.

Rain began to tap at the window. A girl went past the compartment door, hauling a cat in a basket. Then Iris and Bridget put their heads in and said "Hi!" and "Lily, we're four along, *do* come," and Lily said she would, later, and they went away. Nova went past the compartment door with her nose in a book, did not look in, and went past it again going the other way. Hugo's ears turned pink, and he studied his notebook with great attention. Lily decided to say nothing about it for at least a minute.

"Shut up," said Hugo.

"I didn't say anything."

"You were *going* to."

"I'm only going to say," said Lily, "that the notebook is upside down."

It was. He turned it the right way up, and looked out of the window with enormous interest at a field.

There was a rattle in the corridor.

The sound of the trolley was one of the few things in the world that Lily would have recognised blindfold. It came along the corridor in the same way as it always did, with a clink, and a bump, and a jingle of something shaking inside a glass jar, and then the voice, high and cheerful and utterly unhurried:

"Anything from the trolley, dears?"

Hugo was at the door before it had stopped. He slid it open, notebook in hand. The trolley witch was an old woman with a cloud of white hair and a pinny printed all over with tiny sleeping cats, and she was steering a trolley that stood taller than she did, stacked with every colour of paper bag and box and wrapper that a person could want. Somewhere underneath, a toad was croaking.

"Stage one," said Hugo. "Two Pumpkin Pasties, please."

"Two Pumpkin Pasties," said the trolley witch, fondly. "Not your first time, is it, love? And for you, Miss Potter?"

"Just whatever's there," said Lily. "A Cauldron Cake. And—"

"Goodness, yes. Very sensible." The witch winked at her. "Let me see..."

She turned to the shelf. Lily was looking over her shoulder at a box of something that appeared to be growling, and wondering whether it would be bad manners to ask, and that was when the witch stopped.

It was very sudden. One moment she was reaching for a Cauldron Cake, and the next her hand was in the air, and she had gone quite still. Her head had turned a little, towards the back of the train, as though somebody had called her by a name nobody had used for fifty years.

Down the length of the carriage, far off, something went *clang*. There was a distant, indistinct shout.

"Oh, dear," said the trolley witch.

She said it in the tone one uses on finding that the milk has gone off.

"What was—" said Hugo.

"I'm afraid," said the old lady, quite calmly, and looking at neither of them, "that a situation that requires my immediate attention has emerged."

And with a smart little *crack*, like a branch snapping in a frost, she was gone.

The trolley, left to itself, rolled very slowly half a yard along the corridor, tinkling, and stopped against the wall.

Hugo stood there with his hand held out for two Pumpkin Pasties.

Lily looked at the place where the witch had been. A few cats on a pinny seemed to hang in the air for a moment, in memory. Then there was nothing but a faint smell of lavender, and, far away down the train, a muffled thump, and then nothing at all. The rain went on tapping.

"That was weird," said Hugo.

"Mm," said Lily. She had seen weirder. She'd seen a hat shop shout at a girl for having hair, only a few weeks ago, and a sock walk upstairs. She didn't know what had stopped the trolley witch, and she supposed it was one of those things. There were so many of those things. A pipe burst, or a Bludger on the loose, or somebody's toad. Someone would sort it out. Somebody always did.

"Do you think we should—" Hugo gestured at the trolley.

"Pay for them?"

"Take them. Pay for them. Take them *and* pay for them."

"We're not stealing from the trolley witch."

"I'm not *stealing*. I'm leaving the money. It's very different." He looked at the trolley, and then at Lily. "She's going to be a bit annoyed, though, isn't she. If it's all gone."

They counted out the money, in the end, into the empty tin on the second shelf, and took two Pumpkin Pasties, a Cauldron Cake and a bar of something sour. They went back to the compartment feeling oddly virtuous. Outside the rain had stopped. A pale light was coming through the clouds in long slanting bars, and Hugo wrote *Stage 1: done* in the notebook, and underneath it, in smaller letters, *trolley witch: ???*

"Maybe it was a Pixie," said Lily.

"A Pixie in the *luggage rack*?"

"It happens."

"It really doesn't," said Hugo, but he took a bite of his pasty and put the notebook away.

The next time the compartment door slid open, it was Lark.

She did not come in. She stood in the doorway, one hand on the frame, with her chin lifted, in the pose of somebody strolling past who has happened to stop. She had already put on her school robes, which no one did before the last hour, and her Slytherin tie was knotted so neatly that it looked ironed.

"Oh," she said. "You're here."

"We've been here for ages," said Lily.

"I was just walking. I do it. I like walking on trains." Lark leaned in the doorway, and then leaned a little less. "It's my day for it. I'm very relaxed." There was a pause. "Are you doing anything on Saturday? Not this one, the one after. The twelfth."

"Why?"

"No reason. It's the tryouts." Lark said it quite lightly. "The Slytherin ones. I don't think it's going to be a thing. I'm not worried. I've flown a lot."

"So you said," said Hugo, with his mouth full. "Four times. In Diagon Alley."

"It was *three*." Lark's smile slipped, and was quickly put back. "Anyway, they're open to all years, apparently. It's not just Chasers. Kieran says last year's lot were rubbish, and I'd have a good chance if I turned up, and I *am* turning up, obviously, it's not a big deal. Do you want to watch?"

"Yes," said Lily, which she meant, and then, because she'd been about to say *yes, if I can*, she said it again. "Yes. I'll come."

"You don't have to."

"I know."

"It might rain."

"I'll bring an umbrella."

"Fine," said Lark. She looked pleased, and then at once looked as if she'd been looking at something else. "Fine. I mean, you're free to. I'm going to go and sit down, and think about it. Calmly."

She went, and for a while they could hear her feet going away along the corridor at a perfectly even pace, slowing, and stopping, and then going very fast for a few steps in the wrong direction. Hugo swallowed his mouthful.

"She'll be brilliant," said Lily.

"She'll be insufferable," said Hugo. "But yes."

It was nearly evening by the time the train began to slow.

They had changed into their robes. Lily had put her feet back on the seat and been told to take them off. They had had a Chocolate Frog each, and it had been Dumbledore, with the same face as always, and they had both been quite sure it was a different Dumbledore. They had eaten the Cauldron Cake, and all of the sour thing, and most of Hugo's sherbet. Through the whole long afternoon the trolley had not come back. Lily hadn't thought of it again until she went past the place where it had stopped, and caught, very faintly, the smell of lavender.

She leaned her head against the window.

The land had changed. There were mountains now, big and blue-grey, with the low sun on their tops, and the train took a long bend and the whole country swung round. Across the lake, high on its rock, with its windows just beginning to light, stood the castle.

Lily looked at it. It looked like the castle. Hugo, beside her, was trying to fit a last Chocolate Frog card into his notebook, and James's voice came down the corridor, explaining something to someone at the top of it.

She realised, a little later, that she hadn't heard the clock since King's Cross. She listened for it, experimentally. TICK, she thought. There was nothing to follow it.

Down by the water the light turned from white to gold to amber, and the train slid, groaning, into Hogsmeade.

— CHAPTER FOUR —

The Changing of the Guard

The carriages were waiting at the top of the station lane, a long line of them in the dusk, pulled by nothing at all. Last year Lily had gone across the lake in a boat and had wondered about that. This year she climbed into the first carriage with its door open. Hugo climbed in after her, then Iris and Bridget, and it set off up the hill on its own with a jolt that put Bridget in Hugo's lap.

"Sorry," said Bridget, not getting up very fast. "Did you hear Slytherin are holding trials? On the twelfth? *Open* trials. Somebody said their Keeper last year was so bad they've had to put up a notice."

"Who said?" said Iris.

"Niamh Dooley's brother. He's a Slytherin, fourth year. He saw them putting it up." Bridget settled back into her own seat. "Well. He saw the drawing pin."

Down on the black water a string of little lights was moving out across the lake: the first-years, in the boats. Lily looked for Lucy and couldn't pick her out. But one boat had got a long way ahead of the others, as though somebody in it were in a hurry.

The front doors stood open at the top of the steps. Warm light came down them to meet the carriages, and so did the smell of roasting meat. Lily went up the steps two at a time, thinking about potatoes.

It was odd, being on this side of it.

The Great Hall was exactly the same: the candles floating, the ceiling full of clouds with a few early stars poking through, the four long tables and the gold plates waiting on them. But last year she had come in through the doors in a frightened clump with everyone looking at her. This year she was sitting down,

between Iris and the end of the bench, with an empty goblet in front of her and a clear view of the doors. It made all the difference in the world.

The first-years came in behind Professor McGonagall in a long, nervous line. They looked tiny. Lily was quite sure she had never been that tiny. One small boy was walking with his eyes shut, and a girl near the back was holding her own sleeve as though it might get away.

Lucy was at the front.

She was not nervous. She was walking slightly ahead of Professor McGonagall, which nobody did, and looking round the Hall with her mouth open, at the ceiling and the candles and the tables, the way you look at a cake that has been promised to you for a very long time and has finally come out of the oven.

"That's your cousin, isn't it?" asked Iris. "One of them," said Lily.

Professor McGonagall set the stool down and put the Sorting Hat on it. The Hall went quiet. The Hat's brim opened, and it sang.

*A thousand years I've sat up here
And sung my song from year to year;
I've Sorted brave and Sorted wise,
The loyal and the sharp of eyes.*

*But here's a thing I've learnt, my dears,
In all my long and patchy years:
A name's a hat, and nothing more,
It's not the head it's sitting for.*

*Not every truth is said aloud,
Not every danger draws a crowd;
What's carried past in broad daylight
Is none the safer for the light.*

*The clock will tick, the year will turn,
And some things you will never learn;
But what you can, go learn it well.
Now put me on, and I will tell!*

The brim closed. Everyone clapped.

"Bit gloomy," said Bridget.

"It's always a bit gloomy," said Iris.

Last year Lily had turned every line of the song over and over, looking for clues. This year she clapped with everybody else and looked at the gold plates, which were still empty, and wondered how many more first-years there were to get through.

Professor McGonagall unrolled her scroll. She looked down the line over the top of her spectacles.

"When I call your name, you will come forward and sit on the stool," she said. "I am sure each and every one of you will bring credit to whichever house you are sorted into."

"Gryffindor," said a voice from the front of the line.

There was a ripple of laughter. Professor McGonagall looked at Lucy for a long moment.

"Thank you, Miss Weasley," she said. "We shall let the Hat decide."

Lucy nodded, as though they had come to an agreement.

The Sorting began. "Abernethy, Ruth!" went to Hufflepuff, and the Hufflepuff table went up in a roar, and Lily could see Hugo half out of his seat, clapping with his hands over his head. A tall girl went to Ravenclaw. The boy with his eyes shut went to Gryffindor, and opened them, and looked very surprised to find out where he was, and Lily cheered him all the way down the table.

It took a long time to get to the W's. When it did, Lucy was the only one left standing near the front, and she had been bouncing very slightly on her toes for at least ten minutes.

"Weasley, Lucy!"

Lucy sat down on the stool. Professor McGonagall lowered the Hat. It had barely brushed her hair when the brim split open.

"GRYFFINDOR!"

"Oh, *good!*" said Lucy, loudly, to the whole Hall.

She jumped off the stool, handed the Hat back to Professor McGonagall as if returning a borrowed umbrella, and ran down the Gryffindor table, past all the people making room for her, until she got to where Lily was. Then she climbed over the bench and sat down directly opposite.

"I'm *here*," said Lucy.

"And I guess you *really* wanted to be in Gryffindor?" said Lily.

"Since I was *four*," said Lucy.

She grabbed Lily's pumpkin juice, since hers was still empty, drank half of it, and wiped her mouth on her sleeve and looked round at all of them, beaming, like somebody who had been told no for a whole year and had just heard the word *yes* go off like a firework.

The last first-year went to Slytherin, and Professor McGonagall rolled up her scroll and went to the lectern, and the Hall settled down to listen.

Last year Lily had looked along the staff table as though it were a list of suspects. This year she didn't really look at it at all. It was full; that was all she noticed. There were no empty chairs. Professor Longbottom was waving at somebody. Hagrid was taking up as much room as two professors.

"Welcome," said Professor McGonagall, "and, to most of you, welcome back."

She said what she always said, about the Forbidden Forest and Mr Filch's list. James, further up the table, looked offended about the list again. Then she went on, in the same voice:

"Professor Slughorn and Professor Sprout have both retired this summer, with the school's warmest thanks for their many years of service."

Lily heard that. She thought, *Oh*, and then she thought about whether there would be treacle tart.

"Professor McLaggen, who will of course continue to teach Defence Against the Dark Arts, has kindly agreed to become Head of Slytherin."

Professor McLaggen stood up. He bowed to the Slytherin table, and then to the rest of the Hall, and went on bowing for a little longer than anybody else would have. There was polite applause. Along the Gryffindor table, a few people with uncles called Ron exchanged looks. Rose put her hand over her mouth. Lily stared very hard at her plate.

"Professor Longbottom will be teaching all Herbology classes from now on. Our new Head of Hufflepuff—"

"Do you think they'll have treacle tart?" Bridget whispered.

"They always have treacle tart," Iris whispered back.

"—who will be taking Potions."

A woman in Professor Slughorn's old seat inclined her head, and didn't stand up. She was tall and spare, with dark rings under her eyes, as though she hadn't slept since August.

"And now," said Professor McGonagall, "let us eat."

The plates filled. There was roast beef and roast chicken and sausages and gravy in boats, and Yorkshire puddings, and potatoes four different ways. Lily took some of each kind of potato, to be fair. Lucy took everything that was within reach, and when she couldn't fit any more on her plate, she pocketed a sausage for later.

There was treacle tart.

The Fat Lady swung open on the new password, and the common room was the common room: the fire going, the squashy armchairs, a second-year boy already asleep in one of them with his mouth open. Lily went up the stairs to her dormitory without looking at the stairs, and dropped her robes over the bedpost with her wand still in the pocket, and got into bed. It was the same bed. She was nearly sure. It had the same lump in the mattress.

"Night," said Iris, from the next bed.

"Night," said Bridget. "Did you know the Fat Lady's friend Violet is on a cruise? A *wizard* cruise. I heard it from a—"

"*Night*, Bridget."

Some time after midnight, there was a small shriek from the floor below, and then a lot of voices, and then quiet. Lily turned over and went back to sleep.

At breakfast the next morning, Lucy came down with her hair sticking out on one side and a look of enormous satisfaction.

"My curtains wouldn't open," she said, sitting down.

"Why?" said Lily.

"I wanted them shut." Lucy reached for the toast. "They were *very* shut. A prefect had to get me out."

Professor Longbottom came down the table with the timetables. There was a smudge of earth on his cuff, and he was trying to hide a yawn behind the

parchment, and not managing. But he smiled at every single one of them as he handed them out.

"Thanks, Uncle—" said Lily. "Professor."

"Nearly," said Professor Longbottom, and winked, and moved on.

And then it was just term.

It came on all at once, the way term does: bells and staircases and essays and the corridor on the third floor that went somewhere else on Thursdays. Nobody had to show Lily where anything was. She knew which step on the Grand Staircase to jump, and which suit of armour sneezed, and that Peeves was always on the fourth floor before lunch. She got lost only once, which was the staircase's fault.

Potions was on the first afternoon, with the Slytherins.

The new professor was standing at the front of the dungeon when they came in. She didn't smile, and she didn't frown. She waited until everyone had found a stool, and then she said, "My name is Professor Winterbourne," and pointed at the store cupboard behind her.

"Everything in that cupboard can kill you," she said. "That's not a threat, it's a fact. Act accordingly, and you'll be fine."

Then she took the register.

Lily knew what was coming. She'd had it last year, on her very first day: her name, and a pause, and a smile, and Professor Slughorn saying *the final piece, at last*, as if she were the last card in a set. She sat very straight and held her quill.

"Nott, Theodore."

"Here."

"Potter, Lily."

"Here."

"Prewett, Lark."

That was all. It went past at exactly the same speed as everybody else. Lily let her breath out, and found that she'd been gripping her quill so hard it had left a dent in her finger.

The new professor wrote the instructions up on the board. Her hands were stained with ink and something darker, like old burns, and one of her knuckles

stuck out at an odd angle, as though it had been broken once and nobody had bothered to set it properly. She walked between the benches and said almost nothing. A Gryffindor boy got the wrong answer about porcupine quills, and she just told him the right one. A Slytherin boy leaned over his cauldron with his sleeve hanging in it, and she took five points from Slytherin without even slowing down.

"Not for the potion," she said. "For the sleeve."

At the end of the lesson, Lily's potion was the right colour. Nobody said anything about it. It was quite nice.

On Thursday, her bag tied itself in a knot.

It wasn't the bag exactly. It was the drawstring at the top. It had been fine at lunch. By the evening, when she went to get her Charms book out of it in the common room, the string had wound itself up into a hard little ball the size of a walnut, with the bag pulled shut underneath it like a mouth that won't open.

"Here," said a big sixth-year girl from the next table, and pointed her wand. "*Relashio!*"

There were sparks. The knot gave a small squeak, like a mouse being trodden on, and pulled itself tighter.

"Oh," said the sixth-year. "That's not supposed to happen."

"I could do *Diffindo*," said Bridget, reaching for her wand.

"You could cut the *bag*," said Lily, and held it to her chest.

In the end, Lily took the bag to the library.

Hugo was at their usual table at the back, behind the Herbology shelves, with three books open in front of him and a fourth propping up his elbow. He took the bag from her without a word, as if she'd handed him a sandwich. He turned it over. He looked at the knot for a long time. Then he started picking at it with his fingernails.

Lily sat down opposite and got out her Transfiguration book instead, since it was the only book she had.

"So how's your new head of house?" she said, after a while.

"Fine, I guess." Hugo didn't look up. "Strict about prep time, keeps to their selves. Nothing exciting."

"Oh."

A loop came free. Then another. Madam Pince went past, looked at the two of them, saw that one was reading and the other was untying a piece of string, and decided that there was nothing to object to, though she plainly wanted to.

It took him nearly twenty minutes. At the end of it the string was just string again, a little crinkled, and the bag fell open with the Charms book inside, perfectly fine.

"There," said Hugo, and handed it back.

"Thanks," said Lily. "That was so boring to watch."

"I know," said Hugo happily, and went back to his books.

The rest of the fortnight went by like a page turning. Lucy came back to the common room one evening without the password, and the Fat Lady swung open for her anyway, and then sat in her frame looking scandalised and saying, "I did *not* do that," to anybody who would listen. The next day, Lucy asked Professor Longbottom whether first-years could try out for the house team, and was told no, and asked why, and asked why again.

Saturday, Lily went to the Slytherin trials.

It drizzled the whole morning, just as Lark had said it might. Lily sat in the stands with Hugo and Nova under her umbrella. There were nearly thirty people in green circling over the pitch, and Lily couldn't have said which of them were good. But she could pick out Lark. Lark flew as though the broom were part of her, low and fast, with her hair in a plait so tight it didn't move. Once, she took the Quaffle off a big fifth-year boy so neatly that he went on flying for several seconds before he noticed it had gone. Nova clapped. Hugo clapped. Lily clapped as well, and then rather wished she'd brought something to eat.

They sat there for three hours. Lily didn't leave.

On Sunday morning, Lark came across the Great Hall to the Gryffindor table.

She didn't run. She walked, very calmly, past the Ravenclaws and round the end of the Hufflepuff table, with her hands in the pockets of her robes and her

chin up, as though she had just happened to be going that way. She stopped behind Lily and leaned on the table.

"Reserve Chaser," said Lark.

She said it to the salt cellar. She was trying very hard to keep her face still. Her mouth wouldn't do it. It kept going up at one corner and having to be pulled back down.

"*Lark*," said Lily. "That's brilliant!"

"It's only reserve."

"It's still the *team*. You're on the *team*."

"I'm on the team," said Lark, and then gave up, and grinned, all at once, so widely that a Hufflepuff at the next table looked round to see what was funny.

"And the best bit," said Lily warmly, "is you don't even have to go out in the rain unless somebody falls off."

Lark stopped grinning.

It was only for a second. Something went across her face, quick and flat, and then she looked at Lily for a moment, as though she were deciding something.

"Yes," she said. "That's what reserve means."

Lily heard it about half a second after she'd said it. Her face went hot. She opened her mouth to say that wasn't what she'd *meant*, but Lark had already straightened up off the table.

"Practice is Tuesdays," said Lark. "In case you want to bring the umbrella." And she went back across the Hall to the Slytherin table, not quite as slowly as she'd come.

Lily sat and looked at her toast.

"That came out wrong," she said.

"Yes," said Iris kindly, and passed her the marmalade.

Across the Hall, Lark sat down next to Kieran and said something, and Kieran clapped her on the back, and she laughed. The owls came in under the clouds on the ceiling, hundreds of them, dropping letters into the porridge. A parcel landed on Bridget's plate and burst open, and a howl of Irish music came out of it, and then stopped. Lucy was telling a first-year boy how to get to the Charms corridor, wrongly. Someone at the Hufflepuff table had set fire to a napkin, and someone else had put it out.

Lily ate her toast. It was Sunday. On Monday there would be Transfiguration, and on Tuesday there would be a Slytherin practice, and she

would go to it, with the umbrella, and she would think of something better to say.

The Great Hall was very loud and very ordinary, and nothing in it was ticking at all.

— CHAPTER FIVE —

Post

October came in wet and stayed wet.

The lake went the colour of pewter. The Whomping Willow lost its leaves all in one night and spent the next morning thrashing about as if it had been robbed. Peeves found out that a bucket of rainwater balanced on a door was funnier than a bucket of anything else, and the first-years found out that you couldn't get a bucket off your head by pulling. Hagrid's pumpkins, down in the patch behind his hut, were already the size of garden sheds, and every morning there was a fresh row of them, a little bigger than the day before.

Lily went to Slytherin practice every Tuesday.

She took the umbrella. Nobody had told her she had to; she just went. She sat at the top of the stands with her hood up, and her hands up her sleeves, and watched seven people in green go round and round in the rain. Sometimes Hugo came, and sometimes Nova, and once, horribly, nobody did. She went anyway.

She did not say anything else about reserves.

Defence Against the Dark Arts was with the Hufflepuffs, which meant Hugo, and it meant Professor McLaggen.

"The Leg-Locker Curse," said Professor McLaggen, striding up and down at the front of the classroom with his robes swishing behind him in a way Lily was fairly sure he practised. "*Locomotor Mortis*. Now. A simple jinx, you might think. A schoolyard trick. And you'd be *wrong*." He stopped, and swung round, and pointed at nobody in particular. "When I was Keeper for Gryffindor—well, reserve Keeper, through no fault of my own—I saw a perfectly good Chaser taken clean out of a match with a Leg-Locker. Fell off her broom like a sack of potatoes. Never recovered her confidence."

"Did she die?" said a Hufflepuff boy, hopefully.

"She went into insurance," said Professor McLaggen darkly. "Pairs, please. Gently. I don't want anybody carried to the hospital wing on my watch. Seven years in the field, and I never lost a partner, and I don't intend to start with second-years."

Lily got Bridget.

She usually got Bridget. Bridget didn't mind who she partnered. Bridget only cared about Quidditch, and rumours, and getting through a lesson without having to read anything.

"Did you hear," said Bridget, as they faced each other across the desks, "that Professor McLaggen was never actually an Auror? He did six months in the office and then went and sold brooms."

"Who said?"

"Deirdre Callaghan's cousin Fergal. He works in the Ministry canteen. He's served him *soup*," said Bridget, as if this settled it, and pointed her wand at Lily's knees. "Right. *Locomotor Mortice*."

"It's *Mor-tis*," said Lily. "Not Mortice. Mortice is a lock."

"That's what I said."

"You said—"

"*Locomotor MORTICE!*"

There was a bang and a flash of something greenish. Lily braced herself. Her legs did not lock. Nothing at all happened to Lily's legs.

Bridget looked down.

Her shoelaces had come alive. They were whipping round and round each other, left round right, right round left, faster and faster, lacing her two shoes together into a single great lump. And they weren't stopping there. The fringe on the end of her scarf (which was Iris's, borrowed at breakfast, because Bridget had lost her own for the third time) had flipped down off her shoulder and was busily knotting itself into the whole mess, so that Bridget's neck was being slowly hauled down towards her feet.

"Ow," said Bridget, bent double. "Ow. Ow. Lily. *Lily*."

"Ah," said Professor McLaggen, arriving. "A common error. A *very* common error. Stand back, everybody. *Finite Incantatem!*"

The laces gave a small, smug twitch and tied themselves into a neat bow. Then the bow pulled itself through the knot, and the knot went tighter, and

Bridget sat down hard on the floor with her shoes and her chin in the same place.

"Hm," said Professor McLaggen.

He tried two more spells. One of them made the knot go blue. The other made it hum.

"Well," said Professor McLaggen at last, straightening his robes. "It'll wear off. They nearly always do. Finnigan, do the reading. Everybody else: *with the correct pronunciation*, please. When I was at the Academy, we had a fellow who mispronounced a Shield Charm, and do you know what happened to *him*?"

"Insurance?" said someone at the back.

"*Pairs*," said Professor McLaggen.

It had not worn off by lunch.

Bridget got down to the Great Hall by hopping, with Iris on one side and Lily on the other, and her neck still bent so that she looked as if she were searching for something on the floor. The Hufflepuffs had to go past them on the stairs, and several of them laughed, and one of them didn't.

"Sit down," said Hugo, when they got to the end of the Gryffindor table. "No. On the bench. Put your feet up. Like that."

He had a sandwich in one hand. He put it down, and looked at the knot from one side, and from the other, and then got down on one knee on the floor of the Great Hall and started picking at it with his fingers.

"Can't you just—" said Bridget.

"No."

"But a *spell*—"

"Professor McLaggen did spells," said Hugo.

He went on picking. A crowd of first-years stopped to watch. A blue loop came out. Then a humming one. The rest of the Hall ate its lunch. Bridget, with her chin on her knees, told Hugo in great detail about how the Gryffindor Seeker was going to be dropped for being rubbish, which she'd had from Rory Mullan in third year, who'd had it from the Seeker's own sister, and Hugo said "Mm" and "Really?" and went on picking.

The bell went for afternoon lessons just as the last lace came free. Bridget straightened up with a crack.

"Brilliant," she said. "You're brilliant. You missed lunch."

"I know," said Hugo. Iris unwound her scarf from Bridget's neck, and Hugo stood up and ate his sandwich in three bites on the way out of the Hall.

Professor Longbottom was tired.

It wasn't the kind of tired Lily had seen on Dad all summer. Dad's tired had been the quiet kind, the kind that sat on him like a wet coat and made him stand at windows. Professor Longbottom's was the muddy kind. He came in to dinner with earth up to his elbows and his sleeves rolled up, and a leaf in his hair that nobody liked to mention, and he ate with one hand and marked essays with the other. Once Lily saw him fall asleep at the staff table with his fork halfway to his mouth, and wake up again, and put the fork in his mouth as if nothing had happened.

"He's teaching *everyone*," said Iris, who knew. "Every year. All the Herbology. And he's Head of House. And the Mandrakes are teething."

Iris was in the greenhouses three evenings a week now. Professor Longbottom had asked for helpers, and Iris had put her hand up so fast she'd nearly fallen off her stool. She came back to the common room at nine o'clock with dirt under her nails and a smell of dragon dung that went up the stairs ahead of her, and she was happier than Lily had seen her since they'd met.

"I repotted a Fanged Geranium today," she said, one night. "By myself. It only bit me twice."

"Is that good?"

"It's *very* good. He said I had good hands." She went pink. "For plants."

When Lily went past the staff table on her way out of dinner that week, Professor Longbottom looked up from his marking and smiled at her. It was a proper smile, even with the leaf. Then he looked down at the next essay and rubbed his eyes.

On the third Saturday in October, Lily went up to the Owlery.

She'd written to Mum. It had taken her most of Friday night. It said that Lucy was in Gryffindor and that everybody already knew who Lucy was, and that Potions was all right now, and that Professor McLaggen had told them about the time he'd personally stopped a rogue Hippogriff, which he hadn't, probably. It said that Iris was a plant helper and that Lark was on the team. It said *Say hi to Dad*. Then underneath that she'd started to write something else, and stopped, and crossed it out so many times that it was just a black square. She folded the letter so the square was on the inside.

Hugo came too. He had a letter for his mum, and they met at the bottom of the West Tower, since the Owlery belonged to everybody.

It was a long way up. The Owlery was at the very top of the West Tower, and the West Tower had a staircase that went round and round on itself inside the stone, so narrow that you had to go up it in single file, and so steep that by the top you were counting the steps under your breath to stop thinking about your legs. Halfway up there was a window slit. Hugo stopped at it and leaned on the sill, puffing.

"How many more?"

"Loads," said Lily, who had no idea.

At the top there was a door, and behind the door was the Owlery.

It was a great round room of cold stone, with no glass in the windows, so the wind came straight in and went round the walls. There was straw on the floor, and droppings on the straw, and tiny white bones in the droppings, and the smell was the smell of every bird in the world kept in one room at the same time. All the way up the walls, on perches and ledges, hundreds of owls were asleep, or pretending to be. A few of them opened one eye at Lily and closed it again.

That was the Owlery. It was exactly the same as it had been last year. Nothing ever happened in it except owls.

Lily picked a school owl, a scruffy brown one that was awake, and tied her letter to its leg. It looked at her as though she'd asked for something unreasonable. Then it hopped up onto the windowsill, shook itself, and dropped out into the grey air.

Hugo's owl took much longer. Hugo had written his mother a long letter, and it was a fat roll, and the first owl he chose looked at it and flew straight up to the highest beam in protest.

Lily wandered over to a window while he tried again.

You could see a long way from up here. The Forbidden Forest went off to one side in a dark green line. The lake lay flat and grey. Down below, past the greenhouses, was the Quidditch pitch, with its tall gold hoops and its stands striped in house colours, and seven tiny red figures zooming round over it in the drizzle. Gryffindor practice. One of them, very far off, was certainly James, because one of them was doing a loop for no reason.

Lily watched the little red figures go round. She watched for quite a long time. The wind blew in and blew out again.

"This is the most boring room in the castle," she said.

"It's an owl room," said Hugo, from somewhere behind her. "What did you think it would be?"

"I don't know. *Something*."

"It's owls, Lily."

His second owl took the letter and went. They stood for a moment, both of them, looking at the straw.

"Shall we go down?" said Hugo.

They went down. It was quicker going down. At the bottom, Lily's legs wobbled, and she had a feather stuck to her shoe, and she'd already forgotten what colour the owl had been.

On the last Tuesday of the month, Lark caught her not watching.

It wasn't Lily's fault, exactly. The practice had been going on for an hour and a half, and it was the same thing over and over: Chasers passing the Quaffle in a triangle, and the Keeper diving for it, and the Captain blowing a whistle and shouting, and then all of it again. Lark was good. Even Lily could see that. The Captain kept putting her in when one of the others was tired, and every time Lark went in, the triangle went faster. She flew like a starter, not a reserve. Lily had heard a sixth-year say so, in a grumpy sort of voice, at breakfast.

But there was a cloud over the Forest that looked exactly like Hagrid riding a bicycle, and then it slowly turned into Hagrid riding a much smaller bicycle, and Lily was watching that.

"Well?"

Lark had landed. She was standing at the bottom of the stands with her broom over her shoulder and her face pink from the cold, and her eyes very bright.

"Did you see it?" she said. "The dive? At the end?"

Lily opened her mouth.

She could have said yes. It would have been easy. Lark wanted her to say yes so much it was practically written on her.

"I saw *most* of it," said Lily. "You were really good. I think you were the best one. Honestly, though, I don't really know what the best one looks like." She stopped, and then, because it was true, she added, "I mostly watch the Bludgers. They're more interesting. They look like they're *trying*."

There was a little silence.

"Right," said Lark. "Thanks. I think."

"I *meant*—"

"No, it's fine. I know what you meant." Lark hitched her broom up on her shoulder. Her face had gone a bit still. Then she let out a breath through her nose, and it was almost a laugh. "The Bludgers. Honestly, Lily. Next time, watch the dive. I'll do it again. It's the *best* bit."

"I'll watch it."

"You won't."

"I'll *try*."

"Fine," said Lark. And she went off to the changing rooms, kicking at the wet grass, and only looked back once.

Lily took the umbrella down and shook it. A cloud was going over the Forest that looked like nothing at all.

That week was as ordinary as a week can be.

On Wednesday, Lucy got into the broom cupboard on the fourth floor, which had been locked since before James started. She came out with an armful of very old Quidditch robes and a bat that looked as surprised as anybody, and it was days before Professor Longbottom found out.

The next night, at dinner, Albus's place at the Slytherin table was empty.

Lily noticed because she always looked. Scorpius was there, at the end of the bench, with his food going cold in front of him. He kept turning round to look at the doors. After a while he got up, wrapped two bread rolls and a slice of pie in a napkin, and walked out of the Hall with them held carefully in both hands.

Albus missed dinners sometimes. He'd missed them last year. Lily looked at the empty place for a moment, and then at her own plate, where there was treacle sponge, and ate it.

And then it was Friday night.

The rain had stopped at last. The common room was warm and noisy and smelled of wet socks drying in front of the fire. Somebody's toad had got into the coal scuttle again. In one corner, a group of fifth-years were arguing about O.W.L.s in hushed, frightened voices, and in another, two third-years were trying to teach a chess knight to say a rude word.

Lily sat at the big table by the window, with her Defence essay in front of her. *The Leg-Locker Curse: Uses and Countermeasures. Twelve inches.* She had written four of them, and two of the four were the title.

"Did you hear," said Bridget, dropping into the next chair, "about tomorrow? The Halloween feast? Somebody said the skeleton band's coming back, and this year they play their own ribs."

"Who said?"

"Mr Filch."

"Mr Filch told *you*?"

"He was talking to a cat. I was behind a tapestry." Bridget looked at Lily's essay, upside down. "What countermeasures are there?"

"Not tying your laces together, mostly," said Lily, and Bridget threw a quill at her.

Iris came in through the portrait hole a little after nine, as she always did on greenhouse nights, with mud on her knees and the smell of the greenhouses coming in with her. She sat down on the hearthrug and held her hands out to the fire.

"Good?" said Lily.

"Mandrakes," said Iris, with deep happiness. "Professor Longbottom gave me earmuffs of my own." She yawned enormously. "He says I can do the baby ones on my own next week."

Over by the fire, Lucy was curled up in the biggest armchair with her Charms book open on her face, fast asleep and snoring.

Lily wrote two more inches. They weren't very good inches, but they were inches. Then she gave up, and put her quill away, and went upstairs.

The dormitory was dark and warm. Bridget was already talking in her sleep, something about a Bludger. Outside, the wind had dropped, and there was nothing to hear but the castle settling, the way it did every night, the creak of the old wood, the hush of the fire dying down in the room below. Tomorrow was Saturday. Tomorrow was Halloween, and there would be pumpkins, and bats, and maybe skeletons, and no lessons, and pudding.

Lily pulled the covers up to her chin, and turned over, and was asleep before she'd finished thinking about the pudding.

— CHAPTER SIX —

What McGonagall Said

"—and they play their own *ribs*," Bridget was saying, "like a xylophone, and Fergal's mammy saw them at a wedding in Kilkenny, and the bride's grandmother danced with the drummer, and he came apart in the middle of a reel, and they had to put him back together, and they got his—"

Nobody was laughing. That was the first thing.

Lily noticed it the way you notice the fire has gone out: not when it happens, but a while after. The Great Hall was full of floating pumpkins with their faces already carved, and live bats hanging from the rafters in a row, and orange and black streamers looped from every candle-bracket. It looked exactly the way it had looked last Halloween morning. But half the Gryffindor table had come down late, in a bunch, with a prefect at the front and a prefect at the back, and they'd sat down without shoving. Nobody was shoving anywhere. At the Hufflepuff table, a boy was eating his porridge very slowly, looking at the doors.

Then she looked up at the staff table, and there were only five people at it.

"—his *femur* on back to front," said Bridget, "and he walked like a crab for the whole of—"

Professor McGonagall stood up.

She didn't tap her goblet. She didn't need to. The Hall went quiet from the front backwards, the way a field goes quiet when a cloud comes over, and Bridget's mouth closed on the next word and stayed closed.

Professor McGonagall looked very old. Lily had never once thought of her as old. She thought of her as sharp, and tall, and a little frightening, and *there*, like the castle. But this morning the Headmistress stood at the front of the staff table with both hands flat on it, as though the table were holding her up rather than the other way round, and her face was the colour of the tablecloth.

"I have very sad news," she said, "and I am going to give it to you plainly, because you deserve that."

She waited. Somewhere, a bat shifted on its rafter and was still.

"Craig Bowker, Head Boy and prefect of Slytherin House, died yesterday evening."

Nobody made a sound. Lily heard it go down the Hall anyway, like wind through long grass. She heard it reach the Slytherin table and stop there.

"The Ministry of Magic has been informed, and an investigation is already under way. Until further notice, the Quidditch pitch and the Owlery are closed to all students. All of you will be in your common rooms by seven o'clock each evening. Today, you will be accompanied by a prefect or a member of staff whenever you go between this Hall and your common rooms." She looked down the length of the four tables, slowly, from one end to the other, as if she were counting them. "These are not arbitrary rules. You will keep them."

She stopped. For a moment Lily thought she was going to say something else. Her mouth moved a little, and her hands stayed flat on the table.

"That is all I can tell you at present," said Professor McGonagall. "Please eat your breakfast."

She sat down.

Nobody ate their breakfast.

Lily didn't know who Craig Bowker was.

That was the strange part. She sat with her spoon in her porridge and tried to find him in her head, and she couldn't. *Bowker*. She'd heard the name. She thought she'd heard it. A tall boy, maybe, with a prefect's badge, who'd once told a crowd of second-years to stop blocking a staircase. Or that might have been somebody else. She hadn't known there was a Head Boy this year. She hadn't known he was in Slytherin. She hadn't ever spoken to him, or he to her, and now he was dead, and she was trying to remember his face so that she'd know who to feel sorry about.

Died. McGonagall hadn't said how. She hadn't said where, or what of. She'd just said it, the way you'd say the date.

Lily looked across at the Slytherin table, because everybody was looking at the Slytherin table, and then wished she hadn't.

Some of them were crying. A girl in seventh year had her face in her hands, and two of her friends had their arms round her from both sides. But most of them weren't doing anything. They were just sitting, with their plates in front of them, looking straight ahead, as if they'd been told to hold very still for a photograph.

Lark was one of those.

She was sitting near the middle of the table, with Kieran on one side of her, and she was looking at nothing. Not at the staff table, not at her plate, not across the Hall. Her hands were in her lap. Lily looked at her and waited for her to look back, and Lark didn't, and Lily didn't know what to do with her own face, so she looked away.

Further down, Milly sat with her back straight and her eyes on the far wall. She didn't look like she was crying. She didn't look like anything. Lily had known Milly all her life, across the table at the Burrow, and had never once seen her face look as empty as that.

Lily wanted to go over to Lark, and didn't know what she'd say if she did, and then Hugo was there.

He'd come over from the Hufflepuff table without asking anyone, which nobody did at breakfast, and nobody told him off for it. He stood behind her for a moment. Then he took hold of her sleeve, just for a second, between his finger and thumb, and let go again.

"Did you know him?" he said.

"No," said Lily. "Did you?"

"No."

They looked at each other. It felt like it should have mattered more that neither of them had known him. It felt like it should have made it smaller. It didn't.

"What happened to him?" said Lily.

"I don't know."

"But what *happened*? People don't just—he was in *seventh year*."

"I don't *know*, Lily." Hugo glanced up at the staff table. "Mum'll know. The Ministry, she said. Mum'll know by now."

"Your mum's not going to tell *you*."

Hugo didn't argue. That was worse than if he had.

Up at the staff table, Professor McLaggen was sitting with a cup of tea in front of him that he hadn't touched. His face was grey. He looked like someone who'd gone to the wrong room and was waiting for someone to come and tell him where the right one was. Every so often he started to get up, as if he was going to go to the Slytherin table, and then sat down again. Next to him, Professor Winterbourne sat very still and very small in her chair, smaller than Lily would have thought someone that tall could be, with her plate in front of her and nothing on it. Lily looked at her and didn't know why. She looked back at Professor McGonagall instead.

The Headmistress was watching the Slytherin table. Her mouth was a thin line. And there was something in her face, something Lily had never seen there in all the time she'd been a little afraid of it, that looked very much like somebody who didn't know.

Hogwarts is safe now, Mum had said, at the kitchen table, more than a year ago. *There hasn't been a major incident in over twenty years.*

Lily put her spoon down.

"—murdered," somebody was whispering, further up the Gryffindor table. "My brother said there were Aurors in the Entrance Hall at *four o'clock this morning*—"

"Bridget," said Iris, very quietly.

"I didn't say anything!" said Bridget. "That was *Owen*."

They went back to the tower in a crocodile, two by two in a long line, like first-years on a school trip.

It was a prefect called Amira at the front and Professor Longbottom at the back, and nobody was allowed to stop, or straggle, or go to the toilets on their own. Halfway along the third-floor corridor, a pair of wizards in long dark-blue robes came the other way with a roll of parchment between them, and Amira stopped the whole line against the wall to let them pass. They didn't look at the students at all. They had silver badges on their chests. Lily had seen badges like that every day of her life, on a coat on a peg in the hall at home.

The Grand Staircase was closed. There were more people in Ministry robes at the bottom of it, doing something to the banisters with their wands, and

Professor Longbottom took one look and led the line the long way round, past the West Tower.

That was where Lily saw the crates.

The door at the foot of the West Tower stairs was propped wide open with a chair. A stack of wooden crates stood beside it, the ordinary kind, with rope handles and numbers chalked on the sides, and a few Ministry people were carrying them up the stairs, one crate at a time, round and round out of sight. A tall witch went up with one under each arm. A young wizard came down empty-handed, puffing.

A third man was standing at the bottom with a clipboard. He was nobody in particular. He was middle-sized, in Ministry robes that were a little too short in the sleeve, with thinning hair and the sort of face you couldn't remember even while you were looking at it. He was speaking to the young wizard, in a soft, careful voice.

"If you wouldn't mind," he said. "Careful with that one. It's marked. They're all marked, really, but that one especially. I'll just log it. I'll just—yes. Thank you. Thank you so much. I'll just make a note."

He made a note. The young wizard picked up the crate and went up the stairs with it.

Lily looked up. You couldn't see the top of the West Tower from inside, only the stairs going round, but she knew what was up there. The Owlery. Straw and droppings and a lot of sleepy owls. She'd been up there two weeks ago, to post a letter to Mum. She'd been bored.

"Keep moving, Lily," said Professor Longbottom, behind her. His voice was gentle. He had mud on his robes still, from yesterday, and his eyes were red round the edges.

She kept moving.

At the next window she looked out. You could see a long way across the grounds from there, all the way to the stands of the Quidditch pitch with their striped flags hanging limp in the damp. There were people all over the grass in front of them. Lots of people, in dark robes, standing in a ring, and something stretched between poles round the whole pitch that glittered faintly, like a line of frost. The hoops stood up in the middle, gold and tall and empty.

Nobody was flying.

Lark had practice on Tuesdays.

Lily turned away from the window before anyone could see her looking.

When they got back to the common room, there was a new notice on the board, in Professor Longbottom's big, round handwriting.

Until further notice: All students to be in the common room by 7 p.m. The Quidditch pitch and the Owlery are OUT OF BOUNDS. Quidditch practices are suspended. Students may not use the Grand Staircase without a member of staff. Letters for posting are to be left with Professor Hagrid at his hut. He will see to them.

Underneath, in smaller writing, as if he'd added it afterwards: *If you want to talk to somebody, my door is open. N.L.*

Lily read it twice. Then she went and sat in the window seat with her knees up and looked out at nothing.

The common room was full and very quiet. Nobody had anywhere to go. A group of seventh-years sat round the fire, not talking. The fifth-years had their books out and weren't reading them. James was sitting on the arm of a sofa with Rose, saying nothing at all, which Lily had never once seen him do. Over in the corner, the two third-years who'd been teaching a chess knight to say a rude word last night had put the board away. The knight was standing on the mantelpiece by itself, looking puzzled.

"It's the Quidditch I can't—" Bridget started, from the next chair, and then stopped and went red. "I don't mean *that*. I don't mean it matters. I just mean —"

"I know what you mean," said Iris.

Iris had made a pot of tea from somewhere. She was going round with it. She gave Lily a cup without asking, and Lily held it and didn't drink it, and it was warm against her hands.

"Do they think somebody *did* it?" said Lily. "To him?"

Iris looked at the tea. "They wouldn't close the pitch if he'd just fallen off his broom," she said.

"They wouldn't close the *Owlery*," said Bridget. "Why would they close the Owlery? He died on the pitch. Everybody knows he died on the pitch."

"How does everybody know?"

"Because they've *closed the pitch*."

"Then why have they closed the Owlery?"

Nobody had an answer to that. Lily looked out of the window. From here you could just see the top of the West Tower against the grey sky, and a little flicker of something at its windows that might have been a Ministry ribbon or might have been an owl.

At lunch, she saw Nova in the corridor outside the Great Hall, in a queue of Ravensclaws waiting for their own prefect.

"Do you know anything?" said Lily, in a low voice, as the lines shuffled past each other.

Nova shook her head. Her face was white, and she was holding her elbows. "Nobody does. I asked our prefect. She doesn't know either. She said they told the prefects the same as us." She swallowed. "Word for word. She said McGonagall read it off a piece of paper."

Then the Ravenclaw line moved on, and Nova went with it, looking back once over her shoulder.

The Halloween Feast happened anyway.

Lily had thought it wouldn't. But at six o'clock Amira came round the common room and said they were all to go down, and they went down, in a crocodile again, and the Great Hall was still decorated.

That was the worst bit. Nobody had taken anything down. The pumpkins still floated in the air with their carved faces grinning, but somebody had only lit about half of them, so that every other face was dark. The bats still hung from the rafters. The orange streamers were still looped from the candle-brackets, and the candles under them were burning lower than usual, as if they weren't sure they were allowed. It looked like a party that everybody had arrived at and then remembered they'd been told it was cancelled.

There was no music. There were no skeletons. Last year there had been a whole band of them, and Lily had only caught the very end of it, having spent most of the feast outside in the dark chasing what had turned out to be Haggrid's fairy lanterns. She'd thought there'd be other years for skeletons.

Peeves was nowhere. At any other meal with pudding in it, Peeves turned up sooner or later, and his not being there was so strange that she kept looking up at the ceiling for him.

The food came. It wasn't the Halloween food. It was ordinary dinner: shepherd's pie, and carrots, and gravy, and a jug of water at each end of the table. It was hot and good, and nobody ate much of it.

At the Slytherin table, half the places were empty. The ones who had come down sat close together, all bunched up at one end, as if they were cold. In the middle of the table there was a gap where nobody sat at all. It was a long gap, three or four places wide. Lily didn't need anybody to tell her whose place had been in the middle of it.

Lark was sitting at the very edge of the bunch, next to Kieran, as far from the gap as she could get. She still wasn't looking at anyone. Lily watched her for a while and willed her to look up, just once, across the Hall. Lark didn't.

Half the Slytherins weren't there. They'd be in their common room, Lily thought, all of them together, which was where she'd want to be. She looked at her shepherd's pie.

"Why aren't there any *sweets*?"

It was Lucy. She'd said it at an ordinary volume, which, for Lucy, was quite loud. Heads turned. A seventh-year at the end of the table glared.

"*Lucy*," hissed Iris.

"I was only *asking*. It's *Halloween*. There's always sweets at Halloween. Milly said—"

"Not tonight," said Iris. "Eat your dinner."

Lucy ate her dinner. She ate it with an expression of deep injustice, scraping her plate.

When pudding came, it was a plain sponge with custard. Lily ate some of it. Professor McGonagall stood up again, and the Hall went quiet again.

"We will take a moment," said the Headmistress, "to remember Craig Bowker."

She didn't say anything else. She bowed her head. All along the staff table the teachers bowed their heads, and then the students did, all through the Hall, and there was a silence so complete that Lily could hear the candles burning.

She tried to think about Craig Bowker. She tried to think about the boy who'd maybe told some second-years to stop blocking a staircase. But she didn't

have a face for him, and the silence went on, and what she found she was thinking about instead was the Slytherin table, and Lark's hands in her lap, and the crates going up the West Tower stairs, and Professor McGonagall's mouth moving on the thing she hadn't said.

"Thank you," said Professor McGonagall. "Prefects, please take your houses back to their common rooms."

The benches scraped. Everyone stood up.

Across the table, Lucy was eating a toffee. Lily had no idea where she'd got it. Lucy looked back at her, chewing, with no sign of shame at all.

Hugo caught up with her at the doors, where the Hufflepuff line and the Gryffindor line went different ways.

"I don't think they know either," he said, very low.

"Who?"

"Them." He jerked his head at the staff table. "Any of them. I think McGonagall's told us everything she's got."

"They'd tell us if they knew," said Lily. "They'd *have* to."

Hugo looked at her. "Would they?"

Then his prefect called him, and he went.

Lily went up the stairs in the crocodile, with Amira at the front and Professor Longbottom at the back, through corridors that had been noisy every night since she'd first come to Hogwarts, and were now as quiet as a library. *They'd tell us if they knew.* She said it to herself, going up the stairs. She said it again on the next flight. She'd always known that grown-ups knew things they didn't tell you, the way you know the sky is up. But it had always been the boring things: what was in your Christmas presents, why Dad was late, what Uncle George had said that made Mum throw a tea towel at him. Not this. Not a person.

Nobody was telling her something.

And it wasn't the kind of something you found out at Christmas.

The dormitory was dark. Nobody had put the lamps on, and nobody got up to do it.

Lily lay on her back and looked at the canopy of her four-poster. It was red, but in the dark it was just a shape. Outside, the wind had got up again, and it went round the tower in long low breaths.

"Lily?" said Iris, from the next bed. "Are you awake?"

"Yes."

"Do you think it was someone from outside?"

Lily thought about it. She thought about the wards Dad had told her about, and the walls, and the gates with the winged boars on them that nothing could get through without being let. She thought about McGonagall's face.

"I don't know," she said.

"My mum's going to write," said Iris. "She'll be frightened. She gets frightened about this sort of thing." She was quiet for a while. "She'll want me to come home."

"Will you?"

"No," said Iris. "Professor Longbottom needs me for the Mandrakes."

From the bed on the other side of Lily came a rustle, and then Bridget's voice, in a hoarse, excited whisper. "Rory Mullan's cousin found a footprint in the Forest last week. As big as a *bath*. And my dad says Hagrid used to keep a *giant* in there. His own brother. Dad saw him at the Battle, pulling up trees." The whisper got faster. "So maybe he's still in there, and he got out, and came up as far as the pitch, and—"

"*Stop it*, Bridget," said Lily.

She hadn't meant to say it so loudly. It came out sharp, sharper than she'd ever spoken to Bridget, and it sat there in the dark afterwards.

There was a long silence.

"Sorry," said Bridget, in a small voice.

"No. I'm sorry," said Lily. "It's just—he was a person."

"I know," said Bridget. "I know he was."

Nobody said anything else. After a while Bridget's breathing went slow and even. Iris turned over. Down in the common room, the fire must have gone out, because the room got colder, a little at a time, and Lily pulled the covers up to her ears and kept her eyes open.

She thought about the empty places at the Slytherin table, and the half-lit pumpkins, and the man at the bottom of the stairs saying *I'll just make a note*. She thought about the Owlery, which was nothing, which was straw and bones and owls, and which somebody had closed. She thought about Lark looking at nothing, and about Professor McGonagall's mouth moving on the thing she hadn't said.

And somewhere at the back of her head, very faint, so faint she wasn't sure at first that she could hear it at all, something started up that she hadn't heard since the train.

Tick, it went.

She lay very still and listened.

Tock.