

pathological people pleaser

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/47917177) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/47917177>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationships:	Regulus Black/James Potter , Minor or Background Relationship(s)
Characters:	James Potter , Regulus Black , Sirius Black , Remus Lupin , Peter Pettigrew , Lily Evans Potter , Mary Macdonald (Harry Potter) , Marlene McKinnon , Dorcas Meadowes , Emmeline Vance , Barty Crouch Jr. , Evan Rosier , Fleamont Potter
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Modern Setting , Summer Vacation , Summer Romance , Enemies to Lovers , James Potter-centric , Borderline Personality Disorder , Mental Health Issues , Sirius Black & James Potter Friendship , Implied Sexual Content , Coming Out , Sexuality Crisis , Childhood Friends , Insomnia , Grief/Mourning , Implied/Referenced Child Abuse , Established Sirius Black/Remus Lupin , Established Marlene McKinnon/Dorcas Meadowes , Established Mary Macdonald/Lily Evans Potter , Getting Together , POV Alternating , Song: You're Losing Me (Taylor Swift) , another fic titled after a taylor swift song who would have guessed? , James Potter is the biggest pathological people pleaser to have ever people pleased , my mirrorball baby , James Potter Angst , Friends With Benefits , Sexual Content , Established Barty Crouch Jr./Evan Rosier , Angst with a Happy Ending , happy ending guys , promise! , Implied/Referenced Suicide , Suicidal Thoughts , Unreliable Narrator , SHOULD I STRESS THIS? , I can say it again , James Potter Has BPD Borderline Personality Disorder
Language:	English
Collections:	jegulus fics I read and so should you <3 , harry and his gay dads , My fav marauders fics , maeMae , Re-read a thousand times , HP fics I loved enough to save , marauders , Marauders , i've already read this masterpieces , i will still read these when I'm old , Magnolia's Favourite Fics , 🌟 Favoritos 🌟 , Fluff Angst and Random Recs , imsosofturhonor , i think about these a little too often , harry potter and the dead gay wizards , jegulus , god tier fics , This is mine , best fics i've ever read , Den of Sin , break my heart and put it back
Stats:	Published: 2023-06-16 Completed: 2023-10-04 Words: 114,435 Chapters: 19/19

pathological people pleaser

by [rweoutofthewoods](#)

Summary

No one, it turns out, really knows one another.

(OR: all it takes is a summer-long holiday in Italy, James Potter's teetering mental stability, a secret relationship, friends with benefits, Marlene's secret, and enough stupidity and insecurity to go around for everything to come crashing down around them.)

Notes

PLEASE DO NOT PUT MY WORK ON GOODREADS!

Oh come on!! You didn't REALLY think I'd let pride month, much less a new Taylor Swift song pass without writing a fic for it?? Did you???

As always, heed tags but I'll put a warning here, this is very mental health-focused fic. CW for discussion of BPD, implied suicidal ideation, implied sexual content, struggles with sexuality, grief, unhealthy coping mechanisms, and some heavy drinking.

As always a big thanks to my beta [@pastelanxiete](#) for jumping into another big project with me.

I'll be updating every Friday the same as I did with anti-hero if any of you are following me from there. Enjoy!!

DISCLAIMER: please do not diagnose yourself because of my fic. If you recognize yourself in James I implore you to remember 1. Some things overlap in multiple disorders and 2. That is then something you should bring up to a professional. BPD is not easy to diagnose and I think to be officially diagnosed you need to be over 18 and I do not recommend self diagnosing in the case of a personality disorder. Take care of yourselves mwah!

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- Translation into Español available: [Pathological People Pleaser- traducción al español](#) by [Chars_springs](#)

Chapter 1: part I: (stop)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Part I: (stop)

James

James's mother had always told it like it was. She was brutally honest, but not in the way people *say* they're brutally honest when really, they're just mean. No, Effie Potter was kind in her honesty, but she never let James get away with things either.

"You have so much love to give, sweetheart," she used to tell him often. *"More love than most people, you be careful with it because not everyone is going to give it back."*

So, James wasn't raised sheltered, he knew there were bad things in the world. He'd seen some of them. In Sirius's childhood, in the bruises he would hide and the tears he'd cry into James's shoulder.

Still, he grew up with a privileged and warm childhood. James was never given anything but love and care. Even his mother's honesty was always padded with kindness and warmth. Frankly, James's life was perfect. He had everything and anything a person could ask for. This had always been the case.

Yet, the secret, the terrible aching starving beast sitting in his chest, consuming everything around him, was that James Potter was deeply and severely unhappy. Maybe he had always been that way, he couldn't remember a time when it was different. A time without the gaping black hole in his chest.

"Prongs?"

James blinked, shaking his head. “Sorry, what?”

Sirius raised his eyebrows. “I was asking about the sleeping arrangements. Moony said all of us might have to share rooms. Obviously, Moony and I will, and Mary and Lily as well as Dorcas and Marlene, but—”

“Yeah,” James said quickly, trying not to flinch. “I don’t mind sharing. Me and Pete? Just like old times?”

“Actually,” Peter winced, “I’m bringing Emmeline, remember? So I’ll be sharing with her.”

“Oh, right, no worries, mate.” James shot him an easy grin to show there were no hard feelings.

“See, that’s why I’m asking,” Sirius cut in. “Because Reg is bringing Crouch and Rosier, but they have their weird hook-up thing going on, which I absolutely do not want to know anything about, but that means *they’ll* share, which leaves you and Reg and well— *you know...*”

“Regulus hates my guts?” James offered, leaning back on Sirius’s sofa as if that didn’t sting a little. “It’s fine, if he stabs me in my sleep at least it’ll make for an interesting holiday.”

“He wouldn’t do that!” Sirius insisted, to which Remus snorted. “What?” Sirius asked, whipping around to glare at his boyfriend. “He wouldn’t! I mean... *probably!*”

“Just try not to piss him off and you’ll be fine,” Remus advised James, nodding sagely.

Easier said than done. Everything James did seemed to piss Regulus off. He didn’t even know what it was. He could correct it if he knew, but the truth was Regulus just didn’t like him.

Remus began to steer the conversation towards the itinerary for their summer-long holiday while Sirius argued passionately for his favorite philosophy of simply winging it.

James sat back, tugging his knees to his chest in an attempt to ground himself. Sirius pulled Peter into the argument and their voices began to rise. James grabbed his glass, taking a long sip of his drink in hopes that the alcohol would soften the buzzing in his ears.

God, what was wrong with him? Why couldn't James just have fun for *one* night? Why was there a feeling of dread lurking without reason?

“You're sure you don't want to bring anyone?”

James blinked, yanked back into the conversation. He hadn't even realized their argument had ceased. He wondered who'd won. Probably Remus, he always did.

“Huh?”

“On our trip,” Sirius clarified. “What about that girl you were seeing... Clara or something, right? Don't feel like you can't invite her, we can make space.”

“I'm sorry James, I really just don't think this is right. I'm too busy, my job is so demanding. I can't give you what you're looking for.”

“I only wanted to see you more than once a week,” James protested. “We've been dating for months now, Clara. I didn't think that was absurd to suggest.”

“And I get it, but I don't have that time to commit to you. It's just too much.”

Too much.

“No,” James swallowed. “It’s fine. It’s not the same as the rest of you lot.” He waved a vague hand at Sirius and Remus. They’d been together since they were sixteen and had been in love with each other long before that. Now, in their twenties, they were still madly in love. It was the same with Marlene and Dorcas, who met as kids and later started dating. Now, they were still going strong. Even Lily and Mary, while it’d taken them a bit longer to get together (the fact that James and Lily were dating for so long was definitely an obstacle in the way of their love), but eventually, they’d figured things out. Now they were coming up on their second year together and they couldn’t be happier.

It's not that James had never been in love. In fact, he was pretty sure he'd been in love with every single person who'd ever looked at him, and even those who hadn't. It was that no one had ever loved him back.

“You give too much,” his mum would say gently, stroking his hair after whatever heartbreak he'd been through this time. *“You have to be more careful with who you hand your heart to, not everyone deserves it.”*

As much as James adored his mother, he was beginning to think she was wrong. All signs pointed to one thing: *James* was the problem.

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James’s alarm was going off when he woke. It was blaring loudly, telling him that it’d probably been on for a while and he rolled over, fumbling for his phone before one of his neighbors could start banging on the walls in annoyance. Shutting off the alarm and blinking down at the time with blurry eyes, James groaned aloud. With a fumbling hand, he shoved his glasses on his face, squinting down at the notifications on his lock screen.

There were about a million voice messages from Sirius which James ignored, he’d listen to those on his way to work. Peter had texted him a few videos which James also deemed unimportant at the moment. The notification that stopped his heart dead in his chest was short, only a few words.

Dad

Got to raincheck for tomorrow. Sorry.

I'll see you soon.

James swallowed, opening the text and staring at it with a knot in his throat. His dad wouldn't see him soon; he was leaving for the entire summer in only a few days. Apparently, his father hadn't remembered that.

James

i'm leaving for Italy in a few days?

won't be able to see u before i go

His father's reply was instant at least, which James appreciated.

Dad

Right. slipped my mind.

Will see you when you get back.

Have fun.

We should talk soon. I will call you.

Suddenly, the knot in his throat was bursting open and James threw his phone, feeling satisfied as it hit the wall with a loud crack. The all-consuming rage only lasted a second before the world seemed to come rushing back around him and he was left blinking, sitting in his bed in only his boxers, the world empty and quiet around him.

He wasn't crazy.

Taking a shaky breath, James stood, picking up his now cracked phone without bothering to spare more than a cursory glance at the damage. Who fucking cared. It's not like anyone really wanted to contact James anyway. His friends would probably be grateful for the peace.

Feeling weighed down, James limped through his morning routine. By the time he got to work, he knew his day was already ruined and it didn't help that from the beginning of his shift everything was already shit.

“James,” his manager, Molly, complained basically the second he clocked in. “I told you to reorganize the men’s section before you left yesterday, but everything was a disaster at closing.”

“I did! People come in and mess—”

“I don’t want to hear excuses,” Molly cut him off swiftly. “You’ll be refolding everything at closing tonight to make up for Jade cleaning up after you yesterday.”

James turned so she wouldn’t see his face twist into a scowl. “Yeah, no problem.”

“Good, you’re a great worker, James. I know you can do better on this. We’re a team here, we rely on each other.”

Molly’s voice was gentler now, as if she could sense his worsening mood. But James had no desire to hear her padded, fake sympathy and he left her, heading onto the floor to force a fake smile onto his face while he greeted the morning shoppers.

It wasn’t until his lunch break when he pulled his phone out of his pocket that he realized there was a large crack running down the screen, and when he tried to switch it on, it remained dark. Cursing under his breath, James tossed the broken phone into the trash without a second thought before heading back to work.

The rest of the day passed in a slow crawl, and James felt like he was itching out of his skin. By the time he got home, he was ready to climb into bed and sleep for a week.

The next day, James woke up to his alarm blaring yet again, this time from his digital clock. The sound was unfamiliar and shrill. There was a hole eating through his chest. He couldn’t

breathe around it so he switched off his alarm, rolled over, and went back to sleep.

He woke that night, disoriented and fuzzy as he opened his eyes to darkness. He wasn't sure what had woken him at first. His flat was quiet, his digital clock silently lighting up the darkness of his room with its red numbers. After a moment, he heard a sharp knock and James sat up, forcing himself out of bed and into his entryway where someone was incessantly knocking on his front door.

James threw open his door, blinking as Sirius froze on the other side, hand raised as he was about to knock again.

“Good, you're alive!” Sirius exclaimed. “What's going on, why haven't you answered your phone?”

James blinked, trying to process anything that was going on. He wasn't wearing his glasses and the blurriness didn't help with how disoriented and dizzy he felt. “Huh?”

“I texted you,” Sirius said, pushing past James and into his messy flat. “I haven't heard from you in days.”

“I saw you like two days ago,” James said slowly. “That doesn't warrant breaking down my door.”

“Yeah, but you never go that long without replying to texts.”

“Oh,” James frowned. “Right, my phone broke. I have to go get a new one.”

Sirius spun, his brow furrowing as he seemed to take in James's disheveled appearance for the first time. “Were you sleeping? Did you forget we had plans?”

James absolutely did, but he shook his head anyway. “No, no. I just wasn’t feeling well so I was taking a nap, must have just overslept. I should have set an alarm, but you know... broken phone and my clock is wonky.”

Sirius surveyed James for a moment and he wasn’t sure if his friend was convinced. However, after a moment’s pause, Sirius seemed to let it go, clapping his hands together. “Well, come on then. Do you feel well enough to go out now?”

“Yeah,” James said quickly. “The nap helped, I’m good.”

“Okay, great. Go get dressed, I left Remus and Reg in the car. If we take too long, Reggie will start getting antsy and I don’t want to be responsible for whomever he maims.”

“Probably me,” James muttered but turned, heading for his room.

He threw on the first semi-clean clothing he could find and stumbled back into the living room where Sirius was waiting impatiently. He basically dragged James out of his flat as soon as he emerged, pushing him into the car.

“Alright, Prongs?” Remus asked, turning around to peer into the back seat as James climbed in.

“Yeah,” James mumbled. “Sorry, I fell asleep.”

“I tried to call to warn you that we were coming.” Remus raised an eyebrow. “That didn’t wake you? You never have your phone on silent.”

“*Apparently*, this fucker broke his phone.” Sirius scoffed, climbing into the passenger seat. “Now c’mon, onward, Moony, before the girls get mad we’re late.”

Remus stared at James for a moment longer before turning back around and starting the car. Sirius instantly began arguing with Remus about which way to the pub was fastest and James tuned them out, relaxing for a moment now that their gazes were off him. He rubbed at his eyes under his glasses, taking a deep breath.

James stiffened suddenly as he realized that Regulus, who had so far been ignoring James in favor of tapping away at his phone, seemed to have stopped typing. James looked to his left where the younger Black brother was looking at him with scrutinizing eyes.

“*What?*” James snapped under his breath, not in the mood to play nice with Regulus’s attitude that night.

Regulus blinked, snapping back a little. He almost seemed surprised under his typical blankness. James didn’t think he’d ever snapped at Regulus before, and he was grateful that Sirius was too caught up in his bickering to hear.

Regulus and James had a specific sort of relationship. James was nice to him, had always been nice to him, even when he and Sirius had fallen out for a few years in school. James always looked out for Regulus because he was Sirius’s baby brother. The most important person in his best friend’s life, and some of the only family he still had. Regulus, in turn, had always been mean to James. No matter what, no matter when.

The first time James met Regulus, his snotty eleven-year-old self had looked James up and down, scowled at him in distaste, and then very rudely informed him that it was: “*Reg-u-lus, not Reggie or Reg, don’t call me that. I don’t like you.*” And to set the tone for their entire relationship for more than a decade, James had only smiled apologetically. “*Right, sorry, Regulus. It’s great to meet you.*”

Regulus was mean, James played nice. That was how it worked. But sometimes it was exhausting to keep up a happy face for someone who clearly hated his guts. Tonight, with a swirling cloud over his head, maybe for the first time ever, James couldn’t stomach a smile.

Sometimes, James wanted to scream. He wanted to take Regulus by the shoulders and shake him until he told James what he’d done. What was wrong with him, what caused Regulus to hate James so much? Or at least let James give Regulus a proper reason for his hatred.

But James didn't, he never snapped. Until tonight, apparently. James didn't know what Regulus was thinking now, but it was at least enough to stop whatever biting comment Regulus might have had.

"How'd you break your phone?" Regulus asked. It wasn't kind. James didn't think Regulus even actually cared, but it wasn't the attitude James was dreading so he just shrugged.

"Dunno," James said. "It just cracked."

Regulus hummed in response, going back to whoever he was texting without sparing James another glance.

He didn't know what Regulus thought of that. Whether or not he believed James or he simply didn't care either way. James didn't know why Regulus had even asked. He didn't know what went on in Regulus Black's head. He didn't think anyone did, not even Sirius.

They pulled up to the pub before James could drive himself utterly insane with the possibilities. This was good, he thought, as they stepped into the pub and the girls plus Peter waved them down from a table in the corner. James could get drunk and forget about his shitty job, his broken phone, prospectless future, and whatever Regulus Black may or may not have been thinking.

"I can't believe we're doing it!" Lily was saying excitedly as they all found their seats. "We've been planning our post-graduation trip since before we even started university! I can't believe we actually made it this far."

"A miracle with this lot," Dorcas scoffed. "Plans like this rarely make it out of the group chat."

"We all managed that trip to Scotland last year," Peter protested, his cheeks already a little pink from his drink.

“That was three days long,” Remus pointed out. “Very different than the entire summer.”

“I’m going to be so broke by the end of this,” Marlene lamented, leaning into Dorcas as she sighed.

“Joke’s on you, I’m already broke,” Mary frowned. “I’ve been working my ass off, and I still worry for my spending on this holiday.”

“Lucky Sirius and Reg’s crazy rich uncle own a villa in Italy, eh?” Dorcas said. “I’m glad I made friends with rich people, otherwise we might have to pay for the lodgings as well. Can you imagine the price for an entire summer?”

“Hm,” Mary agreed, “not all of us are trust fund babies.” She narrowed her eyes, casting a mock glare at the Black brothers and then James.

“Hey, I got disowned. No trust fund for me,” Sirius protested.

“Not from your *parents*, no. But as Dorcas said, crazy rich uncle. And James does.” Mary raised her eyebrow.

James swallowed the bile that was rising in the back of his throat. James knew he was lucky, he grew up rich, never wanting for anything, but he didn’t have a trust fund. James had an inheritance, something you got when somebody died.

James never wanted his inheritance. Not that it mattered, he didn’t have it anyway.

He stood suddenly. “Uh, I’m going to get a round of drinks,” he said even as Mary frowned. Let them think he was offended over his rich parents being pointed out, what a shallow, privileged James Potter thing to think.

James got drinks. He didn't return, instead downing enough that the fact that he didn't feel like a human didn't matter, and he amused himself by flirting with a girl at the bar as she eyed him in interest. James felt a thrill, a rush at being desired as she put a hand seductively on his arm.

There was no zing at the contact. James didn't feel anything even as they stumbled into the bathroom and he got her off. He thought he must be broken because she was gorgeous, with long golden hair and rosy cheeks. Her waist was small under James's fingers and her voice just breathy enough where it should have been hot. Yet, he felt nothing. He wasn't even hard when it was over, and she reached for his waistband.

"I'm fine," he told the woman, turning and leaving her in the dirty bar bathroom as she fixed her clothes. It was nice to be wanted, but he'd served his purpose for her. If she'd wanted something more, she would have asked for his number before they'd ended up in the bathroom.

Feeling too hot under his collar, James quickly exited the building, stumbling out onto the street where the night air was brisk and the sound of music and chatter was muffled.

There were still people out on the street. A small, very drunk group seemed to be waiting for their cab, giggling loudly on the pavement. Needing to be away from the laughter, James turned the corner, ducking into the alley on the other side of the bar. He leaned against the brick wall, taking a deep breath of the fresh air.

"And you seem to think *I'm* a whore, when you're picking up and dumping girls in pub bathrooms."

James jerked up, eyes flying open as he took in Regulus leaning against the wall further down the alley, a cigarette lazily held between his fingers.

"I don't think you're a whore," James sighed.

"*Really?*" Regulus said, drawing out the word. Despite the fact that he clearly seemed to be mocking James, the word sounded like honey falling from his lips, his voice husky and low.

“So you insist on cock-blocking me all the time for fun?”

“There’s a difference between cock-blocking and making sure you’re safe.” James crossed his arms. “We’ve been over this—”

“Yes, yes, I should be *so grateful* you don’t tell Sirius the things I get up to. *Oh, James*, thank you for saving me! Where would I be without you saving me from the scary strangers who want to sleep with me? How wonderful that my brother is able to sleep at night thinking I’m an innocent, blushing virgin.”

“You have bad taste,” James said stiffly. “And I’ve gotten involved a total of what, two, three times? All of them were scumbags. That one guy last month left a bruise on your wrist.”

“Maybe I’m into that.”

Whatever James had been expecting Regulus to say, it wasn’t that, and for a moment he stood there, blinking as it felt like the air was torn from his lungs. He didn’t understand his reaction to that, and after a moment James shook his head. “I look out for you for Sirius. I know you don’t like it and never have. Too bad.”

“You better not get in my way in Italy.”

James scoffed. “We’re sharing a room, haven’t you heard? You’re *not* fucking anyone in there.”

“I wasn’t planning on it. I’m sure just the reminder of your existence is enough to make a man go soft.”

“Fine.”

“*Fine*,” Regulus said, his ever-present scowl deepening.

“Pass me a cigarette,” James said tiredly.

“No, why would I do that? Do you even smoke?”

“Maybe I’ve decided to start and you’ll get to watch me have an embarrassing coughing fit as I try for the first time.”

The promise of that seemed to be enough to entice Regulus, and he passed James the pack of cigarettes.

“A light?” James prompted and Regulus sighed, pulling out a lighter as well.

Of course, it was silver and engraved with Regulus’s initials. James resisted the urge to roll his eyes, how posh and so very Regulus. The lighters James normally used were neon yellow and purchased dirt cheap from his local corner store.

James lit the cigarette, taking a drag and ignoring the way Regulus seemed sincerely disappointed when James didn’t fall into a coughing fit.

“I didn’t know you smoked,” Regulus said as James handed his cigarettes and lighter back.

James just shook his head, as he exhaled. “Regulus, you don’t know *me*.”

And for some reason, Regulus frowned at that. Honest to god, his face, which was normally twisted into a scowl or perfectly blank, flickered. He frowned like somehow, James had gotten past the asshole armor he always wore around himself. The corner of his mouth turned down and James felt... *something*. The swoop of his heart, the prickle of something on the back of his neck. Rather than examining whatever the hell that meant, James straightened.

“Try not to shag anybody violent tonight, I can’t be bothered to clean up after you,” James said before turning away so he couldn’t see the little frown on Regulus’s face any longer.

“See!” Regulus called after him. “You do think I’m a slut!”

And really, James didn’t. In fact, he was sure he’d been through just as many bodies as Regulus had, but tonight he liked the idea that maybe, potentially, the notion might sting Regulus just a little. Probably not, but it was nice to think that just once James could hurt Regulus in the way he was so often hurt by the younger Black.

--

James woke the morning of their flight to Italy in a mood. Which, if you’d seen him recently, you’d think was his constant state, but really, it wasn’t. Often James felt fine, great even, when he could manage to ignore the hole in his chest, sucking in everything it touched.

James had agreed to sleep over at Sirius and Remus’s so they could all take a cab to the airport together. They had a guest room, but of course, Regulus had claimed it, leaving Peter and James to figure out the couch and an air mattress. Which was fine, James had slept in worse places, but he still woke at an ungodly hour to Regulus banging around while he made tea. Honestly, James wasn’t sure Regulus slept at all because he was not a morning person, and being up this early was a bad omen. They already had to sacrifice precious sleep because of their flight and now Regulus had woken James up even earlier. He held in the rude string of words that were swirling around his head as he grumpily gave up on sleep, because soon after, Sirius was up too and James wasn’t about to act a bitch to Regulus when Sirius was present. Not that he normally acted that way anyway, the pub night a few days earlier being an exception, but it didn’t squash the urge.

However, despite being woken early and the general chaos and arguments that broke out on their way to the airport, somehow, they managed to meet up with the girls and make it onto their plane with very few mishaps. As their flight took off and James peered out the window, watching London disappear as they rose above the clouds, he breathed out a sigh of relief. He suddenly realized that for the rest of the summer, he didn’t have any of his usual shit to deal with.

He had the entire summer where he didn't have to think about Molly or her worried gaze as she'd brought him into her office a few days earlier.

"You didn't even call out, James," she'd told him. "You just didn't show up for your shift. That's not acceptable behavior. Normally, I'd fire someone for that, but you've never had an incident like this before and overall, you get great reviews from customers and you're a good worker. I know you've had a rough year so I'm going to cut you some slack—"

"I don't need pity."

"I'm not giving you pity, I'm giving you a chance. If you want to retain this job when you return at the end of August, then I recommend you take it."

But none of that mattered right now, and no one need know about any of it. Now it was just James and the rest of the summer to figure out what the fuck he was supposed to do next.

"Italy, here we come." Sirius grinned, his eyes wide with excitement as he peered around James to watch the earth below them as the plane gained altitude.

James turned his new phone over in his hands and mirrored Sirius's smile. "Here we come," he agreed, feeling giddy.

The flight was short. In fact, they'd originally debated whether or not to even fly, but in the end, it just seemed better than a train ride which would take an entire day. Knowing his friends, more than a few of them were sure to get antsy. So it was only around a two-hour flight, and in no time they were touching down in Italy and dropping their bags on the floor of Alphard Black's huge Italian house.

"Wow," Marlene raised her eyebrows as she spun around the entryway, taking in the bright tiles and colorful art adorning the walls. "This place is gorgeous."

“Crazy rich uncle,” Mary nodded seriously before Lily grabbed her by the wrist as they took off to claim a room.

Regulus was in the corner with Barty and Evan as everyone else set off to choose their own rooms as well, and Barty clapped him on the shoulder. “Well good luck, Reg,” he said, casting James a pointed look. “Potter, I hope he kills you. The world would be a better place.”

James winked at Barty in response, smiling as if those sorts of things bounced off of him. As if he didn't think the same thing whenever he got too drunk or couldn't sleep.

James was left alone with Regulus and the other man sighed, clearly still unhappy with the sleeping arrangements. James felt his happy mood from earlier instantly plummet, a cold feeling washing over him as Regulus turned, setting off into the house, a clear dismissal of James.

James followed anyway, ignoring the shameful feeling of rejection that always followed Regulus's demeanor towards him.

Regulus walked with a purpose, choosing a room and dropping his stuff in it without waiting for James to approve.

“You can sleep on the cot,” Regulus said tonelessly. “Got to get it down from the attic I think.”

James sighed, admiring the comfy-looking bed, knowing he'd be sleeping on a no-doubt ancient and hard mattress the entire summer.

“Gee, thanks,” James muttered. “How thoughtful of you.”

“Boo-hoo.” Regulus rolled his eyes. “I can't sleep as is, I'm not even bothering with anything less than a proper bed. I'll get the fucking cot if you want to be a baby about it.” He didn't

wait for James to answer before leaving the room. James just stood there blinking as he realized he must have been right that morning; Regulus had trouble sleeping and he probably hadn't slept at all the night before.

When Regulus returned a little while later and began setting up the spare bed, James couldn't help but study his face. As James stepped forward to help him, they were close enough that James could make out the telltale smudge of makeup under his eyes. Concealer of some sort, no doubt to hide the bags that must have been there. James had never noticed before. He wondered if anyone else knew that Regulus didn't sleep. Was he an insomniac or was it something else?

“Why are you staring at me, Potter?”

James quickly tore his gaze away. “Sorry,” he muttered. “It's just- I realized you're wearing makeup.”

“*And?* I thought you were an ally.”

“Firstly,” James frowned, “you don't need to be gay to wear makeup. Secondly, I'm just saying I was surprised. I never noticed before.”

Regulus scoffed. “Course not, you don't notice me.”

James frowned suddenly at that remark. It felt like an echo of their conversation in the alley when James had said Regulus didn't know him. He didn't know what that meant or if it mattered to Regulus. To begin with, Regulus Black didn't give two shits about James. And aside from that, it wasn't true, *sure* James noticed Regulus.

He said as much. “That's not true,” James insisted.

“*Really,*” Regulus said the word in that way he always did, drawn out and sarcastic, but something about it was so sweet and addicting. The low swoop of his voice dragging its way

over James's skin. "Name one thing, aside from the fact that I'm a whore."

"I—" James began, trying to think of something he noticed about Regulus that didn't have anything to do with his extracurricular activities or keeping them out of Sirius's worry, but really, James realized, everything he paid attention to about Regulus had something to do with Sirius. But that was why James paid attention in the first place, *for Sirius*, so surely that couldn't be wrong. That was the only way they had any sort of relationship. James was Sirius's best friend, and Regulus was his best friend's brother. Yet, based on the way Regulus was looking at him, grey eyes sharp, James knew that would be the wrong answer. Did Regulus want to be noticed by James? No, surely not, *right?* Regulus had never cared, in fact, he was crudely clear about his dislike of James.

"I noticed you apparently don't sleep."

"Doesn't count," Regulus said, leaning back, something in his gaze closing off before James could even realize it'd been there. *Something* hiding away, a door, a window to a part of Regulus James had never even come close to witnessing before, and instantly, he wanted it back. "I told you that earlier. But sure, good on you for having basic listening skills, you're on par with most four-year-olds. Do you want a sticker?"

"I noticed it when you were making a fucking racket in the kitchen this morning and woke me up at an ungodly hour," James countered, unsure why he now felt he had to prove something to Regulus. "And I notice that whenever you say the word 'really' you draw it out, and you almost only use it when you're being a sarcastic dick."

Regulus blinked, standing suddenly and James thought for a moment that maybe he'd caught Regulus off guard before the other boy was rolling his eyes. "Great, really putting those basic listening skills to work then. So *maybe* you're actually on par with most eleven-year-olds, great work!"

James sighed, standing and brushing his hands off on his trousers. "I'm going to go find sheets for this," he said, leaving Regulus, the confusing, mind-twisting person he was alone in their bedroom.

"Prongs!" Sirius's voice called as James passed an open door down the hall. He instantly paused, taking a few steps backward to peer inside. Remus was lying on the bed while Sirius

sat on the floor, unpacking his things, which seemed to include a whole lot of taking them out of his bags without putting anything away.

“Yes, Pads?” James questioned, leaning in the doorway.

“How are you getting on with Reggie? He hasn’t resorted to violence yet, has he?”

“No, so far only light mocking.” James shrugged, grinning at his friend to prove he wasn’t bothered by it.

Sirius grimaced anyway. The animosity between Regulus and James had always been a sore spot for Sirius, who desperately wanted two of the people he loved most to get along. In James’s defense, *he’d* tried, for many, many years. “I am sorry about this. You’re sure it’s alright?” Sirius asked.

“I’m sure,” James assured him. “Plus, we’re the only two single people here. I’m not about to break up any of you lovebirds from sharing just because Regulus is a bit prissy. I can handle him, we’ve known each other long enough, haven’t we?”

“I know, I know.” Sirius frowned. “I just want everyone to have a perfect holiday. I mean everything’s about to change after this summer, isn’t it?”

Remus sat up from the bed, shaking his head. “C’mon Pads, you said that after we graduated the first time, didn’t you? And the four of us, plus Mary and Lily, all wound up living in London. Half of us went to uni together *and* we managed to meet Marlene and Dorcas. Sure, things will change, but this holiday isn’t the end of anything. We’re all staying in London, and Reg has another year left of uni... no one is going far. Don’t put pressure on the holiday to be perfect, just enjoy it. James and Regulus will be able to handle themselves,” Remus said, flashing James a pointed look.

“Course,” James agreed quickly. “It’s not the end.” He tried to ignore the way his stomach flipped at the lie. For them, sure it wasn’t, but for James? Well, that was another story, one he didn’t plan to worry about at the moment. He had the rest of the summer, and he planned to take it before everything came crashing down.

“I know,” Sirius sighed. “It’s not like I could ever get rid of you lot... I just know things will change. We’ll be real adults with real jobs, I mean, I start mine basically as soon as we get home. It feels like this is the last time we get to be stupid young people. After that, we’ll just be boring adults.

“If you still want to get drunk and be a slut on the weekends, there’s no age limit on that.” James raised his eyebrows. “I can picture you getting down at the club in your eighties.”

“But then I’ll be all withered and ugly!”

“You’ll still be beautiful,” Remus assured him. “I don’t think you’re even capable of anything less.”

Sirius’s eyes lit up at the compliment. Of course, Sirius had definitely known from the time he hit puberty that he was extraordinarily attractive, yet he never seemed to stop being surprised when Remus offered up compliments. Maybe it was just the fact that it was Remus that made it special; no one else’s opinion mattered to Sirius like Remus’s did. James wondered what that was like, to be so seen and loved by someone.

James couldn’t imagine it, not if it were *him*. He didn’t think anyone would look into the ugly, messy depths of James Potter and come out with anything but disgust. If anyone actually knew the things he felt or the thoughts that looped around his head, even his friends who’d loved him more than half his life wouldn’t stick around. James kept people in his life by keeping the nasty, dark parts of himself hidden. If they saw it, they’d leave. They would turn on him. James’s father was proof enough of that.

Unconditional love wasn’t real, not when it came to James. There were always conditions, even if the people who loved him didn’t know it yet. The only person James thought might love him regardless would be his mum, and that didn’t mean much anymore.

During the time James had slipped into his head, Sirius and Remus had started flirting and James shook his head, deciding to leave them to it. Neither of them noticed him leave.

Starting back on his quest to find bedding, he dug through a few closets before he found some sheets. They were soft and smelled freshly washed, probably in preparation for their arrival. James was at least glad for comfortable bedding if he had to sleep on an ancient cot.

When James returned to his room, Regulus was gone and his things were unpacked, bags hidden away. James wasn't surprised by Regulus's efficiency, but what he *was* surprised by was the fact that the drapes had been pulled open on every window, allowing for the sun to shine brightly into the room. For some reason, James would have thought Regulus to be the kind of person who liked a room dark and gloomy, but he'd tied the drapes back with obvious intent and care.

James thought of his own room back home, dim and dusty, the blinds always closed. Maybe people expected him to have a room like this, the windows always open, the sun constantly shining in.

Making quick work, James made up his bed before unpacking his things. When he was finished, he headed down the stairs, following the sound of voices in the kitchen. He heard laughter, everyone chatting easily, and James was probably the only person who wasn't in there. He considered barging in, asking what they'd do if he died. Would they care, would they laugh like this without him as if nothing had changed? *Would* anything change? Clearly, they didn't need him. James could just off himself and it wouldn't matter.

There was another peal of laughter and James tried to swallow down his sudden rage at their ease. How simple it seemed for everyone else. What was wrong with him? Why did anger itch under his skin so intensely it burned?

James scratched at his arms, feeling the rage in his veins. He pressed at the most prominent vein on his wrist, trying to force down the anger that bubbled there. Taking a deep breath, he forced the pained look off his face. They didn't need to deal with any of James's nasty bits.

“Oi, Prongs? That you?”

James took a deep breath, stepping inside the kitchen. “Yeah, yeah,” James said, taking a seat next to Sirius and nudging his friend playfully.

“What were you lingering in the doorway for?” Sirius asked.

“Sorry, I was on my phone.” James waved the damned thing, hoping nobody could catch the fact that it was still off from his flight. He knew his dad was bound to try calling him soon. James had been waiting in fear of that dreaded call for the past week.

“We were just talking about dinner,” Remus said as James dropped his phone on the table. “I think we should go get groceries tonight for the week and cook something rather than going out.”

“That’s fine with me.” James shrugged.

“I agree,” Mary leaned forward. “That way we can save a little money. I’m sure we’ll have plenty of time to go out later on, but we’re all semi-responsible adults, we can manage some cooking.”

“Take ‘we’ out of that sentence,” Lily snorted. “*You* are not going anywhere near the cooking, not if we wish to avoid being poisoned.”

Mary huffed, shooting a glare at her girlfriend, but she didn’t contradict Lily either.

“Okay,” Remus spoke up. “House rule, Sirius and Mary are *not* allowed to cook. Anyone else we should ban?”

“Emmeline,” Peter said instantly, and the girl blushed, tucking her hair behind her ear. “She once burned a pot of water.”

“That... is true,” she admitted, cheeks pink.

“Okay, you three are kitchen-banned,” Remus said seriously. “Who’s a good cook? I know James is brilliant, Dorcas is good, and the rest of you are passable?”

“Barty is atrocious,” Evan offered and the man in question tried to elbow him in the side while Evan easily avoided him. “Don’t let him even look at an ingredient, it will instantly self-combust in fear.”

“Noted,” Remus nodded. “Good, we can work out some kind of schedule for cooking, that way everyone does their part.” James couldn’t help but grin at how easily Remus took control. He really was going to make a great professor someday. “Does anyone want to volunteer to get groceries? Reg, can I volunteer you since you’re the only one who speaks fluent Italian?”

“Fine,” Regulus crossed his arms, unhappily. “Barty does, too.”

“Okay, Regulus and Barty... let’s have someone sensible supervise?”

Regulus scoffed at that, but Dorcas just rolled her eyes at her friend. “I’ll go, let’s make a grocery list.”

Everyone started throwing out requests for food they wanted and meal ideas while James sat back, eyes straying to Regulus. He’d been glaring at Remus for a second, clearly not pleased to have been volunteered, but within a few minutes, he seemed unable to keep it up. Regulus was always good to Remus, a fact that itched under James’s skin. Even if Regulus played mean, he always softened for Remus, for most of them eventually. It made sense. Remus was the wonderful sort of person that everyone liked. He was kind and forgiving, but sharp and sarcastic as well. A perfect balance between warmth and his ability to take no shit. Remus was smart and funny and naturally likable, he didn’t have to try or pretend to make people like him. They just *did* because he was Remus Lupin. James violently envied that. He didn’t think he’d been a natural a day in his life, all he did was try.

“What do you want, Prongs?”

James looked up to find Remus looking at him expectantly, a pad of paper and a pen in his hand with their grocery requests.

“Oh, I’m fine,” James said quickly, no need to be a burden. “I’ll eat whatever we have.”

“You don’t have any preferences?” Remus prompted, slowly.

James just shrugged and Sirius leaned over to poke Remus in the arm. “C’mon, Moony, you know our James. Never a more easygoing person,” he said, flashing James a wide grin.

James nodded in agreement. Yes, he was so easygoing, of course. James didn’t spend every second of every day trying to shape himself into something likable. Absolutely not! That’d be crazy. James definitely hadn’t created his personality just to please the people around him.

Definitely not.

Emmeline

Emmeline really liked Peter. They’d been dating for almost six months now, and it was serious. She wouldn’t have agreed to join him on a summer-long holiday with all his friends if that weren’t the case. Emmeline also liked his friends. They were an interesting group, and to be honest, she was still trying to work out some of the dynamics, but they’d all been warm and welcoming to her. She found she got along well with Marlene, and they’d formed a fast friendship the past few months. However...they were still *Peter’s* friends. Now she was in a house with all of them, people who’d clearly known each other for years, some of them for over a decade and here she was, the newcomer.

Everyone was nice to her of course, but she still felt herself getting lost in the crowd. The thing about Emmeline was that she was a very social person, she liked having lots of friends and going out. However, she always was and had always been quite uncomfortable in her skin. She had no problem holding a conversation, but she needed someone else to take the initiative. If someone took the first step, she could keep up, but she was terribly uncertain when it came to speaking up first.

Peter had warned her that some of his friends were “*characters*” as he’d put it. She could see that. Sirius and James specifically were bright and confident in a way Emmeline couldn’t even fathom. Sirius was attractive and bold, so confident and charming in his skin that she could see the way eyes followed him in any room, both with adoration and bitter envy. James was different, he was confident and extroverted, but unlike Sirius, it didn’t make him seem untouchable or unattainable. He was friendly and real. Easygoing and always quick to smile. Emmeline didn’t think she’d ever even seen him frown, much less get angry. He was funny and attractive in a careless way, like it was effortless.

Really, James Potter was everything Emmeline wished she could be. Everyone loved him, he could talk to anyone without fear or uncertainty. Nothing seemed to really touch him. He’d clearly grown up with everything, from what people said. Two loving parents, a pretty house, and a good education. Emmeline had been homeschooled most of her life, and as much as she didn’t like to perpetuate any stereotypes about homeschooling, the truth was for *her*, it’d affected her development negatively. She still felt so *other* in a room full of people. Like they all understood these things she didn’t, and she was wrong or out of place. She wanted to be like James. She wanted to fit in.

She could never undo the feeling, never forget the looks, the lingering of being *different*.

Everyone was chatting around the house. Dinner was cooking and the smell was incredible, especially after the day of traveling, she was starving. Peter had disappeared with Regulus, Lily and Dorcas at some point. He’d checked in with Emmeline before leaving her alone. A part of her wanted to ask him to stay, but she didn’t want to seem clingy or keep him from his friends, so she’d insisted she was fine. But now Emmeline was sitting in the corner, drink in her hand. She didn’t even like drinking much, but it gave her something to do, so she sipped it slowly, trying not to seem like she didn’t belong.

Suddenly, James Potter plopped down in the seat next to her, startling her from her thoughts.

“Sorry,” he smiled, pushing his glasses up his nose. “Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“No, no,” she said quickly. “I just tend to get stuck in my head. Not your fault.”

“Hm,” he hummed, leaning back and taking a long sip from his own cup. Emmeline knew James was a drinker. She had heard Peter complain enough times about James’s tendency to

get pissed and abandon them in favor of some girl. “I see. You considering your escape plan? It’s not too late, you can break up with Peter and make a run for it. I’ll help you craft the breakup text if you’d like.”

Emmeline couldn’t help but return his joking smile, shaking her head. “Breaking up over text? Now that’s a little harsh.”

“Fine, a letter then? How’s your handwriting?”

“Perfect.”

“Good, I’ll help you write it. We can start with... ‘*Dear Peter, I’m sorry. As wonderful and sexy as you are, your friends are fucking maniacs and I cannot take it any longer.*’ Sound right?”

Emmeline laughed. “I wouldn’t say you’re *all* maniacs.”

“Hm, not Remus.” James nodded seriously. “Though don’t let him fool you, he’s just as wicked as the rest of us, just with a little more common sense. Lily’s the only real good one, not that she wouldn’t still fuck a person up if needed, wonderful woman she is.” James smiled fondly and Emmeline wondered how he could talk of Lily so casually. She knew the two had dated for years and she couldn’t imagine ever talking so easily about any ex, even the ones she was on ‘good terms’ with.

“I can see that,” Emmeline agreed.

“Do you talk with Lily much?” James asked. “I can see the two of you getting on well.”

“Not that much,” Emmeline admitted. “I mean, I haven’t been around very long. This is my first time really being around everyone together.”

James stood suddenly. “Well, come on then.”

“Come on where?” Emmeline questioned, but she stood as well because there was just something about James that was so likable, she felt she could trust him.

“To chat with Lily. I’ll pry Mary off her if needed, don’t worry. I think the two of you would be great friends.”

So, Emmeline followed James through the house without complaint.

“Lily!” He yelled, waving at Lily who was at the kitchen table, feet in Remus’s lap while she did Marlene’s hair.

“Potter?” Lily winced, her fingers pausing in their weaving of Marlene’s plait. “Is the volume necessary?”

James just shrugged, something Emmeline noticed he did often. She wondered what could possibly be going on in the head of a guy like that. He never really seemed to have thoughts, opinions, or problems with anything. She wished she could simply take life as easily as it came in the way he did.

“I brought Emmeline,” James said, nudging her towards an empty seat. “Pete abandoned her. I was trying to get her to break up with him.”

Lily rolled her eyes, looking to Emmeline. “Don’t let James get to you, you could do a lot worse than Peter. Take it from someone who dated *James*.” She made a face at that. “Crazy motherfucker.”

“I’m not crazy,” James crossed his arms.

“Sure,” Lily shook her head. “As far as men go, a girl could do worse, but they could also do better.” She looked pointedly at Emmeline. “Like Pete, a wonderful man. I hear he plans good dates, too.”

Emmeline couldn't help but blush a little at that. “He does,” she admitted somewhat bashfully. “He's amazing.”

“Good,” Remus said kindly, leaning forward. “You're my favorite partner he's ever had.”

“Really?” She wasn't sure why she was surprised, but really, Emmeline had imagined most of Peter's friends simply tolerated her.

“Oh absolutely,” Lily agreed. “And trust me, I think he feels that way too. He's never brought anyone around this much. The fact that he took you on this trip is proof enough that he's a goner for you.”

Emmeline couldn't help but feel giddy. God, she really liked Peter. She could imagine having a proper life with him. The fact that maybe he felt the same, and it was possible, filled her with a hopeful warmth.

She turned, looking to see if James had any comments on this, but when she looked towards the doorway, he wasn't there. Huh, she hadn't even heard him leave. She turned back to Lily and Remus, brushing it off.

James probably had more people to entertain.

Chapter End Notes

I'll see you all next Friday ;)

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Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

 See the end notes for TWs! 

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

James

He couldn't sleep. It didn't help that the cot was hard and uncomfortable. On top of that, the room was unfamiliar, and it filled him with unease. Gone were the noises of the city James was used to. Instead, it was eerily quiet.

After hours of trying to force his brain to quiet down, he gave up. Careful not to make any noise and disrupt Regulus's sleep, James dug around in his bag for his cigarettes before creeping out of the room and onto the small balcony off of their room. He savored the taste of the smoke, letting the cool air soothe the burn of his skin. James looked down at the ground below. They were only on the second floor, he'd probably survive if he jumped. Maybe he'd break a few bones, but that would be it. He could hear the crack, the bone-crush. James hungered for it.

He thought about doing it, telling everyone he fell. Watching them worry, seeing them show they cared. Then he thought about the questions. "How could you fall?" "Were you drunk?" "That shouldn't have happened." "What's wrong with you?" "You're crazy."

Crazy, crazy, crazy.

James swallowed, stepping back. He finished his cigarette before turning and heading back inside where Regulus was still tucked into his bed.

James fell asleep listening to Regulus breathe.

--

The blaring of his alarm woke James with a start. He groaned, reaching for his phone on the bedside table, startling when his hand only met air where his table should have been.

“Turn that the fuck off!” someone snapped, and James sat up quickly in surprise, recognizing Regulus’s sharp voice.

He was in the house in Italy; his alarm wasn’t going off, his phone was ringing. James stumbled out of bed to where his phone was charging on the floor. He knew who was calling even before he read the caller ID.

The picture of his father took over the lock screen, younger than he was now, smiling with his arm around James’s shoulder and his eyes sparkling with life.

James felt paralyzed, unable to decline the call or answer it. He knew this was coming, but he still didn’t feel ready. A pillow hit James hard on the back and he spun to glare at Regulus who was now sitting up in bed, his face twisted in a grumpy expression. His curls were disheveled from sleep and his cheeks were a little pink from the early morning heat. For some strange reason, James couldn’t look away.

“Are you going to fucking answer that?” Regulus snapped, and that spurred James into action, shaking him from his weird haze.

“Hi Dad, sorry can’t talk,” James said, accepting the call and instantly hanging up before his father could even say a word.

When he turned back around, Regulus was frowning. Not in his usual way of disgust or bitterness, but in the way James had seen only a few times. Like something was genuinely wrong. The corner of his lips turned down, his eyes wide and almost... confused?

“Why are you ignoring your dad?” Regulus asked as James’s phone immediately began to ring again.

James reached out, turning the cursed thing off before looking back to Regulus. “I’m not. It’s early, I’ll call him back later. He’s just overbearing.”

“Boo-hoo, your dad loves you.” Regulus’s demeanor changed suddenly as he rolled his eyes before getting out of bed. “Well, now you’ve woken me up, so thanks for that. I knew this trip was going to be a nightmare,” Regulus muttered to himself. He got out of bed and headed into the bathroom off their room, leaving James standing in the bedroom with his dark phone and a knot in his stomach.

He knew why his dad was calling, and it wasn’t about love.

James heard the shower turn on and he sat down on the edge of his bed, phone clutched in his hand. After a moment, taking a deep breath, he switched it back on. It started ringing instantly and, trying not to break another phone, James forced himself to answer.

“Dad...”

Regulus

Regulus Black was a pessimist.

This was not news to a single person who knew him. In his defense, he expected the worst because that was generally what he got. Everyone in his life had let him down time and time again. Even the people he’d managed to come back to, like Sirius, had terribly, horrifically *life-ruiningly* let him down on multiple occasions. Like severely, to the point where it had altered his sense of self and probably scarred him for life. Regulus didn’t really blame Sirius for that anymore, only if he was very drunk and very angry. Plus, he was pretty sure he’d scarred Sirius right back and their parents had also done their fair share of absolutely traumatizing them for life. So really, the Black brothers were doomed, it wasn’t Regulus’s

fault that Sirius was his complete opposite and managed to bounce back and retain a little optimism.

Regulus had not. He was mean and bitter and had never once looked at anything as a glass half full. He didn't really care much what people thought of him; he knew who he was, and he knew the people who really mattered would love him even when he was a bitch. That didn't mean he *liked* being bitter and cruel. Really, he wished he was more like Sirius, but Regulus wasn't about to try to be someone he wasn't. That was just who he was, and frankly, he was lucky to have made it this far at all, so being a bit of a bitch was a small price for the fact that he was alive.

Regulus knew Sirius thought so too because he'd let Regulus get away with a lot over the past four years, things he wouldn't have before. But Regulus was lucky to be alive, and Sirius was lucky to have him back, or at least that's what Remus said. He said that Sirius loved Regulus to death and that he'd do anything for him, including letting his attitude run a little wild after everything. And sure, Remus was probably right because he usually was, but still... Regulus was a pessimist. Sometimes he found it hard to believe Sirius really loved him that much.

Regulus wanted to stay in the shower for much longer than he did, but he knew there were many other people who would need to shower as well and he didn't want to use all the hot water. He still felt groggy and grumpy as he finished up his shower, but at least he was clean.

Stupid James had kept him up that night. Not that sleeping usually came easy for Regulus, but Potter didn't help. He'd heard him up half the night, even getting up to smoke, a habit Regulus still couldn't quite believe. No one had ever mentioned James smoking before, and Regulus wondered if that was a secret. It didn't seem to be a new habit, but who the hell knew what went on with James Potter? Regulus always thought he knew the other man. Sirius's dumb and cocky best friend, loud, annoying, and a pain in Regulus's ass. The kid who had stolen his brother away as soon as they met. Regulus hated James, yet he couldn't stop thinking about James's words outside the pub.

"Regulus, you don't know me."

That wasn't true, Regulus didn't think that could be true. Sure, they weren't *friends*, but they'd grown up together, even if Regulus had spent all those years hating James's guts. He still knew that James had wanted to play football professionally from the time he was eleven

to seventeen. Regulus knew James only drank coffee, never tea, that he took it with far more sugar than any person should but if someone offered him a cup, he always asked for it black so as to not give them more work. He knew James pretended not to hate his job but he despised it, and that he'd probably only gone to uni because everyone else had.

See, Regulus's terrible, shameful secret was that he noticed a lot of things about James Potter. Things he wished he didn't because James didn't notice him. James humored Sirius, watched out for Regulus (i.e. cockblocked him at every opportunity) for his best mate, and that was all. Regulus didn't and had never existed to James outside of Sirius, and that was fine. Regulus hated James, he didn't need to be noticed by him.

Definitely not.

Regulus could hear the timbre of James's voice in the other room as he turned off the shower and began to pull on his trousers. The walls were thin, and without the steady noise of the water, he could hear James speaking clearly, even though his voice was low.

"...and I've told you, Dad, I'm fine."

There was a moment of silence and then James scoffed, the sound sharp and so unlike any noise Regulus had ever heard from his mouth. "Oh, you've got to be fucking kidding me. Don't act like you give a shit, you don't love me. You just want to ship me off and be rid of me bringing shame upon your name, huh? Get rid of your crazy fucking son with all his issues so no one will ever have to know you raised a psycho—"

James broke off, probably interrupted by his dad on the other side of the line and Regulus froze outside of the door, not wanting to interrupt. He'd never heard James talk like that, and none of the things he was saying made sense. Ship James off? A 'psycho'? Regulus didn't think he'd ever heard anyone put James Potter and psycho in the same sentence. James was easygoing and well-adjusted, confident in himself and a little reckless at times sure, but more level-headed than Sirius at the very least.

"There's nothing wrong with me! I'm not fucking taking them, Dad! I don't want to talk about this, I don't want to talk about school. You're not allowed to forget I exist and then suddenly decide to interfere with my life! You've been blowing me off for weeks, don't try to be a father now. I'm not fucking sick! I'm not crazy!"

There was silence after that and Regulus swallowed, waiting a long moment before hesitantly reaching for the doorknob. When he stepped back into the bedroom, James was sitting on the edge of his bed, phone clutched in his hand. He startled when Regulus let the bathroom door swing shut behind him, looking up like he'd forgotten Regulus was there.

That was another thing Regulus noticed. James always seemed to go somewhere else when no one was looking, except Regulus was always looking. Not that he thought James ever realized that.

James opened his mouth as if to say something and then froze, his eyes fixed on Regulus's bare torso. Regulus resisted the urge to hide himself, he knew he was attractive despite the scars that criss-crossed his body. The dots of cigarette burns down his side had always been particularly ugly to Regulus; bile rose in his throat every time he caught sight of them. Yes, Regulus knew he was hot, but *in spite of* his imperfections, not alongside them.

"Go ahead and stare it up, Potter," Regulus snapped, and god, sometimes he did wish he was somebody else. He wished he could react any other way. "I know it's ugly."

James seemed to snap to attention, instantly tearing his eyes away from Regulus's bare skin. "It's not ugly," James muttered, the words falling from his lips in a rush as if he hadn't meant to say it at all.

"*Huh?*" Regulus asked dumbly.

"I—" James paused, clearly knowing it was too late to take it back now. "I said it's not ugly.... It's just life."

A day ago — hell, an hour ago, Regulus would have scoffed and asked what the fuck James knew about *life* in that sense. With his own charmed upbringing and perfect little life. Except, suddenly, Regulus felt like everything he thought he knew had been tipped on its head.

In his mind, James had everything. His parents had always loved him to death, willing to give him anything. Everyone he met loved him. No one shook their head when the topic of James Potter came up, they all smiled and sang his praises.

Yet, those small pieces of the conversation Regulus had overheard changed pretty much every perception of James that Regulus ever had. He'd thought Monty Potter was a perfect, loving father, but a perfect father didn't leave their son sitting on a bed, staring into the distance as if they'd seen a ghost.

"I guess it is," Regulus finally replied, and James's face twisted in confusion like he couldn't believe Regulus wasn't snapping at him.

"Right..." James said slowly, his brow furrowed.

"The shower is free if you want," Regulus gestured behind himself, and James didn't react for a minute, still frowning.

Regulus turned, unable to face James any longer. He quickly dug out a shirt, pulling it over his head. He left James sitting there on his bed, still staring into space in confusion.

There had been enough world-tipping going on that morning and the sun had barely risen, Regulus couldn't have anything else he thought he knew fundamentally altered before eight A.M.

He headed down the stairs where the house was predictably quiet, everyone else still fast asleep. He began to fix himself tea and started a pot of coffee as well as, admittedly just for James.

See, because if Regulus's secret was that he noticed James Potter, the core of that lay within one very big, terrible, and awful secret that Regulus swore he would take to his grave.

Regulus Black was in love with James Potter. Regulus had been since he was thirteen years old, which was... pathetic, absolutely pathetic. Regulus had convinced himself he'd grow out of it eventually. Yet here he was, in his twenties and still miserably in love with James.

At least Regulus took comfort in the fact that nobody knew, least of all James.

Well, no... Barty and Evan knew because Regulus had made the mistake of getting a little too drunk and sobbing about James's hair into their shoulders, but he had enough dirt on the two of them he knew that was a secret they'd keep.

By the time the coffee had finished, James was coming down the stairs, hair damp and as wild as ever. Regulus grabbed a mug and poured him a cup before adding a little cream and a shit ton of sugar the way he knew James liked it. James sat at the table, tapping at his phone. Regulus wondered if he was texting his dad or maybe whatever girl he was seeing now. Sirius had said James was being weird and that he must have been seeing somebody new. Regulus pretended the thought didn't make him want to be sick.

Swallowing, Regulus grabbed his own cup of tea before setting the coffee down in front of James, who dropped his phone in surprise as he looked at Regulus and then at the coffee.

"It's coffee, not poison," Regulus rolled his eyes before sitting down at the table as well and beginning his usual morning routine of checking his texts and emails.

"You made me coffee?"

"I made a pot, and yes, I poured you a cup. Not exactly much effort."

James didn't reply and Regulus snuck a glance as James took a sip, pausing suddenly, his head jerking towards Regulus.

Regulus didn't have time to look away and he knew he was caught. He refused to flinch from James's gaze, even as the other man examined him with such scrutiny that Regulus could feel

it settling in his bones. Something buzzing and intense bloomed in his chest. He didn't think James had ever really looked at him before, not really, and certainly not like he was now. Like he was seeing Regulus; not just a glance, not even a brief stare but something heavy, shifting the earth's core. The gravitational pull of James's brown eyes behind his glasses, the curve of his bottom lashes.

James looked away first, his forehead creased, brows pulled together. Like Regulus was a puzzle, something he had never witnessed before.

"You put sugar in my coffee," James said finally, even as he fixed his eyes on his mug.

Regulus took a sip of his tea, savoring the burn of the scalding liquid because at least it gave him something to focus on rather than the very fresh memory of James's eyes burning into his skin. "As many people do."

"You put *a lot* of sugar in my coffee," James emphasized. "Like a lot, an abnormal amount. Is that how you take it?"

"No. I don't really drink coffee."

"Is that why you put that much sugar in?"

"No," Regulus sighed. "I did it because that's how you like it."

"But how did you know that?"

"I pay attention."

"To me?" James's voice came out tentative and unsure, his fingers tapping on the table as he still refused to meet Regulus's eyes again.

“Sure, to plenty of things.”

“Why?”

“It’s dangerous to miss things.”

James’s head jerked up at that, eyes finding Regulus’s again, and his frown deepened. “You think I’m dangerous?”

“I didn’t say that,” Regulus told him quietly, and he was saved from having to explain why exactly he paid attention to James as Remus appeared in the doorway. He had a book clutched to his chest and he rubbed his eyes tiredly.

“Morning,” he greeted, clearly having no idea that he’d walked in on — well, Regulus didn’t know exactly what it was, but *something*.

It felt like something.

Marlene

Someone was chatting downstairs. She couldn’t tell who, but it was one of the boys based on the low timbre of their voice. Marlene could hear it rising from the first floor as she stretched out in bed. The air was filled with the smell of fresh coffee, and it reminded her of waking up at home as a teenager. The quiet sound of the world outside the window, no city noises to interrupt nature.

Rather than that comforting her, Marlene instantly sat up, blinking just to be sure that she wasn’t at home. She hadn’t gone back, she hadn’t been pulled five years into the past, back to her dead little town with nothing to offer but suffocation.

Dorcas was already awake, peering out the window.

“Reminds you of home, hm?” she asked, turning as she heard Marlene stir.

Home... Marlene didn't grimace at the word. They were on holiday, and she didn't want to start a fight on their first real day in Italy. So carefully, she just nodded.

“Yeah, it does,” Marlene told her girlfriend, as if her nightmares didn't consist of an ending that looked the same as the middle.

Once they were the same.

Two girls in the middle of the busy vastness of London. Used to neighbors that had known them since the day they were born, shop owners who were at their parents' weddings, servers who knew their orders, and their parents' and grandparents' as well.

Once, they were two girls clinging onto each other in a city where you were lucky to see the same person twice. Where you saw more people in a day than lived in their entire town growing up.

Somewhere in between now and then, the idea of being known had settled, a sickening stone inside Marlene's gut.

Dorcas had never given two shits if the people who knew her grandparents looked down on her and scoffed. If they said: “This isn't what your grandmother would have wanted.” She would probably laugh in their faces. “Screw that old bat,” she would grin.

Marlene cared.

But she didn't want to fight today, so she stood, despite the stone laying heavy in her stomach.

"I'm starving," Marlene said instead of *will you still love me when you realize what I've become? Will we survive this holiday?*

"Let's see if we can convince James to make pancakes," Dorcas said, stepping away from the window to kiss Marlene on the cheek before grabbing her jumper from the end of the bed and slipping it on.

"Sure, let me just get dressed. I'll join you downstairs in a minute."

"Course, love you," Dorcas said, grabbing her phone and heading towards the door.

"Love you too," Marlene called after her, shutting the door to their bedroom as she listened to Dorcas's footsteps fade away.

She hoped it didn't sound hollow because it wasn't that she didn't mean it. She did. Marlene had probably loved Dorcas her entire life and would continue to do so forever.

She thought of the email, sitting pinned to the top of her inbox. *Dear Ms. McKinnon, it is a pleasure...*

She squeezed her eyes shut. No matter that she could recite the email word-for-word by now, as well as her own reply. That was a problem for later. She had at least a month before she had to deal with that, and for now, Marlene was determined to enjoy her holiday.

When she emerged downstairs, it seemed Dorcas had succeeded in convincing James to make pancakes because he was at the stove listening to Sirius, who was sitting on the counter telling some story that involved a lot of dramatic hand gestures. Dorcas was next to Regulus, who was staring into his cup even more silently than usual, but Marlene decided not to question it. Despite the fact that Dorcas had become quite close with the younger Black

brother, Marlene had never really understood him. She didn't know much about his backstory aside from the fact that his and Sirius's family was apparently shit and both brothers had been through a lot. Regulus was mean and moody more often than not. Not that Marlene had a problem with him, he was never really cruel, simply a bit of a downer. Still, she wasn't keen to get involved in whatever was going on to make him look so concerned by his cup of tea.

Dorcas was having some silent conversation with Barty over the table, and so Marlene figured that lot had it taken care of, they were *Regulus's Group* anyway, as Marlene thought of them in her head. Sure, they were all friends, but Marlene thought of the group as separated by brothers. Dorcas, Barty, and Evan all belonged to Regulus, as well as Pandora who had skipped the trip as she was on her honeymoon that summer. Everyone else was Sirius's. Marlene had heard Sirius and Regulus had fallouts in the past. She hoped it wouldn't happen ever again because she was sure that would divide their friend group straight down the middle.

“What do you want on your pancakes, Marls?” James called and she smiled, joining him in the kitchen. Though she'd never admit it to anyone, James was her favorite of all the boys.

“Got any strawberries?” she asked, stopping next to where Sirius was perched on the counter.

“For you, of course.”

“Oi, Potter!” Dorcas yelled from the table. “Stop trying to steal my girlfriend, she's a lesbian, you whore!”

James turned to Marlene and winked. “If anyone could change your mind, it'd be me.”

“Ew,” Marlene rolled her eyes, pushing him playfully. “You're hot, James, but unfortunately not hot enough to turn me straight. Good try though. I'm sure you can find lots of other pretty girls, so I won't even feel bad for rejecting you.”

“But maybe you're the only girl I want,” James pouted and Marlene snorted.

“James actually has this special power where he turns straight girls gay,” Sirius noted, swinging his feet. “That’s what happened with Lily, eh? If you let James have his way, you’ll turn out extra gay by the time he’s done.”

Marlene raised her eyebrows. “Are you sure it wouldn’t just cancel out? Maybe your power will turn me straight and we can ride off into the sunset together.”

“My lifelong dream,” James smiled as he began adding strawberries to the pancake he was making.

“Back off my girl, Potter!” Dorcas called again and Marlene just giggled.

Sirius jumped off the counter and Marlene followed him out of the kitchen as the conversation turned to their plans for the day. They intended to take it easy the first week, just settle in and get to know the area a little. After that, Remus had a very detailed itinerary of sights to see and places to visit.

“We should swim today!” Mary suggested. “I mean, we have that whole pool, might as well make good use of it.”

“I know there’s a lake around here somewhere too,” Sirius commented as he dug into his breakfast. “Uncle Alphard was telling me about it.”

“Why don’t we stick with the pool today and go find the lake another time?” Lily suggested. “Too much effort for day one.”

They all quickly agreed and after breakfast, everyone disappeared to change into their swimsuits.

“You coming, Reggie?” Sirius asked when Regulus didn’t rise from the table.

“Not today,” Regulus said quickly. “I didn’t sleep so well, you know how it is. I think I’ll try to take a nap.”

Sirius’s brow furrowed and he reached out, squeezing Regulus’s shoulder, soft in a way he only ever was for his brother. “You’re alright?”

“Course, just need to adjust,” Regulus assured him, letting Sirius lean down and kiss him on the forehead. Even as Regulus made a face of disgust, he still allowed it.

Marlene thought it was sweet, how much they clearly loved one another. Even though, from what she understood, it couldn’t have been easy between them. She wished she could have that kind of relationship with her own siblings, but unfortunately, not all relationships could withstand pressure.

Still determined to enjoy her holiday, Marlene went upstairs to change into her swimsuit before following Dorcas into the large backyard where Mary and Lily were already splashing around in the pool.

Emmeline was sitting tentatively on a pool chair, looking a little uncomfortable and Marlene plopped down next to her.

“Getting in?”

“Eventually, yes. It looks cold,” Emmeline said, watching as Sirius grabbed Peter and pulled him into the pool, knocking them both under the water. They emerged a moment later, sputtering and bickering, which quickly developed into a playfight. Remus, who was sitting at the edge with his feet in the water, just shook his head in exasperation as the two began shrieking loudly.

“I like this,” Marlene said, pointing to Emmeline’s little yellow bikini. It suited her, standing out brightly against her skin.

“Thanks,” Emmeline said, a small smile appearing on her face. “I bought it just for this trip. I tried on so many to find one I liked, and Pete was no help at all, he thought I looked good in all of them.”

“Wow, horrifying!” Marlene told her dramatically. “Your boyfriend thinks you’re hot!”

Emmeline just laughed at that, punching Marlene playfully on the arm. Dorcas was on the other side of the yard in the middle of some heated conversation with Barty, and Marlene watched the way she waved her arms in the air in offense.

“Everything alright?” Emmeline asked, leaning in and lowering her voice.

Marlene tore her eyes from Dorcas. “Yeah...” she said quietly, pausing for a moment before turning to look at her friend. “Are you ever scared of the future?”

“Terrified,” Emmeline said instantly.

“Really? I swear, you seem so put together.”

Emmeline’s eyebrows shot up at that. “Then you’ve got it very, very wrong,” she said, pulling at the ends of her dark hair. “I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“Well,” Marlene took a deep breath, “neither do I. It seems like I’ve spent my entire life waiting to become a ‘real adult’ and now I’m here and I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“My grandmother says that’s how everyone feels,” Emmeline said slowly. “That you’re supposed to be scared in your twenties. But then again, she usually follows that up with *‘when I was your age I’d already immigrated from Korea all on my own and had two kids!’* So maybe that’s not quite as comforting as it could be... but anyway, my point is she always tells me she was terrified. So, I think that’s a constant no matter who you are or what life you lead, being scared.”

Marlene knocked their shoulders together, smiling lightly. “That’s comforting actually, thanks, Em.”

“I wasn’t sure you’d think it was that comforting,” Emmeline admitted with a small laugh. “I was panicking for a second there, but yeah... There’s nothing wrong with not knowing what you’re doing.”

“What are we talking about?” James collapsed on the chair next to them and Emmeline laughed as he sprawled out dramatically.

Marlene wasn’t surprised that Emmeline seemed to have taken a liking to James, he had that effect on people.

“Being in your twenties,” Marlene sighed.

“Ah,” James grinned. “Our prime years!”

“Maybe for you,” Marlene rolled her eyes, reaching out to flick at his messy hair. “Not all of us are hot, single James Potter. My days of slutting it up are long gone.”

“You don’t slut it up for Dorcas?” James raised his eyebrows at her suggestively.

“Not as often as a girl as young and hot as me should,” Marlene said, making sure to sigh dramatically in hopes that no one would catch the tinge of bitterness in her voice.

“I mean, in that bikini I’m sure you could convince Dorcas to indulge you.” James smiled and Marlene just shook her head. Honestly, she wasn’t sure. She didn’t know if Dorcas really looked at her anymore. If she’d even notice how hot Marlene looked in her red swimsuit, how it brought out the blonde of her hair and the blue of her eyes. Dorcas hadn’t even glanced over once since Marlene had put it on.

“Not swimming, James?” Emmeline asked, gesturing to his shorts and T-shirt.

“Nah, not feeling like it today,” James said with a careless shrug. “Do you know how long it takes my hair to dry?”

“Now you care about your hair?” Marlene asked. “Really?”

“I’ve always cared about my hair. Just because you don’t recognize the art of it isn’t my fault.”

Before they could begin the age-old argument of whether James Potter's hair was a masterpiece or a monster, there was a loud splash and they were all drenched with water.

“Peter, Sirius!” Remus complained, scrambling up, holding his now-wet book aloft. “For fucks sake, cannonball *away* from everyone!”

Marlene coughed, blinking water from her eyes. “Well, I suppose since I’m soaked now it might be time to get in. Coming, Em?”

Emmeline pushed her hair out of her face, standing. “Might as well,” she agreed.

James was frowning at his soaked clothes and he sat up as he caught Marlene’s eyes on him. “I think I’ll just go change real quick,” he said. “I’ll see you guys later.”

“Sure,” Marlene agreed, grabbing Emmeline’s hand and pulling her towards the pool.

James

James walked back into the house, pulling his damp shirt away from his skin. He tried to swallow down the irritation prickling behind his eyes. It was just an accident, Peter and Sirius hadn't meant any harm. It wasn't on purpose.

It wasn't on purpose.

He stopped suddenly when he stepped into his room and registered Regulus's form curled up on the bed. His eyes were closed, and his curls were fanned out on his pillow, making him look like some kind of sleeping angel. James allowed himself to watch Regulus for a moment, unsure what the strange feeling burning in his chest was. He wanted to reach out and run his fingers through Regulus's hair. To lay his thumb over the light freckles on his pale cheeks and press his fingertips into the swell of his bottom lip, catch it between his teeth —

Wait, *what?*

James immediately turned away, his heart beating loudly in his chest. He resisted the urge to look again as if Regulus might wake and read his thoughts.

Quickly, James pulled off his shirt and began to rummage through his side of the dresser searching for a shirt. He pulled one out, tossing it on his cot behind him. Straightening, he paused as he suddenly caught sight of his torso in the mirror above the dresser. He froze, gaze stuck on the large scar stretching across his lower ribs. He thought of Regulus that morning, the way he'd called the scars across his own body ugly.

James hadn't thought they were ugly, he'd wanted to run his teeth over them—

Okay, *what the fuck?* No, that was enough of that.

He swallowed. What had he said to Regulus? *Just life?* Maybe for Regulus. Regulus, who couldn't control the things that had been done to him. It was different for James. That wasn't

just life, it was the ugly black hole inside of him, sucking in every piece of good from the world around him. The monster screaming in his chest.

Grimacing, James turned to grab his shirt and stopped short as he met Regulus's eyes. The other man was sitting up in his bed, very much awake now.

They stared at each other for a moment so delicate, James thought if he breathed too quickly it might fall apart. Regulus's gaze flicked down from James's eyes to his ribs, lingering only a second before he seemed to register what he was looking at and quickly tore his eyes away.

"Sorry," Regulus said quickly, looking ashamed.

"Sorry..." James repeated in confusion. "For?"

"I-" Regulus carefully kept his gaze away from James's ribs. "For looking."

"Oh... I-I'm sorry for looking, too. For this morning."

"It's okay," Regulus said quietly. "I've had them for a long time. My mother liked to put her cigarette out on my back." Regulus shrugged as if this weren't a heartbreaking, horrifying statement. "Sometimes mums are like that. You're not the first person to look."

"But it made you uncomfortable."

"Not them being seen," Regulus shook his head. "Just them being seen as... ugly, as more than me."

"I don't think that's possible, you outshine most things." And James had absolutely no idea where that came from, but his brain was running away from him today, and he'd never exactly been the best at thinking before he spoke.

James wasn't sure who was more shocked by his words, *him* or Regulus.

Regulus, whose mouth had fallen open slightly as if that were the last possible thing he expected James to say.

"You don't notice me," Regulus countered, almost like he was trying to convince himself.

"Not always, maybe not."

"And now?"

"It's harder not to pay attention."

Regulus just frowned, that special one that James was starting to recognize. As if his usual sharp edges had fallen away and all that was left was the wideness of his eyes and the downturn of his pretty lips.

When Regulus didn't speak, James reached out, quickly pulling on his shirt. "Could you... not mention it?" Regulus just blinked and James hurried to clarify. "The scar?"

"Okay." Regulus didn't ask. He didn't ask how long James had had it, where it came from, or why it was a secret. "I think you were right," he said after another long moment.

"About?"

"I don't know you," Regulus cocked his head. "Best be careful though, or it'll stop being true."

“Maybe I’d want you to know me.”

“Does anyone know you?”

“I don’t know.” And it was entirely honest, maybe some of the only honest, entirely true words James had spoken in years. He felt them burning in his throat and he instantly wanted to take them back because the last honest words he’d spoken had been to his mum and look how that had turned out. The curse of James Potter, everything he touched withered and every person who got too close burned.

Regulus didn’t seem at all shaken, however. He didn’t ask any questions James wasn’t prepared to answer. He just laid back in his bed and covered his face with his arm.

Maybe it went both ways.

Maybe James had never really known Regulus, either. Maybe that was changing.

He was terrified that it was changing.

Sirius

“Do you think I worry too much?”

Remus kicked his jeans off, leaving him in just his boxers and shirt as he turned to look at Sirius. “In general *or...*”

“About Regulus.”

“Ah,” Remus said, picking up his dirty trousers because he was not Sirius and would never just leave them on the floor. “When it comes to Reg, yes, absolutely.”

Sirius sighed, climbing into bed and burrowing under the covers as he watched Remus pick up Sirius’s clothes as well. “Do you think it’s bad?”

Remus didn’t answer for a moment, finishing with his task before switching off the big light and climbing into bed. “I don’t think it’s that simple,” he said finally, turning on his side to face Sirius. “That worry you have... you know what it really is at its core?” Sirius shook his head and Remus smiled gently, reaching out to brush Sirius’s hair from his face. “It’s love. And that’s not bad. Loving Regulus could never be bad. I think if your concern starts to suffocate him or it’s hurting him... or hurting *you* then it’s bad, but worrying for someone you love is natural.”

“He gives me a lot to worry about,” Sirius muttered. He had lost count of how many times he’d come close to losing Regulus for good, forever. That fear still lingered and probably always would. The feeling of losing the first person he’d ever loved, his baby brother. Even while Regulus felt much closer these days, Sirius could never forget what it was like to wake up in the middle of the night, sure in the knowledge that he might never see his brother again. “Do you think...” Sirius continued. “Has he seemed weird lately?”

“Not too much. I think he’s been having trouble sleeping, but he’s pretty honest with you about that, isn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Sirius sighed. Regulus had basically said as much that morning. “I just really hope this holiday will be good for him. He really liked this place when he stayed here with Uncle Alphard, I just hope the amount of people won’t overwhelm him.”

“Regulus is an adult, Pads,” Remus said gently. “Don’t forget that. He can handle things. If he needs alone time, he can make it for himself. He’s been doing really well this year, don’t get all overbearing on him, you know he hates it.”

“I know,” Sirius agreed. “He just scares me sometimes.”

“I know. I think that’s normal.”

They fell into a comfortable silence as Sirius scooted closer to Remus, who lifted his arm so Sirius could tuck himself close.

“Sirius?”

“Hm?”

“Do you think *James* has been weird?”

Sirius pulled back at that, his brow furrowed. “James?” he repeated.

“Yes,” Remus frowned. “Maybe I’m reading too much into it, but I have a bad feeling. I can’t even explain it, so I feel a little crazy if I’m being honest, but something doesn’t feel right. I swear he’s been acting weird even though I can’t pinpoint it.”

“Well, Moony... he had an awful year, didn’t he? I mean, aside from those few months he was at home, he didn’t take any time off, he just bounced right back as if nothing had happened. He’s probably just... you know, finding his footing a little still.”

“Probably... it’s just that he never talks about it,” Remus said quietly. “I never want to bring it up because it’s clear he just wants to move on, but sometimes I’m afraid it’ll come back to bite him one day. I mean, this is James, I don’t think he’d ever experienced anything like that in his life before last year. He doesn’t have any practice in working through it.”

“Maybe, or maybe he’s simply well-adjusted and mentally healthy enough that he was just... able to cope and move on?” Sirius suggested.

“Is that really possible?”

“Dunno,” Sirius snorted. “You’re asking the wrong person.”

Remus chuckled as well, reaching out to turn off the lamp on the bedside table.

“You really don’t think James and Reg are going to kill each other?” Sirius whispered into the darkness, listening to Remus let out a soft sigh.

“Sirius, light of my fucking life, I’m changing my answer. You *do* worry too much, in general. James and Regulus are both adults, I think they can manage to sleep in a room together.”

“You think they’ll be fine?”

“Yes,” Remus assured Sirius firmly. “Fears of murder aside, what’s the worst that could *really* happen?”

Famous last words and all that.

Regulus

There were some things that Regulus theorized were doomed to happen, to repeat themselves in different lives and different people.

Falling in love with your best friend was one of those things. Regulus was lucky in the sense that two of his best friends were women while he was very gay and the other two had the terrible curse of falling in love with each other.

Not that they'd ever admit it. Barty and Evan truly seemed convinced that they were having a little fling and that was all it was, *except* it'd nearly been a year now... but that wasn't Regulus's business to point out. He'd let Dorcas try to knock some sense into them. No one wanted relationship advice from Regulus Black, of all people.

So, Barty and Evan were hopeless, but now Regulus was sitting in the living room, surrounded by couples as he realized in horror that four out of five of them had gone from best friends to lovers... What kind of cheesy romance written by a fifty-year-old whose husband didn't love her was *that*?

The only other single person in the entire house was James Potter. James, who had been looking, who for one brief second had looked Regulus in the eye and he'd felt like he was seeing something no one else did. Like every part of James Potter the rest of the world knew had flickered and there was someone else standing there for a moment.

Regulus wished he had felt something shatter. That realizing maybe he had never known James at all would have obliterated his childhood crush, brought him down to cold-hard reality. Somehow, (because the universe had it out for Regulus, apparently) the notion only made Regulus *more* infatuated. He wanted to peel back all the layers of James Potter until he got to the soft rawness under his skin. Regulus wanted James to wrap his hand around his throat and take anything he wanted.

Regulus couldn't stop thinking about the pink scar stretching the length of James's ribs. Where had it come from? Why was it a secret? What would it feel like under Regulus's fingers? Would James let him touch it? Regulus hated his own scars being touched. If he was having sex, he always firmly instructed that his partner keep their hands off his torso, and if they didn't, he'd kick them to the curb. Yet, he was pretty sure he'd let James touch them. He was pretty sure he'd let James do anything he wanted.

When he was young, his fantasies consisted of James revealing in some dramatic gesture that he'd been in love with Regulus for years. Of the older boy chasing after him and kissing him sweetly in the rain.

Now, in his twenties and long having given up on that sort of love, Regulus didn't expect James to profess his love for him, to reveal that he actually *hadn't* been straight this entire time and that he wanted Regulus. No, that was the pipe dream of an unloved, hormonal

teenager. Still, if Regulus had the occasional fantasy of James pushing him up against a wall and having his way... that was nobody's business.

Regulus had accepted the fact that he wasn't the sort of person who had relationships. Sure, he could pull pretty much anyone he wanted. Sure, sometimes they wanted to go on dates or see him again. Regulus never would, but it wasn't because he was stupidly hung up on his childhood crush. If Regulus had ever met the right person, he wasn't about to turn them away just to hold out for *James Potter* of all people... But he had never found anyone who even came close to what he was looking for. So, sue him, if Regulus was going to be alone forever, yeah, he wished he would get the chance to fuck James just once. But it was what it was.

He *definitely* didn't find it upsetting to be in a room full of people who had already found the love of their lives. Regulus didn't stay up at night worrying that he was running out of time, that would be stupid. He was still in his early twenties... fuck, he still had another year left of uni, he had time. Except, he didn't feel like he did. He watched the families that came into his job, the parents with their spouses and their babies... and cold, emotionless Regulus Black fucking *longed* for it. He looked at his friends, his brother, and their partners and his stomach flipped when he thought they'd no doubt start getting married soon. Buying houses, adopting pets, and having children. Regulus would be there, in twenty years, just as alone and unloved as he was now.

On-screen, the monster in the horror movie they were watching jumped out. Sirius shrieked in surprise, burying his face in Remus's shoulder as the other man started laughing at his expense.

"Pussy!" Peter called from where he was sitting on the floor with his feet in Emmeline Vance's lap, and Regulus felt it in his stomach. *Flip, flip.*

Dorcas was playing with Marlene's hair as she sat at her feet, and in the kitchen, Mary and Lily were having some whispered conversation full of giggles. Even Barty and Evan, who liked to pretend they hated each other, were sitting closer than was needed.

Flip.

Regulus felt sick. Felt it building in the back of his throat.

No one else will ever love you.

He could feel his mother's cold fingers on his throat, the sharp point of her gel manicure digging into his skin.

"I could give you everything, and you're throwing that away. Do you understand that, Regulus? You are nothing on your own, and you will be nothing. Without us, you will have no money, no roof over your head, and no food. If you want to pretend we're so terrible, you can go out there and see how you like living on the streets. Try really being nothing."

What his mother hadn't accounted for, what she always seemed to forget, was that somebody *did* love Regulus. Maybe only one person, maybe the only person whose love couldn't be stopped.

What she didn't account for was Sirius. No matter how broken and frayed their relationship was, nothing could stop Sirius from loving his little brother. So, Regulus hadn't rotted on the street as his mother had hoped, crawling back in a few days, cold and hungry. Instead, he'd shown up at Sirius's door, doubled over slightly, holding his torso with each labored breath.

Sirius hadn't even asked, hadn't said a word. He'd just pulled Regulus inside, his fingers warm on Regulus's freezing skin, and he had held Regulus while he sobbed. He never let go again.

So, Regulus didn't think he was fundamentally unlovable, because Sirius proved that to be untrue. But he did think there was something wrong with him, something in his DNA, written in his blood that made him doomed to live the rest of his life without someone ever falling in love with him.

Regulus stood, and he felt Sirius's eyes follow him out of the room, but no one said anything.

He knew Sirius was worried, he knew it was obvious he hadn't been sleeping. But really, Regulus was fine. Sure, the world felt like it was ending around him. Sure, Regulus was

paralyzed by the fear of being left behind while everyone moved on to the next phase of their lives. But it was fine. Totally and completely fine.

He stepped into his room and out onto the little balcony, pulling out a cigarette. He was pretty sure Sirius knew he smoked and was very sure that he would soon try to stage an intervention over it, but Regulus didn't care much. He had bigger things to worry about than getting lung cancer fifteen years from now.

Regulus wasn't sure how long he stood out there before he heard the sound of the bedroom door. He could hear the muffled buzz of voices downstairs and he figured that the movie was probably over by now. He didn't look up as someone stepped out onto the balcony, just held out an unlit cigarette.

James's fingers brushed his as he took it. "Light?"

Regulus sighed, fishing it out of his pocket, but he didn't hand it over, instead leaning close and lifting it to the cigarette sitting between James's lips. James's eyes flicked down to watch him and Regulus decided not to think about why he was doing this, much less why James was letting him. It felt strange, intimate in a way it shouldn't have. Like something existed in the space between their bodies.

It was purely self-indulgent, but sue him. Regulus would never get James to fuck him, much less *love him*, so the least he could do was get a little too close. At least he could feel the heat coming off his body. The addicting hint of his shampoo and something warm and familiar that just smelled like *James* in a way Regulus couldn't explain.

"Don't like horror movies?" James asked after a long moment, blowing out smoke into the darkness.

"It's not horror movies I don't like."

"Then what is it?"

“Not your fucking business.”

James huffed unhappily at Regulus’s attitude, and he felt satisfied by that. That was the only way James had ever paid any attention to Regulus, when he was being mean. When James was holding back his response or trying to soften his glare.

Regulus always had the feeling that one day he could make James snap. No matter how James acted, underneath the niceties and friendliness, James actually hated Regulus. And while that wasn’t as good as love would have been, it was better than James feeling nothing for him at all.

“Sometime, you’ll need to learn to curb your fucking attitude, or one day someone will take care of it for you,” James growled. “God, you’re insufferable.” And suddenly, Regulus found for as much as he’d wished for the day when James would fight back, he really didn’t like it.

No, he didn’t like it at all.

“Fine,” Regulus said, and he was horrified to discover his voice came out small.

Suddenly, James was spinning, eyes wide as if he’d just had an earth-shattering revelation. He gaped at Regulus for a long moment, and Regulus just crossed his arms, turning away.

“Regulus.”

He didn’t answer, refusing to look at James.

“*Regulus*,” James said more intently, and this time Regulus spun.

“What?” he snapped, mouth in a tight line.

“Did... did I hurt your feelings?”

“No!” It was far too defensive, and James just blinked at him, seemingly shocked.

“Oh my god...” he said, almost more to himself. “I hurt your feelings?” James shook his head as if he couldn’t comprehend this. “But- but you’re absolutely awful to me, all the time. You treat me like shit.”

“And?”

“And you can dish it out but not take it?”

“I said you didn’t hurt my feelings,” Regulus said sharply. “Leave it alone, Potter.”

“But I did. You don’t like it when I’m mean to you,” James said incredulously.

“Well, you aren’t normally!”

“No, except you push my buttons constantly like you’re trying to make me hurt you back.”

Regulus didn’t know what to say to that without admitting that he’d do anything to make James pay attention to him. That the attitude was mostly an act to get James’s eyes on him.

“Okay...” James said slowly when Regulus didn’t reply. “Sorry.”

“Sorry?”

“For hurting your feelings. Now you know how I feel.”

Regulus couldn't help but scoff at that. “As if you care what I say.”

“I do care.”

Now it was Regulus's turn to freeze.

“What?”

“I care,” James repeated. “I don't like it when you're mean to me, either. I've never understood why you hate me. I've never done anything but be kind to you, and you still hate my guts.”

“I don't hate you.”

“Don't lie, Regulus, it's not a good look on you.”

“I'm not lying,” Regulus insisted. His cigarette was burning between his fingers, but he couldn't bring himself to care about the waste as James was looking at him, arms crossed and eyes hard. “I don't hate you,” Regulus said again, hoping it came across as genuine without the glaringly obvious truth bleeding hot and messy through the lines. *I don't hate you, I'm in love with you.*

“I don't understand,” James said, but at least he didn't accuse Regulus of lying again. “Why act the way you do, then? Why treat me so badly.”

“I—” Regulus broke off, unsure of how to even voice the heavy, sick thing that it was, rolling over in his stomach, forcing its way up his throat. “I've had to fight for my place ever since you showed up. I was the only person Sirius loved before you, I was the most important person in his life, and then suddenly he was coming home and it was *James this, James that.*

You replaced me. So, before I even met you, I decided I hated you. And then I met you and you didn't give two shits about me. I'd built you up in my head, drowning in all this spite and bitterness, but you barely even looked at me. And that didn't seem right, that I thought about you constantly, that I despised you for taking my brother away, but to you, I was nothing. So, I made myself something."

"I- Regulus, that is the stupidest thing I've ever heard." He paused suddenly as Regulus frowned, swallowing around the dryness in his mouth. "Wait, no stop that. Don't frown, I don't like that."

Regulus was so confused by that statement that he accidentally obeyed, his face scrunching in confusion. "What?"

"Just... don't frown," James repeated. "What I mean is if you wanted us to be something, we could have been friends. I wanted to be your friend, but you hated me."

"You hated me!"

"You've been awful to me for over a decade!"

"I never thought you cared!"

"Well, I did, okay? I do care. I didn't want you to hate me."

"I don't," Regulus huffed.

They stood there in silence after that, neither sure what this meant or where to go from here.

"Okay," James said finally, his voice almost whisked away by the quiet of the night.

“Does this mean I’m not allowed to be mean to you anymore?”

“Only if you don’t really mean it.”

“I don’t. I won’t.”

“Okay... but I’m not allowed to be mean to you at all, am I?” James asked. “You really didn’t like that.”

Regulus scowled, hating that James seemed almost amused by it, turning to Regulus with the faint traces of a grin. Regulus felt embarrassed by how obvious he was. How stupid that he’d made it this far in life but he couldn’t handle James Potter being a little mean to him.

“It’s okay,” James said when Regulus didn’t answer. “I’ll try not to be. I don’t mean to make you frown or hurt your feelings. Honestly, it’s a little sweet that underneath all of your...” he waved a hand at Regulus, “*prickliness*. You’re a lot softer than you pretend to be, aren’t you?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Regulus shook his head, and the faintness of James’s smile grew into something real, lighting up his eyes and warming the balcony around them. *God damnit*, this man did not help with Regulus’s mission to one day get over him. Stupid James Potter with his stupid hair and stupid glasses and his golden, pretty skin shining in the moonlight. Fuck him.

“Whatever you say, Regulus, whatever you say.”

“I’m going to push you off this balcony,” Regulus threatened, and James just smiled wider because of course, now he knew Regulus didn’t mean it.

Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

TW// suicidal ideation, thoughts of self-injury/harm

Hi friends! Welcome back. I wanted to thank everyone for their kind comments on my last chapter. Not to get a little cheesy, but I was a bit scared whether people would care what I did after anti-hero, but of course, I have a handful of readers who I would die for at this point. I love you all!

On a serious note, I upped the rating of this from teen to mature, because while many of the things I write are on the darker side, this one definitely gets very into sensitive topics, especially suicidal ideation, and self-harm. I won't be explicitly detailing anything gruesome or violent but the themes are present so be aware! Also... I'm sorry I won't be giving you smut because I don't think I'll ever be one who can write it well, BUT c'mon some of this is a little sexy and there is definitely heavily implied sexual content.

Anyway, I've done some of my favorite writing ever for this fic and I'm so excited to continue sharing it with you all. I'll see you next Friday!

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Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end notes for a TW!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lily

The last thing Lily wanted to do while on holiday was deal with her sister. Not when every other part of her life was absolutely perfect by all accounts. She had graduated top of her class. Promptly after, Lily had started a new job which she absolutely loved, that was flexible and exciting enough to keep her interest. *And* on top of that, she had the most incredible, beautiful girlfriend — no, *fiancée* in the whole world.

Not that everyone knew that yet. They'd barely been engaged a month and were waiting for the right time to break the news to their friends, but Lily was ecstatic.

So everything was good. Lily loved her life, every bit of it... except for *Petunia*.

“Your sister again?” Mary asked quietly, leaning over Lily’s shoulder to look down at her phone and the long string of texts from Petunia.

“Yes,” Lily sighed. “She’s insisting I call her. I told her I can’t right now and she’s being a right bitch over it.”

“What is it, is something wrong?”

“Don’t think so,” Lily sighed. “She just says she has ‘news’ which could mean anything from a huge life event to her finding a new dress on sale. Who knows with Petunia.”

“Have you heard from your mum about it?”

“No. You know how she is, even if she knows what’s going on, she never gets between us. Wants us to work ourselves out.”

“Pretty shit parenting if you ask me,” Mary muttered, and Lily turned to her fiancé with a frown.

“Mary,” she sighed. “We’re adults. It’s not her job to work things out for us.”

“Yes, but she never has—”

“That’s not your business,” Lily said sharply. “Just because you were there when my dad died, just because you grew up with my family does not mean you get to judge how we handle things.”

Mary sat back, her lips forming a thin line. “You don’t need to snap at me,” she said stiffly, and Lily instantly winced, looking up at her fiancée.

“No, no, I’m sorry,” she said quickly, reaching out. Thankfully, Mary didn’t pull back, letting Lily grab her hand, holding it softly between her own. “I shouldn’t have said that,” Lily said softly. “I- you know how hard things are with Petunia, with my family... I just need you to be here for me. My mum has tried her best, and I don’t like when you judge her.”

“I know, I shouldn’t have said what I did either.” Mary sighed, shaking her head. Her curls bounced as she did so, and Lily couldn’t help but watch them, slightly entranced. “It’s just frustrating to me, to watch Petunia treat you like shit all the time and your mum never does a thing.”

“It’s not perfect,” Lily agreed. “But that’s just family. I’ll talk to Petunia and maybe it’ll be nothing or maybe it won’t, but whatever happens, I’ll figure it out, and you’ll be here.”

“Always.”

“Good,” Lily sighed, resisting the urge to reach out and pull at one of Mary’s curls. Touching her hair was not allowed unless Lily was helping her do it. She hoped that Mary would want plaits or something soon so Lily would have an excuse.

“You and me,” Mary said, leaning forward to kiss Lily softly on the cheek. She smelled clean from her recent shower, and sweet. The scent of the vanilla perfume she always wore was comforting and familiar.

Mary had been wearing the same scent since she was thirteen, and Marlene always joked that vanilla was a grandmum perfume, but Lily loved it. It had come to the point where she associated anything vanilla with Mary.

“I’ll call Petunia after breakfast,” Lily sighed. “But first, I need food.”

“James said something about making muffins last night,” Mary said, her eyes brightening.

Lily let out a dramatic moan. “Oh gosh, I hope he does. That boy is the best cook I have ever met.”

“Careful,” Mary winked as she stood from their bed and Lily instantly missed her warmth even though she was right there. “Or I’ll start thinking you’d rather marry him instead.”

Lily grinned. “Look, I’m just saying, I adore you, Mary, but the only thing that could make you *more* perfect is if you could cook.”

“I can buy you things.”

“Okay, sugar mommy.”

Mary choked at that, pushing Lily as she stepped back and Lily erupted into a peal of laughter.

“Oh my god, your face!”

“I’m sorry!” Mary said heatedly. “I can’t be your sugar mommy because I’m broke!”

Lily’s cheeks hurt from smiling as she climbed off the bed, grabbing Mary by the arm and pulling her towards the door. “It’s okay, you’re pretty enough that you make up for it.”

Lily was still smiling as they headed into the kitchen together. She slowed her footsteps, looking to Mary in slight alarm as she registered James and Regulus’s voices. If there was one thing she’d learned over the years, it was to not get in the way of those two, as they hated each other’s guts

“...but maybe you’ve just never had it the right way!”

“Oh, shut the fuck up, Potter. Do you really think I’ve never had a single well-made coffee? It could be state-of-the-art and I still wouldn’t like it because *I don’t like coffee!*”

Lily’s brow furrowed, leaning in to whisper in Mary’s ear. “Do we think it’s safe to go in?”

“Depends on how heated this conversation becomes,” Mary whispered back. “Give it a minute, I’m not about to be pulled into an argument about fucking coffee just because those two act like children.

“Yes, but I thought I didn’t like coffee once too—”

“You don’t like coffee, you like sugar.”

“I like coffee!” James protested. “This is coffee, it’s coffee *with* sugar.”

“Enough sugar to give you a heart attack.”

“You know what, Regulus, I hope *you* have a heart attack,” James scoffed angrily, and there was a very strange silence that followed. Hiding in the other room, Lily couldn’t see either of their faces to tell what had just happened, but after a moment James spoke again, his voice softer. “Shit, sorry, that was mean wasn’t it?”

“Yes! *Jesus Christ.*”

“Okay, fine, sorry! I’m trying to be nice, you’re just not an easy person to be nice to. God, you’re such a bitter bitch.”

“*Potter?*” Regulus exclaimed, his voice rising and James groaned.

“Shit, and that was mean again. In my defense, you started it.”

“*I’m* allowed to be mean to you.”

“Okay, Princess.”

Regulus sputtered at that. “*What?* Do *not* call me that.”

“Why not, I’m being nice?”

“You’re being mean.”

“Just drink your tea, Regulus.”

They were silent after that and Lily raised her eyebrows at Mary, who nodded seriously. As they stepped into the kitchen, everything seemed to be intact and the two boys were sitting silently at the table, sipping their drinks.

Whew. Lily was not prepared to handle a fistfight from either of them before she’d even had breakfast. Not that she really thought James would allow it to come to that. In fact, hearing some of his comments at Regulus was a little surprising. She’d never heard James talk to Regulus or really *anyone* like that. But surely, after over a decade of hating each other, Lily was sure he had to lose his cool eventually. James may have been a saint, but no one could hold out against Regulus’s attitude forever. And Lily said this fondly of course, because she loved Regulus and considered him to be a very close friend, but he definitely wasn’t always... the *niciest* person.

“Good morning,” Lily greeted. “How’d you sleep?”

Regulus didn’t even deign this worthy of a response but James looked up, greeting them with a warm smile. “Great, how about you two?”

“Wonderful,” Lily smiled, wrapping an arm around Mary’s shoulders. “I love this place.”

Lily managed not to think about Petunia for the rest of the day. They went swimming again, and in the late afternoon, she went with Regulus to pick up a few things from the shops. She helped James cook dinner later that night, and as everyone else was helping clean up, she went upstairs to change into her pajamas, groaning as her phone began to ring.

“Tunie...” Lily answered, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

“Lily,” Petunia began, and Lily could already tell by the tone of her voice that she was *not* happy. “I’ve been trying to get ahold of you.”

“I know, I’m on holiday, Petunia, I’m sorry I was otherwise occupied.”

“Don’t get snippy with me, Lily. I’m sorry you have more important things to do than talk to your sister, but I have news.”

Lily exhaled through her nose, clenching her fists as she tried to keep her temper in check. “Okay, what’s your news?”

She paused. “I’m getting married!”

“You’re getting married?” Lily repeated. “To Vernon?”

“Who else?” Petunia snapped.

“Okay,” Lily sighed, it wasn’t exactly unexpected. As much as she despised Vernon, he and Petunia had been together for a few years now, so it was only a matter of time. “Do you have a date or anything yet?”

“Yes, April.”

Lily choked on her breath. “*April?* Of this year?”

“Yes, a spring wedding will be nice, don’t you think?”

Lily jumped off the bed, rage blazing in her lungs. “Yeah, Tunie, I *do* think because *I’m* getting married in April and you know that!”

“Yes, but in late April. Vernon and I are getting married at the beginning.”

“*And?* You don’t decide to get married the same month as your sister! Who the fuck does that?”

“If you could please stop cursing at me,” Petunia scoffed. “Of course, you have to make everything about yourself.”

There were frustrated tears pricking at the corners of her eyes as Lily choked out a scoff. “You’re the one who has to upstage my wedding!”

“It’s different!”

“How in god’s name is it different? Because Mary is a girl? Because I’m fucking gay? You think that makes it less of a wedding?”

“You’re always twisting my words, I don’t have a problem with Mary. I’ve known her just about as long as you have.”

“You didn’t have a problem until I started dating her.”

Petunia didn’t have anything to say to this, simply sniffing unhappily over the phone. “You’re always twisting things,” she said finally. “Fine, if you want to make me the bad guy and yourself the poor victim, unsupported and hated by her prejudiced family, go ahead! A good sister would be happy for me.”

“*A good sister* wouldn’t plan her wedding in the same month as her sister’s,” Lily snapped, her voice hard, before promptly hanging up.

She stood there in silence for a long moment, hand over her mouth as she tried to keep at bay the sobs that threatened to spill out.

“Petunia is getting married,” she told Mary that night.

“Oh,” Mary grimaced. “Wonderful.”

“The same month as us.”

“I- oh...”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

James

James was feeling good.

He woke to silence. No alarm, no phone ringing, no Regulus making an absolute racket. As he sat up in bed, glancing to the other side of the room, the man in question was fast asleep. James watched the steady rise and fall of his chest, slow and deep. He’d begun to slowly recognize when Regulus was actually asleep. When he was awake, his breaths tended to be shallow, as if he didn’t want to allow himself to breathe.

Quietly, James stood, stretching with a small yawn. Regulus shifted in his bed and James paused, looking over, but he didn't move again so James crept towards the dresser. He dressed quickly, throwing on some workout clothes. He grabbed his phone and tiptoed down the stairs.

The kitchen was quiet as James started a pot of coffee before tugging on his running shoes and heading outside. He hadn't really gotten to know the area yet, but he knew they were surrounded by a lot of wilderness and James was surging with energy. He didn't mind taking a little time to explore. James started some music, pausing to stretch before taking off into the unknown.

It'd been a little while since he'd had time to run, and he winced at how quickly he found himself getting out of breath, but he pushed forward anyway. There was a reason James had always loved running. He loved the burn, the ache in his chest, the taste of blood at the back of his throat when he pushed too hard. He liked to feel like he was real, alive.

Unfortunately, James hadn't been allowed to work out for months following— well, *the accident*. Then once he was allowed again, life didn't feel like slowing down to allow him the time in the mornings to run.

Time felt strangely stagnant as he pushed forward. Like maybe nothing had changed. Maybe he was home near the English countryside, birds singing and the grey sky heavy above, a lifelong comfort even with the threat of rain. Maybe James would return and his mum would be waiting, with breakfast already made and a smile. A smile warm enough that James could forget about the deep and all-consuming unhappiness that lurked in the marrow of his bones. Maybe he would run until he fell right over the edge of the earth. Maybe no one would even look for him.

James kept pushing. Even when he was gasping for breath, even when the world spun, he didn't stop running. His chest burned; he could feel it, the sickening crunch of metal slicing across his ribs, blood dripping down his face and into his eyes. James stumbled and hit the ground hard, hands falling out to catch himself.

Gasping, he sat back to examine his hands. There was a long cut across the palm from where it'd caught on a sharp rock and he ignored it, pulling at his shirt to frantically look at the scar across his ribs. It was pink and puckered, an ugly flaw across his torso. He expected gushing blood, he expected the harsh threads pulling his skin together. James expected to see metal

sticking out of his chest, but there was nothing. Only the scar on its way to healing, even as it marred his skin.

James dropped his shirt. He stood, wiping the blood from his palm off on his shorts.

He ran back to the house, still tasting the blood and swallowing it down, panting slightly as he slowed to a walk on the front porch. He didn't feel so good anymore.

"Morning, Prongs," Remus greeted from the table as James entered the kitchen, pushing his glasses onto his head and wiping sweat from his face.

"Morning," James mumbled before heading to the sink and downing a glass of water. Regulus was at the counter fixing himself a cup of tea and James watched as, without a word, he grabbed another mug and poured a cup of coffee, grabbing the sugar and unceremoniously dumping in an absurd amount. James couldn't help but smile slightly as Regulus pushed it towards him without a word.

"Thanks," he said softly.

They stood there for a while, sipping their respective drinks in silence. The only sound was that of Remus at the table occasionally flipping a page of his book.

Regulus had somehow managed to become even more confusing to James. At least before, James knew the younger boy hated him and that was that. Except *apparently*, Regulus was adamant that wasn't true and it seemed the shallow dislike James had been sure of went far deeper than that. Went all the way to Regulus and Sirius's relationship, to Sirius leaving and Regulus staying.

Now, that complicated things. See, Regulus and Sirius were a very delicate, very volatile thing. They were close again, and in the past few years they'd become comfortable with one another, but James knew there was still resentment and fear lingering in their relationship. He'd never even realized Regulus felt as if James had "stolen" Sirius away, and the more he thought about it, the more he realized how much sense that made. Of course a young Regulus had decided to hate James before they even met; he was jealous, he was scared of being

abandoned, and then... then he *had* been. Then Sirius had left and gone running to James, leaving Regulus for the Potters just as the young boy had most likely feared.

All of that made sense. What didn't make sense was whatever was happening now.

James couldn't describe the shock he still felt when he realized that he had hurt Regulus's feelings, that for all his attitude, Regulus could dish it out but not take it. The scrunch of his face, the downturn of his mouth, it'd stopped James's heart in his chest. Because what the fuck? Regulus didn't like James being mean to him. Cold, cruel, and uncaring Regulus Black got upset when James was mean to him?

That opened a door James had never even considered existing before. A door to a place where... where Regulus *cared* about James? Cared what he did, what he said, and what they were. After half of his life thinking Regulus could not give two shits about him, James was still reeling from the realization.

So now, they were something. Not quite friends, but not whatever they'd always been either. Something where Regulus cared, and James... James cared, too. In fact, he was finding himself unable to think of anything but Regulus over the past few days. James watched him in every room, picking up little things he'd never noticed before. How Regulus sometimes shrunk back when everyone was around, as if despite the cold confidence he exuded, a part of him was still that scared little boy Sirius had left behind. How his fingers were always tapping out a beat, playing some silent song. James knew he studied music, piano. Regulus had been playing as long as James had known him, yet he realized he'd never heard Regulus play before and now he dreamed about it. What it'd be like to watch his long fingers turn his instrument into something magical. He had to be good, James knew he went to the best school for music within a hundred miles. He remembered Sirius crying with happiness when Regulus had been accepted, spinning his brother around the living room.

And James had been there, had known Regulus for so long that he felt suddenly incredibly stupid for how little he really knew. He'd been sitting on Sirius's floor the day he opened the door to find Regulus standing there, seventeen, rain dripping down his face, a plastic hospital bracelet hanging from his wrist. He'd made tea and helped Remus make up the guest room. He'd sat in the living room while he listened to Sirius and Regulus's voices in the other room, rising until Sirius was yelling and then everything was silent.

It was late when Sirius had emerged, his eyes red from freshly shed tears.

“Reggie is gonna stay here for a little while,” was all he’d said, his voice cracking on the last word and James and Remus had both stood instantly and wrapped Sirius in their arms until he could breathe through his sobs again.

So, James had been there for what was probably one of the worst nights of Regulus’s life. Yet somehow, there was such a disconnect between the two of them.

James watched Regulus sip his tea, his gaze fixed on the far wall, bottom lip caught between his teeth. He wondered what Regulus was thinking, what went on in that mind of his. God, James wished he could rip the younger man open with his own teeth, crack his skull open and pick apart his brain. He wanted to know everything, every inch of Regulus. What sort of things was he thinking? Did his internal monologue sound the same as the words that fell from his mouth, or was he like James? Did he secretly keep things close, never letting people see what he was really thinking?

Regulus turned and James didn’t even bother trying to look away, knowing he was already spotted. They simply held each other’s gazes for a long moment and James really, really wished he could ask what Regulus was thinking at that moment.

There was the unmistakable sound of Sirius bounding down the stairs (because no one else ran down that fast) and James quickly looked away, downing the last few sips of his coffee and leaving the mug in the sink.

“I’m gonna go shower,” he mumbled.

Regulus nodded in reply, wrinkling his nose. “Good, you stink.”

“Sorry, Princess,” James rolled his eyes, not missing the way Regulus’s pale cheeks colored ever so slightly at the name. *Huh*, that was a piece of information he was going to tuck away for later. For what purposes? James didn’t know yet, but it felt very important.

Remus

Look, Remus Lupin was not stupid. Far from it. Ask anyone who knew him. Even those who might claim him to be the worst person to grace the earth still couldn't say he was dumb. Remus was smart, quite brilliant, really. And sure, he had a few moments he wasn't proud of... like the fact that it took him *years* to realize Sirius was in love with him. But in Remus's defense, Sirius was emotionally stunted and coped with his feelings for Remus by making out with other people... so he couldn't be entirely blamed for missing that.

But for the most part, Remus was observant, and right now, he knew something wasn't right. He couldn't explain what it was, but *something* was sending alarm bells ringing through his mind.

Sirius had said James was fine, or as fine as he could be considering the past year. It seemed like Sirius was right. After all, who knew James better? Remus had been watching him, seeing how he interacted with their friends, how he smiled and laughed. James *did* seem fine, but Remus was not dumb and he could just feel that something wasn't right.

“Do you ever feel like you're just... missing something? Something big and important?”

Regulus blinked, looking up and pulling out an earbud to raise an eyebrow at Remus. “No, I don't miss things.”

“Ha,” Remus said dryly, because Regulus was smart too and incredibly sharp, but he did miss things, especially when it came to emotions. The Black brothers had that in common.

“I don't like your tone,” Regulus scoffed. “What is it you think you're missing?”

“Well, I'm missing it, aren't I? How should I know?”

“I have no idea, Lupin...” Regulus sighed dramatically, dropping his other earbud on the table as well. Despite his dramatics, it was clear Remus had his full attention. “What is this about? Can you give me at least a general subject to go off of?”

Remus hesitated for a moment. “James...” he said slowly. He wasn’t so sure he should bring up James to Regulus as the two of them had always had a rocky relationship, but it wasn’t like Remus was airing anything personal. Really, all Remus had was a vague, unsubstantiated feeling.

“What about him?” There was something in Regulus’s voice, something careful and almost closed off that gave Remus a pause.

“It’s probably nothing.”

“No, it’s enough of something for you to be bringing it up.” Still, Regulus’s voice was careful. Remus didn’t understand and for a long moment, he simply studied his friend. This felt like more than just Regulus’s dislike for James. It felt like he had something to hide.

“Well...” Remus frowned. “I can’t even place what it is, that’s the thing. He seems fine, totally normal. In fact, I asked Sirius about it and he seemed to think there was nothing to worry about. And then when I asked Marlene, she honest to god laughed in my face, I’m not even kidding. Like the idea is ludicrous.”

“Is it?”

“I don’t know. I mean, you know James. He’s never failed to bounce back a day in his life. That’s the thing. *Nothing* is wrong, he seems perfectly fine. I feel like maybe he shouldn’t be. But is that crazy? Shouldn’t I just be happy that James is doing well?”

“Well,” Regulus shrugged, “it’s not like you’re wishing for him to be unwell. I get it’s not normal, but you know, everyone reacts differently to these things. If you’re concerned, maybe you should just ask James about it.”

Still, something felt off. Something about Regulus’s demeanor. The entire damn situation felt like a puzzle but one of the pieces had been swallowed by the dog six years earlier and

nobody had bothered to tell him until he'd nearly completed the entire thing except for one piece. (Yes, that had happened, yes, Remus was still bitter about it.)

Remus couldn't place it, he couldn't find *anything* to back up his feeling. Regulus, despite the odd stillness of his voice, was sitting back at the table, entirely casual, the faint sound of classical music still coming from his earbuds. He met Remus's gaze head-on, not a single sign of a lie on his face.

With a sigh, Remus just shook his head. Regulus didn't really lie after all, that wasn't him.

"Yeah," Remus said finally. "You're probably right. I'll just talk to him."

"Good idea, I wonder who gave you that one. Probably someone young and hot and brilliant."

Remus rolled his eyes, pushing Regulus playfully before letting him turn back to whatever song he'd been analyzing before Remus interrupted him.

Remus had barely even opened his book before there was the unmistakable sound of Sirius bounding *back* down the stairs at superspeed, because he'd come down earlier for only two seconds before deciding he had very pressing secret matters to attend to. Those *matters* became clear a moment later as he was skidding to a halt in the kitchen, Marlene right behind him.

Straightening, Remus shot the two of them an instant frown because he knew whatever plan they'd come up with couldn't be good. Marlene and Sirius were a dangerous pair.

"Let's go out tonight!" Sirius announced loudly, and Remus resisted the urge to groan.

God, he was exhausted, his legs had been aching all day, and he really didn't want to go out. In fact, Remus almost *never* wanted to go out, but he didn't want to be the one to ruin everyone's fun. He didn't want to be the one standing awkwardly on the outside either as

everyone else danced and got blackout drunk, but only one of those options included Sirius pouting at him. Sirius loved going out, and he especially loved going out with Remus. “Getting dressed up pretty” for him, as Sirius always put it. As if Remus didn’t think about him day and night already. The outfits Sirius liked to wear did not help Remus’s resolve when it came to denying a night out.

“Sure,” Regulus agreed quickly, and Remus pretended not to notice that he was clearly hiding his enthusiasm. Sirius had no idea the kind of shit Regulus got up to on nights out and frankly, as much as Remus believed in trust and openness in a relationship, he didn’t think it was his place to out Regulus’s escapades to his older brother.

Regulus was an adult after all, plus James always had it covered when it came to watching out for Regulus. Remus didn’t fear for his safety, in fact, he thought it was probably good for the younger Black (to a certain extent). Regulus had been so repressed and stiff for so many years, it was probably good to get out, to feel comfortable in his skin. There were probably worse coping mechanisms.

As Marlene and Sirius started to recruit everyone else into their idea, Remus didn’t interject. He let them come up with plans, even while he wanted nothing less than to leave the house that night.

See, the thing was, Remus wasn’t like the rest of them. The rest of the boys had met at a very young age. Peter and James had been neighbors since they were both four, and then James met Sirius a bit later at school when they were both eleven. The three of them were good friends, and Remus always saw them around town, generally making a racket and being nuisances. He’d scoff and shake his head, but the truth was, Remus had wanted that.

He would watch all the other boys from behind the register of his parent's Kosher butcher and pretend that he didn’t care about fitting in. He pretended he didn’t care that they made fun of him for always smelling like meat or going to Jewish day school when everyone else went to school together. But Remus *did* care, he cared deeply and intensely. It settled in his bones at such a young age. That feeling of existing on the outside. Of being wrong, different.

Eventually, Remus’s parents had finally given in to his pleas and enrolled him in the “normal” school. On his very first day, Sirius had sat next to him.

Sometimes it still felt like a fluke. What had Remus done? What could he possibly possess to make Sirius Black, the brightest fucking star in the sky, sit down next to him and instantly decide to make Remus one of the most important people in his life? It was a question that still haunted Remus to this day.

The part of Remus that was very good at psychoanalyzing himself had decided that this was probably why it'd taken him so long to realize Sirius was in love with him. Peter and James lamented how it was the most obvious thing in the world. Obvious to the point that people had been shocked to discover that Remus *didn't* know. His friends had apparently believed Remus to simply be ignoring Sirius's feelings for the sake of preserving their friendship... but no, Remus didn't have that kind of control.

That had always scared him. How willing he was to do absolutely anything for Sirius. How much he wanted to swallow Sirius whole, to drown in him, to let him put a bullet through Remus's brain. It didn't feel like the pretty kind of love his parents talked about. There wasn't much quiet or ease about them, and sometimes Remus was scared it could all still fall to pieces.

"What are you gonna wear, Moony?" Sirius asked, leaning over his chair to hook his chin on Remus's shoulder.

"Dunno, whatever you pick for me, I suppose." Remus raised an eyebrow, his book closed and entirely given up on by now. He'd really thought he'd manage to have more time for reading on this holiday, but apparently not.

"Moony!" Sirius exclaimed, pulling Remus up from his seat by his wrists. "Are you giving me free rein?"

"Whatever you want."

"*Whatever?*" Sirius repeated, his eyes glinting wickedly.

"Please, it has to be something comfortable though. I cannot go through an entire night of chasing after you idiots in jeans so tight I can barely breathe."

Sirius pouted at that, his eyes wide, but he was interrupted by Barty jumping up onto a chair. “I am going to get so drunk and fuck the first Italian hottie I see.”

“No, you’re not,” Evan scoffed, and Regulus, still sitting quietly across the table, shot Remus an amused glance.

“You’re hot, but you’re not Italian, Evan,” Barty frowned.

“I’m going to kill you. You’re going to wake up bleeding out slowly, floating on your mattress in the middle of the lake, and you’ll have no one to blame but yourself.” Evan said calmly, barely even blinking.

Sirius just made a disgusted face. “Keep your weird shit out of the kitchen.”

“Says *you*,” Barty said, spinning with such contempt Remus knew it was time to end this conversation.

“Great, wonderful. Everybody get up and get dressed because I refuse to deal with this right now.” Remus clapped his hands, feeling like he was rounding up schoolchildren as they all scattered.

God, Remus really didn’t understand how he’d ever wound up with this life.

James

“We’re going out.”

James sat up from his bed blinking at Regulus. It took him a moment to realize what was different. “Are you wearing makeup?”

Regulus instantly frowned. “Have we not had this conversation?”

“Well, we talked about concealer but you’re wearing... *makeup*.”

“Yeah, as I just said...” Regulus said blankly. “We’ve had this conversation.”

“No, it’s different makeup,” James tried to explain. “Like the eyes and stuff... I like it.”

Regulus just continued to look at James with his mouth downturned and a crease between his brow before he finally just sighed, shaking his head. “Thanks, Potter, now get dressed. We’re going out.”

James stood after a moment because that sounded like a wonderful idea. The first few days in Italy had been strange, and James felt uptight and on edge. He needed to get incredibly drunk and forget about everything for a little while. That was his original mission for the holiday, but for some awful reason, his problems seemed to be very persistent and just as sickening in Italy as they were in London.

James didn’t speak another word to Regulus as he started sorting through his clothes. He didn’t even realize that Regulus was still standing there until he spoke suddenly, startling James.

“Remus is worried about you.”

James froze, turning slowly to look at Regulus. “Why?” James choked out, trying not to sound too unnatural. He didn’t think it was working by the look on Regulus’s face.

“I don’t think he knows,” Regulus began, which wasn’t what James expected him to say. “He seems to think that you seem perfectly fine, he just has a feeling.”

“I don’t *‘seem’* fine, I am fine. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“You don’t need to do that.”

James’s heart stuttered, his breath catching before his blood started to pump again. “Huh?”

Regulus crossed his arms, looking up at James with his bottom lip caught between his teeth. “Pretend.”

“I’m not pretending,” James scoffed, clenching his jaw to stop himself from lashing out further. “I’m fine.”

“Okay, so am I.”

“Huh?” James said again, and he hated to say he probably sounded a right idiot at the moment.

“That was a lie, just like the bullshit you just tried to sell me,” Regulus said, his eyes narrowing. “I’m not saying spill your guts to me. Lord knows I may be the least comforting person on the planet, but don’t lie to me. I don’t believe in lying.”

“Really?” James couldn’t help the edge that crept into his voice at that. “Regulus Black is suddenly morally against lying? Do you expect me to believe that?”

“When have I lied?” Regulus asked.

“You lie to Sirius about sleeping around—”

“Firstly, I have never lied about that. If he asked me, I’d tell him. In fact, while I don’t love advertising it to my brother, I’ve never gone out of my way to keep it from him. It’s not a crime if I simply prefer to keep it to myself, especially with how overprotective Sirius is. *You* are the one who works hard to keep it from him.”

“It would only worry him—”

“*Exactly*. I’m not saying start telling him everything I get up to, but I’m not a liar, James.”

James. *James*.

Regulus never called him James. It was always “Potter” or something creative and mean-spirited, but never James. Yet, recently, James was sure this had to be at least the second time Regulus had called him that and it stopped the building anger dead in its tracks. Something about the way Regulus said his name was so earnest, like it was bigger than it really was, like it meant something. Slowly, and dizzyingly so, James felt like he was discovering layer by layer of Regulus Black, and he was nothing like James had ever imagined.

“James?” Regulus questioned when he didn’t respond, and there it was again.

It was addicting, a head rush. James wanted to make Regulus say it again, to hear him whisper James’s name, to beg.

He blinked.

“Okay, so you’re not a liar.”

Regulus looked like he’d expected more of a fight than that, and his eyebrows scrunched together as looked at James, eyes dark and unreadable.

“So... we’re not going to finish this conversation, are we?” Regulus said finally when James didn’t add anything more.

“No. I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Fine, but don’t lie to me.”

James had no reason to agree. He didn’t owe Regulus anything. In fact, James didn’t even think they were *friends*. Yet, there was something there. Something in the way Regulus said his name, the way James couldn’t seem to get enough of him suddenly.

James was a curious person. He always had been, never one to leave a mystery unsolved, especially a person. He delighted in befriending people, in trying to coax them out of their shells, figure out who they were and what made them tick. James was never the best in school, in fact, he’s sure he only graduated because Remus used to spend hours tutoring James in maths. On his own, he may not have done it. Despite his academic shortcomings, his mum had always insisted that James was clever.

“People smart,” she used to always tell him. *“You get people, you know the right things to say. You know how to read someone— that is, when you manage to get out of your own head. You’re real-world smart and one day that will serve you well. Don’t sell yourself short, my love.”*

James had never quite believed her. She was his mum, she was supposed to say that. But he did understand what she meant. He wanted to *know* people, and often he succeeded in doing so. Regulus Black, however, was not a person James had ever had the chance to truly dive into, and he’d tried to make his peace with the fact that he never would. Except, *now... now*, a door was open and James didn’t know how it’d happened or what it meant, but he knew he couldn’t let this go. He couldn’t pass up a chance to know Regulus. James wanted everything, he wanted to know what was going on in his mind. Was it loud like James’s, or was it as quiet as Regulus always appeared? Or maybe, like James’s constant smile, always given easily, Regulus was pretending to be something he wasn’t as well. Or maybe not. He seemed adamant that he wasn’t a liar.

“Okay,” James agreed. Because he wanted to know Regulus, and Regulus didn’t want to be lied to. He didn’t know if he meant it even as he replied, swallowing before adding, “But don’t ask me things I can’t answer if you don’t want to be lied to.”

“Or maybe you could do this crazy thing where you admit how you really are.”

“Oh?” James raised his eyebrows. “So why don’t you tell me about why you don’t sleep? Why you take home anyone who looks at you?” Regulus froze, eyes wide and James shook his head when he didn’t respond. “See? That’s what I thought. Don’t expect something from me you’re not willing to give yourself.”

Regulus opened his mouth before immediately clamping it shut, stopping himself from speaking. *God*, James wanted to know what he was about to say. What was he thinking? Did he want to rip James open with his teeth? Was it the same? Did Regulus find it dizzying in the same way James found himself dreaming of putting his mouth to Regulus’s skin?

“Just get dressed,” was what Regulus said when James didn’t speak again, “or Sirius will be upset. He’s raring to go.”

“I’ll bet,” James said, shaking his head and letting the subject drop, falling between the cracks of the floorboard. If he didn’t, he was afraid he might ask for something, and he couldn’t live with himself if Regulus didn’t say yes. If Regulus wasn’t filled with the same indescribable *want*. So, James was sure it was better not to know, to pretend there was a world out there where Regulus wanted into James’s soul as well. “You know how Sirius is, he’ll wither and die without a night out every once in a while.”

“He’s an attention whore,” Regulus said. Even as James had turned his back, looking to the wardrobe for something to wear, he could still practically sense the way Regulus rolled his eyes at the mere mention of his brother.

“I was going to say enthusiastic,” James noted. “But that works.”

They didn’t talk much after that, and certainly not about anything that mattered, but for some reason, Regulus stayed. Even though he was already dressed and ready to go, he waited for

James, lying on his bed while he scrolled through his phone. James wasn't entirely sure that Regulus was waiting for *him* until James reappeared from the bathroom ready to go and Regulus sat up, following him downstairs.

It was loud in the kitchen. Sirius and Mary had already begun pregaming, and Marlene was giggling loudly about something into Lily's ear. Remus looked like he wanted to be literally anywhere else, and James stopped next to him, squeezing his shoulder.

"Alright, Moony?" he asked quietly.

Remus looked over, blinking in surprise before nodding slowly. "Yeah, yeah I'm fine."

"You feel alright?"

"Well enough."

Remus would never admit when he was feeling ill until he was practically about to drop, but as James studied him, he didn't look too bad. A little tired, but otherwise, he still had color in his cheeks and he stood steadily.

James went to turn, but Remus caught him by the arm before he could depart. "Hey, Prongs?"

"Hm?"

"You're the best, you know that?"

James frowned slightly, unsure what had brought that on. "Course I am, Moony," James said, shaking off his momentary pause. He grinned widely, as he always did.

Remus's brow furrowed and James didn't like the way his friend looked at him, eyes narrowing slightly like he was seeing something for the first time. Something James would really rather he didn't.

As James looked away, he caught Regulus's eyes on him. James held the younger man's gaze in a challenge. Surprisingly, it was Regulus who broke first, spinning and quickly grabbing a shot out of Barty's hand and downing it before his friend could. Barty didn't even look surprised when his drink was stolen, he just pushed Regulus before grabbing the bottle and pouring himself another.

To no one's surprise, it took them forever to make it out of the house and the night was well on its way by the time they stumbled into the club. The music was loud, the bass reverberating through James's chest and he quickly lost sight of most of his friends as Marlene grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him to the bar.

James didn't complain, even as they struggled through ordering from the Italian bartender. Eventually, he had a drink in hand and it was too loud to think properly, just how James liked it. Marlene dragged him to dance, packed in by the bodies around them. James laughed as she threw her arms around his neck, colored lights reflecting off her blonde hair.

"I needed this!" Marlene leaned in to yell into James's ear and fuzzily, James made a distant note to ask her what was going on with her. He could tell something was off, but she hadn't said a word about it yet, and usually, James was the first person Marlene confided in.

Eventually, Marlene was pulled away by the girls, and James let her go, catching sight of Regulus on the far side of the room. There was a man in his space, leaning forward, hands on Regulus's waist. James felt bile rising in his throat at the sight, and he wasn't sure why. It wasn't the first time, nor would it be the last, that Regulus picked someone up on a night out. James was about to look away, unable to stomach the sight when suddenly, he froze, alarm bells ringing in his head. Regulus was leaning against the wall heavily, and something about the sight wasn't right.

James was moving, pushing through the crowd before he even registered deciding to do so. As he came closer, his stomach flipped. Regulus was barely standing as the man put his hands all over him, clearly incredibly drunk.

“Excuse me,” James interrupted coolly, and the man pulled back.

“Problem?” the man asked in an Irish accent, probably a tourist just like them.

“Yeah, get your fucking hands off.”

The man eyed James sharply, and as he stepped forward, Regulus swayed slightly without the man’s weight keeping him up.

“What? You his keeper?”

“He’s drunk.”

“So am I.”

“Not that drunk.”

“James,” Regulus whispered, and he wasn’t yelling or telling James off for ruining his one-night stand. Instead, it sounded desperate and sad and James’s stomach flipped at the sound.

James, James, James. Regulus said his name as if it mattered.

“Get the fuck away from him. Last chance,” James growled.

The man straightened. “No, piss off. If he’s not yours, then it’s not your business.”

James didn't even realize he was throwing a punch until his fist was making contact and the man hit the wall with the force of it. Regulus jumped back, looking confused, his eyes wide with fear. There was a commotion as a bouncer was starting forward and James grabbed Regulus as the man stumbled up, nose dripping blood.

"I'm going to fucking kill you—" James didn't stay to let the asshole finish his threat, holding Regulus up by the waist.

"I'm leaving, I'm leaving," James said, putting his hand up in surrender as the bouncer turned on him. He escorted James and Regulus out of the building anyway, but much to his surprise, rather than simply pushing them outside, the bouncer stopped, frowning at Regulus who was barely staying on his feet at that point.

"He is alright?" The man asked, gesturing to Regulus in heavily accented English.

"Yes," James said, looking down at Regulus softly. "I've got him, I'll get him home."

The bouncer looked to Regulus, catching his eye. "You are alright with him?"

Regulus took a long moment to respond. "James," he said simply, leaning heavily against James.

"You're James?" the bouncer frowned.

"Yes, we're childhood friends. We're living together, he's okay with me. I'd never hurt him."

The bouncer seemed convinced since Regulus didn't seem distressed. He nodded and left them there on the corner of the street.

James just stood there for a long moment. Regulus quietly pressed against his side, head tucked into James's shoulder.

Stretching out his fingers, James glanced down at his hand which was already bruising slightly where it'd made contact with the man's face. He didn't understand why Regulus seemed so comfortable being touched by him. They'd never really touched before, and James had just punched a man, the evidence splashed across his knuckles. Regulus should be running, he should be looking at James in horror. Instead, he seemed perfectly fine in James's space. The only conclusion that James could come to was that Regulus was too drunk to understand what was happening.

James hailed a car, rubbing soothing circles on Regulus's back once they were safely tucked inside and on their way back to the house. He silently prayed that Regulus wouldn't throw up in the cab. By some miracle, they made it to the dark house without incident and Regulus didn't start gagging until they were out of the car. James kept a gentle hand on the back of his neck as he threw up in the garden before getting them inside and safely shutting them into the bathroom. He started the sink and quickly wiped down Regulus's face, having him rinse his mouth and spit into the sink.

"James?" His voice was clearer now, still heavy and slurred at the edges, but Regulus was looking up at him. His eyes were filled with something dark and anguished. James reached up and turned off the sink. The silence that followed was intense, drilling into James's bones.

"Regulus?" James whispered back instead of *don't look at me like that. Don't say my name like it matters. Don't let anyone touch you ever again.*

"I think there's something fundamentally wrong with me," Regulus slurred, his whisper cutting through the quiet. "Like it's in my bones and my DNA. I tried to cut it out, but it's stuck. I'm stuck. I can't get her out of my head."

"There's nothing wrong with you," James whispered, and Regulus reached for him. He'd never done that before tonight, but now James couldn't imagine never having this again. Fingers finding James's skin, pulling, begging, holding on. "Just because bad things happened doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you."

"Maybe I attract it."

You attracted me, James wanted to say. What a sick, sick curse to be wanted by James Potter. And *god*, James wanted. He wanted in an all-consuming, terrible, cursed way that he couldn't deny anymore. He didn't understand what it was, but James knew he needed Regulus, needed to hear his name fall from the other man's lips, always, forever. If he never heard another word again, he'd be okay with that.

"I hated you because you were everything I couldn't be," Regulus choked out when James couldn't force himself to speak. "I hated you not just because I thought you took my brother, but because that was the kind of person Sirius wanted. He wanted a brother who was fun, who laughed loudly and smiled easily. Who agreed to his stupid pranks and ran wild. But I could never be that. I've always been too quiet, too scared, too heavy with all this shit. It's in my bones and I hated you because Sirius loved you, because he hated *me*. Because I'm just like our mother, under all of it I'm just like her. And he'll never forgive me for that, James. He'll always resent me a little bit. He'll always look at me as if they're in my blood. I can feel it on my skin and I've tried to cut it out, but it never took the pity and the bitterness out of Sirius's eyes." James wasn't sure he'd ever heard Regulus say so much at one time as he stopped suddenly, eyes downcast and voice quiet as he finished. "I want him to stop looking at me like I'm something I'm not. I'm not them, I'm not."

"I know."

Regulus looked up. He swallowed and James watched the movement of his throat as he did. "No, you don't."

"Yes, I do. You're not anything like them, and you've never been."

"I stayed. I let them do the terrible things they did. I never said a word, I never stopped them. I was like them, Sirius thought I was like them. You didn't even know me, so you must have thought—"

"I thought you were a child."

That shut Regulus up, cheeks still flushed from the alcohol, eyes wide in surprise.

“I was—”

“*A child,*” James repeated firmly. “I may not have really noticed or seen you before, but I never thought you were a bad person. Sure, I thought you were mean, I thought you hated me, but I never thought you were anything like your parents. And Sirius... I won’t lie to you and say he’s never thought that, but he was angry and scared. He wanted you to come with him, and it ruined him when you didn’t. I will never blame him for the things he did to cope, but he doesn’t think that now. Sirius accepted you no questions asked as soon as you *did* leave. But Regulus, I have never and *could never* think so terribly of you.”

Regulus didn’t seem to know what to say to that, and he just tucked his knees to his chest. James knew the bathroom tile had to be uncomfortable, and he reached a hand out for Regulus to take.

“C’mon,” James murmured gently, “why don’t you get some sleep?” he suggested.

Regulus hesitated for a moment before taking James’s hand and letting himself be pulled up. Regulus’s hand was small in James’s. It was cold, and James resisted the urge to clasp it between his own and warm up his fingers. The bones of Regulus’s hand were delicate under James’s fingertips, and James wanted to examine Regulus’s long fingers, perfect for a pianist.

James didn’t, because he had *some* self-control, thank you very much.

He led Regulus to his bed, pulling off his socks and shoes but leaving on his outfit. Even with the strange barrier that seemed to have dissolved between them, that felt too far.

Regulus collapsed on his bed and his eyes fluttered shut. For once, he seemed to fall asleep almost instantly, his breathing evening out.

James sat there at the edge of his bed, pulling out his phone and texting Sirius.

James:

I took Regulus home he wasn't feeling well.

He's fine btw so don't worry. Just sleeping it off.

Love u <33

He didn't wait for Sirius to respond before switching his phone off. He didn't want to know if any of his friends had heard about the part where James punched a man. Hopefully not. He thought if they had, his phone would have been blowing up.

James sat there watching Regulus sleep for a long time. He didn't understand what the feeling was that filled his chest every time he looked at the other man. James didn't understand what was happening or why he was suddenly obsessed with Regulus Black, but that was a worry for another night.

Chapter End Notes

 TW// slight implied non-con (a character is drunk and getting advances they cannot properly consent to)

Hi folks, welcome back to another friday and another update! I've been having such an incredible time with this fic and have done some writing that I honestly think might be my best work yet, so I really appreciate anyone who's been reading commenting, or sharing this fic around <3

James calling Regulus "Princess" >>>>

ALSO moonwater friendship the lom!!

Also I realized this will be my last pride month update, so happy pride month from ur favorite lesbian author. I hope you all found some love for yourselves and others this month <3

See you next Friday for another update!! Mwah!

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Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Regulus

“I think you’d like him.”

“I don’t know...”

“You would.”

“Mother and Father don’t approve.”

“Well, Mother and Father don’t know James. He’s kind and funny, he’s always laughing or smiling about something. He loves telling stories, and he makes them so interesting. Every time I just think that you’d love them! His parents are great, I got to meet them after school one time and they were so nice and they hugged me! You’ll see when you start school with us this year, you’ll love him.”

“Boys!”

Regulus instantly straightened up, spine going rigid. Sirius was slower to stand upright, but as the clack of their mother’s heels came closer, he collected himself as well, chin up, shoulders back. After all, Blacks don’t slouch.

“Yes, Mother,” they chorused in unison as their mother rounded the corner, the lines of her stern face hard.

“What are we doing out here? Sirius, I’m certain you have homework, and Regulus, you must prepare for your lesson.”

“I’ve finished my work,” Sirius insisted. “And Reggie has been practicing all morning.”

“Reg-u-lus,” their mother corrected. “Enough of the juvenile nicknames, I’ve told you this multiple times. Do I need to repeat myself?”

“No, Maman,” Sirius said quickly even as he scowled.

“Regulus, go on and practice.”

Regulus nodded silently and Sirius’s mouth turned downwards in a deep frown. “But Maman, his fingers will bleed at this point—”

“Do you think that’s my problem? If Regulus didn’t want to practice any more today, he should have done it yesterday.” She turned to Regulus, eyes sharp as if he were the one protesting. “I will not stand you stumbling through the same measure for one more lesson.”

Regulus nodded quickly, eyes downcast and lips pressed tightly together.

He would get it right. If he did, maybe his mother would be proud. Maybe if he was perfect, she would be able to love him.

“I wish you had come with me.”

Regulus blinked, looking up. His mother was gone, and so was young Sirius. Instead, he was looking at an older version. His hair longer and fingernails painted as he picked at the chipping paint.

“Sirius?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t think you should dwell on that. I don’t think there’s any universe out there where I did.”

“Maybe there is,” Sirius insisted.

Regulus thought about it, other lives, other Regulus Blacks. Maybe some things were the same in all of them. Unchangeable, unstoppable events. The descent, the steady crack of the Black brothers’ relationship. The shattering of glass as Regulus winced, eyes squeezing shut against the pain of being abandoned. Sirius leaving their parents’ house at sixteen, and Regulus staying. Maybe they’d always lose each other, maybe Regulus was lucky that this was one of the universes where they found their way back.

Maybe this wasn’t even the best one. Somewhere out there Regulus Black probably had a family. He probably had a warm house full of books where a fire was always burning, someone always laughing, a husband to kiss him goodnight. He probably had a family, a kid. This life probably wasn’t the best one, but it couldn’t be the worst either. Because if there really were other versions of Regulus, some of them probably never even made it to twenty.

“Maybe,” was all Regulus said to his brother. Even as the scene was shattering around him. Crumbling to ashes, the smoke choking him.

“Don’t leave me!” Regulus wanted to scream.

Love me, love me, love me.

“Do better,” his mother whispered, her voice tight in his ear, hand cold on the back of his neck. “Do better.”

There was water rushing in his ears, he was choking, water filling his lungs.

Regulus sat upright with a gasp, immediately regretting it as consciousness returned to him and he winced against a wave of nausea.

“Alright?”

Regulus squinted, his eyes finding James Potter in the doorway. He had a glass of water in his hand and a bottle of painkillers in the other. Rather than properly answering, Regulus let out a pitiful whine and James’s lips curled into a faint smile.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” he said, handing Regulus the water and pills. “For your hangover.”

“Thanks,” Regulus croaked out, quickly taking the pills and downing the water with a wince. Something was creeping at the edges of his mind as he looked to James, who was watching him with an expression he couldn’t read.

Suddenly, Regulus straightened, a memory coming back to him.

“Oh my god, did you punch someone?”

James grimaced. “Ah, yeah... best not mention that to anyone, if you don’t mind?”

“I- okay... you *punched* someone.”

“Yeah, we’ve established that.”

“Why?” Regulus questioned.

James just tilted his head, looking down at Regulus in his bed. “How much do you remember?”

“I- I dunno... not that much. I remember you going after some guy and then leaving... pretty sure I trauma dumped on you in the bathroom.” Regulus winced at that, god he hoped he hadn’t said anything too revealing.

“Yeah... that happened. It was just some asshole who wouldn’t keep his hands off you, and you were way too drunk to consent, it wasn’t right. And I know you hate that I—”

“No,” Regulus cut him off. “No, this is different. You’re right, I- I don’t even remember that I was so drunk. I would have felt like shit if I’d woken this morning and—” Regulus broke off swallowing. “What I mean is... thank you.”

“Thank you?” James repeated incredulously. “God, Regulus, I’ve been preparing for you to be pissed at me all morning.”

“Really?” Regulus asked, trying to imagine James stressing over Regulus being mad at him.

“Yeah.”

“Oh, it’s okay. Sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” James told him quickly. “Sirius is definitely going to barge up here in a moment though. I told him you weren’t feeling well last night so I took

you home, he's been very worried. I didn't say anything else though."

"Okay... thank you, James."

James, who had stepped back, clearly preparing to retrieve Sirius stopped suddenly, and Regulus raised an eyebrow at him.

"What is it?"

James just shook his head as if he could shake out whatever had stopped him in his tracks. "Nothing," he muttered. "I just like that you call me James now."

Regulus hadn't even realized he'd been doing it, and he was left with that horrifying realization as James turned, leaving the room. Regulus didn't have time to dwell on it as a moment later Sirius was in the doorway, knocking lightly.

"Can I come in? James told me you were up."

"Yeah," Regulus sighed, flopping back onto his bed and ignoring the way the movement made his head hurt.

Sirius needed no other invitation and a moment later he was invading Regulus's bed, laying down next to him. "You're alright?" he asked quietly, his voice tight with worry.

"I'm fine, Sirius. I just got a little too drunk, it happens. James was there and he took me back to sleep it off, no harm done."

Sirius was silent for a long moment, and Regulus knew he was holding back whatever scolding or rant he wanted to give. They'd had a lot of conversations about trust, and Sirius really tried his best not to be overbearing, even when he was worried. Regulus wasn't a child, and they'd had their fair share of fights over it.

“James is a good guy,” is what Sirius eventually seemed to settle on saying. “I know you don’t like him, but he cares.”

“I know,” Regulus said quietly, and that seemed to be the last thing Sirius expected because he sat up suddenly.

“Do you?”

“Yes, Sirius. I’ve never claimed otherwise. I think he has an insufferable personality, not that he’s a bad person.”

Sirius sighed, loudly. “I still think if you really got to know him better, you’d like him.” It was such a startling echo of the dream Regulus had that night that it was almost eerie.

“I don’t know,” Regulus said, even though Sirius was right. But Regulus was sure he didn’t like James in the way his brother was hoping for, so he thought it best to... skip over the truth a little. It wasn’t a lie, not really. Sirius wanted them to be friends, and Regulus didn’t think that was in the cards.

“We were going to go get brunch,” Sirius said rather than arguing, which Regulus was immensely grateful for.

“I think I’m going to have to raincheck,” Regulus mumbled, and Sirius just sighed and leaned down, placing a kiss on Regulus’s head.

“Fine, fine. Nurse your hangover, consequences of your own actions, mind you.”

“Stop,” Regulus complained. “You’re starting to sound like Remus.”

“Proximity and all that,” Sirius shrugged as he extracted himself from Regulus’s bed. “Plus, we know all my common sense really just comes from him.”

“*Oh no*,” Regulus exclaimed, “he’s becoming self-aware!”

Sirius just scoffed, grabbing a pillow off of James’s bed and swatting at Regulus with it. “Shut it.”

“Hey! You can’t do that, I’m hungover.”

“*Consequences...*” Sirius singsonged, and Regulus rolled his eyes.

“I’m going to teach *you* consequences,” Regulus muttered threateningly.

Sirius just laughed loudly as he skipped out of the room. “You come find me then, when you can get out of bed without throwing up!” He called, and Regulus just flipped off his retreating form. Even though Sirius couldn’t see it, Regulus was sure he caught the aura of it at least.

Regulus didn’t mean to fall asleep after that, but when he opened his eyes again, the sun was even higher in the sky and the house was quiet. With a sigh, Regulus peeled himself out of bed and into the bathroom, showering (without throwing up, thank you very much) and getting dressed into something that *wasn’t* his outfit from the night before. By the time he was done, Regulus felt remotely human again, and he headed downstairs hoping a cup of tea might breathe a little more life back into him.

Regulus stopped dead in the kitchen when he realized James was sitting at the table, book in his hand. He looked up when Regulus entered, raising an eyebrow. “Good afternoon.”

“I thought everyone had gone to brunch.” Regulus frowned.

“Yeah, but Sirius was worried about you and to tell the truth, I wasn’t feeling it, so I agreed to stay.”

“Oh,” Regulus said, unsure if that meant something. Should he read into it? No, no surely not. James had stayed for Sirius, he always did these things for Sirius.

“Anything you want to do today?” James asked, and Regulus turned to start the kettle just so he had something to do.

“I don’t know... it seems nice out,” Regulus mumbled, wanting to scream at how awkwardly the words came out.

“We could swim?” James suggested.

Regulus turned back to face him at that. “I thought you didn’t like swimming?”

“No, I do.”

“But you haven’t swam at all since we’ve been here,” Regulus noted, instantly flushing as he realized he was accidentally revealing just how much attention he paid to James.

Thankfully, James didn’t seem to notice his blush, just shrugging awkwardly. “I- it’s not that I don’t like it,” he said quietly. “It’s...” he seemed unable to express whatever *it* was in words and instead gestured vaguely to his torso.

Regulus simply frowned for a moment before he suddenly remembered the scar across James’s ribs... *right*, of course. He’d asked Regulus not to mention it, so clearly it was some sort of secret from the others. That realization was quickly followed by another as he realized that James was offering to go swimming with *Regulus*. James... *trusted Regulus*? At least to some capacity, it seemed.

“There’s a lake,” Regulus said after a heavy moment.

“Right, Sirius mentioned that, but I don’t know where it is.”

“I do.”

“You’ve been there?” James asked, cocking his head in a question.

“Yeah, I stayed here for a little while some years back.”

“Oh, right,” James said, straightening as he seemed to remember that, and more specifically, the *circumstances* of Regulus’s stay. “Well sure, let’s go then. I doubt the others will be back for hours. You know how it is, brunch will most definitely turn into an all-day sort of event.”

James was quiet as they left the house. They walked together; the world seemed to be sleeping around them, giving way only to the crunch of their footsteps.

Birds were singing in the distance, dancing through the trees above them. Two flew over their heads, flapping their wings in tandem and Regulus wondered if to the birds, James and Regulus looked the same. Walking side by side under the warmth of the summer sun. Regulus remembered being here, laying in the sun, eyes to the sky, remembering how to breathe again as he ran his fingers through the water.

He remembered drowning, the rush of water in his lungs, coughing it up, the concrete under his shredded fingers.

It was an accident. It was an accident.

“Regulus?”

Regulus inhaled. It cleared his lungs easily and he held it there for a moment before exhaling. “Sorry, what?”

“Are you alright?” James seemed to have sensed a shift and it amazed Regulus how easily he seemed to read people, to pick up on the smallest things

“Yes, I’m just...” Regulus looked up to the sky, the trees dancing above them, leaves filtering through the sun and sending shadows over the dirt. “Just remembering. I spent a lot of time here.”

“It’s beautiful,” James remarked as they made it to the top of a small hill and a small lake stretched out in front of them, still and dream-like in the gentleness of the afternoon. “Were you remembering good or bad things?”

Regulus spun, letting his hands swing, tasting the air around him. “Both,” he said, and he didn’t look at James, but James didn’t seem to need him to.

Finding a relatively grassy spot, Regulus laid out his towel, feeling James’s eyes on him for a moment before he followed, doing the same. Regulus expected to feel self-conscious as he stripped down to his swimming trunks, but much to his surprise, he didn’t feel uncomfortable or scrutinized by James.

James took his shirt off as well and Regulus tried not to look, not just because he wasn’t sure how he’d resist the urge to fucking *lick* James’s abs (god help him), but because James seemed to have had much less time to grow comfortable with his own scar than Regulus.

“Come on,” Regulus said, not looking back as he headed towards the shore, stopping when the water touched his toes. There was a rock stabbing into the sole of his foot, but he still didn’t move. There was the crunch of James’s footsteps behind him, a pause, a breath, a careful silence.

“Sometimes I dream of drowning,” Regulus said quietly. Not to James, who was standing behind him, but to the still expanse of the lake as if he might be able to plead with it. Like an offering. *Look what has already been taken from me. Don’t take any more.*

James didn't speak at Regulus's shoulder. He didn't say sorry, he didn't offer pity, dripping sickly sweet through his fingers.

He didn't ask Regulus what it was like to drown. Regulus wasn't sure he could have answered that.

What *was* it like? It wasn't comparable to something else, Regulus was sure. Maybe James would get that, maybe he would look to his ribs and remember whatever event that had ripped jagged through his skin, and he would understand that some things can't be condensed down into bite-sized pieces.

Drowning was just drowning.

There was no difference between the during and after, he never really felt like it stopped.

"Do you want to go back?"

Regulus swallowed. There was no underlying question in James's words, no pity or prying. *Ask me.* Regulus wanted to scream. *Ask. I've never told anyone, but I would tell you.*

"No," was what Regulus said. "I'm okay." He took one step, and then another to prove it, water rising up to his knees.

He stumbled over something in the water—maybe a branch or piece of debris, and then James's fingers were on him, catching him around the waist. Even once Regulus had regained his footing, he didn't immediately let go.

"Careful," James murmured at Regulus's back, and he was close. Close enough that Regulus could feel his voice on his neck. It sent an involuntary shiver down his spine, and James

suddenly went very still at the movement, fingers tightening slightly where they were grasped on the small of his waist.

I would tell you. Regulus wanted to scream. *Touch me, claim me, I'll give you whatever it is you want.*

Anything at all.

Sirius

Sirius felt dumb.

He was stuck in the swirling feeling, dizzy with his own stupidity. Marlene was telling a story in front of him, grabbing Emmeline and Mary by the arm and shaking them to help make her point. Sirius didn't know what the point was because he was stuck in feeling dumb.

Remus, who had been walking next to Lily while Marlene's voice rose, looked back, frowning when he caught sight of Sirius lagging behind them. And because Remus was perfect and wonderful and Sirius didn't and could never deserve him, Remus instantly squeezed Lily's hand before falling back into step with Sirius.

He didn't say a word as they walked, and Sirius was filled with another surge of affection. Remus knew Sirius well, probably better than almost anyone except maybe Regulus, James, and Peter, though things with James were... tricky lately. Sirius no longer felt as comfortable dumping his trauma and moods on James. He didn't want to somehow upset the balance James seemed to have somehow regained far quicker than Sirius ever could have. On the same note, Regulus was similar. To begin with, he was Sirius's little brother and Sirius was meant to take care of *him*. Sirius didn't feel right forcing Regulus to shoulder his issues when he had his own, much more twisted and dark than whatever Sirius had to offer. Regulus had been through everything Sirius had and then *worse*. And Pete... well as much as Sirius loved Peter to death, he also wasn't always the best person to dump your troubles on. He tended to panic in high-stress situations which stressed *him* out, and then everyone else around him even more so.

Remus Lupin, however, was the one person in the world Sirius still felt he could tell anything. He got Sirius in a way nobody else did, and even when he *didn't*, he still knew how to handle himself. Sure, they still fought often and butted heads, but that simply happened when two people were so different. Remus knew when to keep his mouth shut and let Sirius come to him, and when to push him.

Now, he just let his hand brush Sirius's as they walked behind the rest of their friends. Brunch had been nice despite most of them nursing a nasty hangover. Now feeling more refreshed, Mary had insisted on a little exploring and shopping around the city.

"I think I sound like a broken record," Sirius murmured, letting his shoulder knock into Remus's gently.

"Reg?"

"Reg," Sirius confirmed, swallowing around the dryness in his mouth. Remus waited for Sirius to continue, a steady and quiet presence. "I- I don't think I've ever been as scared as I was that day. He came to *me*, Remus. He broke out of the fucking hospital and took off and then came to me. He trusted me to take care of him even though the last time we'd spoken I had basically cursed his name, even though I thought I'd never see him again. These past few years... *I know* I'm overbearing, I know I worry constantly, I know it drives Regulus and every other person around me absolutely nuts... but he trusted me to take care of him. I'm supposed to. I just wish, for once, he might *let me*."

"Yes, but you know what Regulus wants? You to trust him," Remus said firmly. "I know you try your best, but you still seem to forget that Regulus is an adult. You're allowed to worry, it's natural to worry. But he isn't a baby, even if in your eyes he will always be *your* baby."

"But last night, I didn't even realize anything was wrong," Sirius insisted. "I feel so stupid. How did James know and not me? Regulus barely even tolerates James, yet he was the one who took Reg home when he was sick while I was in the room getting drunk off my ass."

"I think that's a little thing called a support system," Remus said softly. "If anything, you should feel glad, not stupid that you have such amazing friends who will take care of Regulus. We love him too, Sirius. Maybe he's not our brother, but there's not a single person here who would hesitate to take care of Regulus or do exactly what James did."

“But it’s not James’s responsibility,” Sirius said, crossing his arms. “In fact, as much as Prongs will never admit it, I don’t think he likes Regulus any more than Reggie likes *him*. But James stayed today, James took him home last night, James is doing something *I* should be doing. I don’t want to burden him—”

“Pads,” Remus cut him off swiftly, grabbing Sirius's arm to stop him in his steps. Ahead of them, their friends got farther away, not realizing they were leaving the couple behind, but Remus paid them no mind. “James may not *like* Regulus, but he does care about him. He volunteered to stay behind today, so don’t feel guilty over it, okay? They may not click or get along well, but James and Regulus have known each other as long as *I’ve* known *you*. Do you get that, Pads? James has always wanted to help; he’s always been there, not just for you but for Regulus too. It’s not your fault for not noticing anything was wrong yesterday because Reg is fine. You saw him this morning. He’s not alone in the house, he’s perfectly safe. So I know I can’t wave my hand and say, ‘don’t feel dumb, Sirius’ because I’m not magic, and that will never work, but try not to blame yourself too hard. You can’t coddle Regulus forever, and he doesn’t want to be.”

Sirius knew Remus was right, but he also knew he couldn’t shake off the guilt hanging over his shoulders. He should have noticed, he should have paid better attention. Sirius didn’t say that, even though he was sure Remus knew.

“What happened? Reggie, what happened?”

Regulus just blinked, holding himself tightly, arms tugged at his chest. Each breath seemed to pain him, and his face was colorless.

“Regulus,” Sirius pleaded. He went to reach out but promptly stopped when his brother shrank back. “I won’t hurt you,” he promised. “I’d never hurt you.”

Regulus didn’t respond for a long moment, eyes blank, but after a few heavy breaths, he shuffled forward just a few centimeters. Tentatively, Sirius reached out, hand slow and gentle so Regulus could shake his head or move back if he wanted. He didn’t. He let Sirius touch him.

His skin was cold under Sirius's hand as he gently unfolded Regulus's arms so he could take his brother's hand. There was a plastic hospital bracelet on Regulus's wrist and Sirius stopped dead, a wave of anguish rising in his throat. "Did Mother and Father do this?"

Regulus met Sirius's eyes this time, maybe for the first time since he'd showed up shivering at Sirius's door. He shook his head, opening his mouth. It took him a long moment to force words, lips trembling as his voice came out hoarse.

"No," he choked out, and it was barely above a whisper. Regulus seemed to have lost his voice, and it was raspy and raw when he spoke. "B- but they... they don't care. They don't care. Nobody cares."

"I care, Reggie, I care," Sirius said fiercely.

"You left."

"I've regretted that every single day of my life. I won't do it again, Reggie. I'll never leave you again, just stay. Please, I care." It was frantic and rambling. Sirius knew he sounded pathetic pleading like that, but he didn't care. He just needed Regulus to stay, to never leave his sights again, to never look up with such a dead look in his eyes, as if his life was already over and he was a ghost among the living. Sirius had been angry for a long time, angry that Regulus hadn't come and hadn't fought harder, but at that moment, it didn't even seem to matter anymore.

Even though Regulus wouldn't explain, Sirius could feel it. Fear, terror, building from the marrow of his bones to the back of his throat, pressing in behind his eyelids. Something had happened, something terrible, and Sirius could feel the edges of loss. He could tell that whatever had happened, Sirius had come close to having a dead brother, so he would never let Regulus go again.

Regulus never would tell him what it was. It'd be their Uncle Alphard a few days later, explaining an "accident" that despite a lot of very important figures' best efforts to cover up, Alphard still had enough connections to unbury the truth.

But still, even while Regulus knew that Sirius was aware, he still never said. Never explained his own side of the story. Sirius had stopped waiting for him to, and eventually, a spark had come back to Regulus's eyes. But still, Sirius could never quite shake the feeling of his baby brother slipping through his fingers, never to be kept again.

Chapter End Notes

Hi, hi! I'll keep it short and sweet because I have to rush off to work (🙄🙄) but happy Friday, here's the chapter I hope you enjoyed! We're sloooooowly seeing some little puzzle pieces emerging ;)

ANYWAY, on another note I'm taking one-shot requests rn so if anyone wants to shoot me an ask on tumblr or any of my other socials I will do my best to write you something. I can't promise I'll be able to do everyone's, but I'll try!

Love you all and see you next Friday!

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Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

James

Regulus was warm.

That was the only thought going through his mind. Regulus was warm, his skin heated under James's hand and he was small. Smaller than James had realized. Regulus had always felt taller than he was, with such an intense, cold confidence radiating off him. One look at Regulus was all it took to know he'd been raised to be *someone*. Everything he did seemed purposeful, his spine ridged, his chin raised. Yet now, looking out across the lake as if waiting for it to answer some unasked question, nearly pressed against James's chest... he seemed small. Not as if he needed James to protect or save him, but rather like some of his armor had come off and he was standing there unguarded.

James wasn't sure how he forced himself to let go of Regulus's waist, exhaling a tight breath, but somehow he did. Somehow Regulus stepped further into the water and the moment broke, giving way to the easy warmth of the day.

"Sirius used to call me a mermaid," Regulus murmured, tilting his face up to the sun as he descended into the cool of the lake, treading water slightly.

"I remember," James said, smiling at that thought. Summer days spent in the Potter's pool, how Sirius always had to drag Regulus out when it was time to hurry home and avoid being caught by their parents. "You loved to swim, loved the water. Though I think it was partly because of the fact that you always insisted you were secretly a mermaid."

Regulus turned to look at James at that, cheeks coloring slightly at the reminder. He huffed, shaking his head. "That's because you were always putting on that show with the mermaids." He narrowed his eyes. "Not my fault I was influenced."

James smirked at that. “*Well*, it didn’t have me or Sirius running around insisting we’d turn into mermaids if we got wet, that was just you.”

“Please,” Regulus grimaced. “I will give you anything not to bring that up to my brother, I don’t need him remembering that and using it to terrorize me.”

James laughed and it felt right to do so when the sun was shining and the birds were singing. It felt right as Regulus’s face scrunched up at James’s laughter, and the younger boy let out a heavy sigh.

James stepped further into the lake, a smile still on his lips. The world was quiet, and after a moment Regulus took a deep breath before sinking under the water. James watched it swallow him. He waited. Waited a moment that felt like a million years before Regulus broke the surface, gasping and wiping water from his face. James just watched, admiring the pale skin of his hands as Regulus pushed his hair back. It was quite nice like that, James thought. Away from his face, letting James see the curve of his cheekbones and his jaw.

“Do you still like it?” James asked.

Regulus blinked. There was a drop of water on his lashes and it freed itself at the movement, dripping down his cheek.

“Like what?”

“The water.”

Regulus shrugged. “When I can make peace with it.”

James looked out across the lake, the only disruption coming from their bodies. Otherwise, it was smooth and quiet. “I don’t think I understand that,” James muttered, watching the way

the water made Regulus's hair even darker, shining in the sun.

Regulus looked purposefully away, not meeting James's eyes. "I don't reckon you've made peace with many things."

James scoffed at that. "What would you know?"

"I just would," Regulus insisted stubbornly. "Because it's not something a person just *does*. Because you can't get over something if you're in denial. You keep things far too close to your chest, and you never speak about them—"

"If that's a cursor, then I wouldn't say you're over anything either. You've never talked about ___"

"Not to you," Regulus cut him off, eyes flashing. "Do you think you're the only person in the world? Just because I never wanted to recount every gritty gruesome detail to Sirius or to you, doesn't mean I've never talked about it. I have friends, you know. I have a therapist. I spent months in this house with Uncle Alphard trying to figure out how to be alive again. I'm not trying to say that I'm past everything that has ever happened to me. I'm not saying I don't still have nightmares and days when I wake up and all I can do is fucking *drown*. But some days, I can find peace, and you, James... you have not. You can't be angry with me for seeing that. You've let me see."

James felt like it'd be wrong to yell. It'd make him look stupid, like he was somehow proving Regulus right. But boy, even his pride was barely enough to stop himself from grabbing Regulus by the shoulders and shaking him.

"I don't think I meant to," James forced out, voice strained.

Regulus's jaw was clenched, mouth in a tight line and he paused at James's reply. "But you did. You did and we both know it. I bared my fucking soul to you last night, and I know I was drunk and I wish I hadn't because it's embarrassing, but I did. So you can't pretend as if I have no idea what I'm talking about. Clearly, you have some shit going on, and I'm not trying to make you talk about it, but don't think me so stupid."

“I don’t think you’re stupid,” James whispered, because of all the things he may have thought about Regulus Black, his being stupid was not one of them.

“Then don’t treat me like I am.”

James didn’t know what to say to that, so he just sank farther into the water, bringing his hands up to wipe his face. The cool water was sharp as it dripped down his cheeks and he blinked, exhaling.

“Let’s trade then,” James said finally, looking back to Regulus, who was still watching James carefully.

“Trade?”

“Yes, tell me something and I’ll tell you something.”

Regulus bit his lip, tilting his head as he thought for a moment. “Barty and Evan are driving me nuts,” he said finally, choosing a safe enough topic. “Everybody knows they’re in love with each other; at this point, they’re basically in a long-term relationship, but neither will admit it. Barty can be... well, that’s not my business to tell, but he’s complicated and Evan is complicated. I’m just waiting for the day it blows up in their faces. In all of *our* faces. Sometimes, I get so angry with them, because they have everything right in front of them, and they’re lucky. They have no idea how lucky they are.”

James swallowed. “Sirius and Remus make me angry sometimes,” he said, matching Regulus’s admission with something similar of his own. “Like they’re so in love with each other, and I know it wasn’t exactly easy for them to get there, but they did. They’re basically perfect, the center of each other’s worlds. And I don’t think they even know it, how rare it is to get that.”

“Yeah,” Regulus whispered, and what had started as a safe topic had already devolved from that, as things so often seemed between James and Regulus. “Most of our friends. Mary and

Lily, Marlene and Dorcas, Pandora and her strange husband.” James couldn’t help but smile at Regulus’s unwillingness to name Xenophilius, even after all the years he and Pandora had been together. “They all have something so special, and I don’t know what makes them different, what makes them deserving of that when I’m—”

Regulus broke off, but James knew what he’d been about to say. *When I’m not.*

“You are.”

Regulus just shook his head, face twisting before he instantly paddled forward, pushing past James until he could stand properly. James watched him walk to the shore laying down on his towel and covering his face with his arm to block out the sun. Only waiting a minute, watching Regulus from the water, James frowned before following him, stopping to stand over Regulus.

James didn’t say anything, but Regulus seemed to know he was there even without uncovering his eyes. “I’m not saying I’m unlovable or something,” he mumbled and James didn’t point out that he hadn’t said Regulus was.

“Okay.”

“I’m probably just... not built for that. I- I’ve never even been in a relationship.”

James sat down next to Regulus, huffing out a laugh. “I’ve been in a lot.”

“I know,” Regulus said, and there was something under his words, a tinge of bitterness that James didn’t understand. Was Regulus jealous that James had dated people before and he hadn’t?

“It’s not all it’s cut out to be,” James hurried to assure him. “Most girls don’t seem to like me that much.”

Regulus uncovered his eyes at that, squinting up at James. “Well, do you like them?”

James stiffened, heart freezing in his throat. “*What?*” he snapped.

Regulus sat up at that, a frown twisting his face. “What?” he asked in confusion.

“I like girls.”

Regulus’s eyebrows shot up at that. “I- James...” he said slowly as if he was chewing on some realization. “There’s nothing wrong if you don’t—”

“I do—”

“—but that’s not what I meant,” Regulus continued. “I mean... you expect them to give you their heart and soul, but do you like *them* that much? Do you love them, or do you just want them to want you?”

James stood suddenly. “Stop psychoanalyzing me. Mind your fucking business,” he scoffed, grabbing his towel and T-shirt before leaving Regulus sitting there on the grass in a state of shock.

“Wait, James!” James didn’t respond and Regulus let out a groan so patronizing that James didn’t know how anyone could sound so mean. “Are you fucking kidding me, Potter?”

Ah, so *Potter* was back. Wonderful.

James wanted to take it back. He wanted to run back to Regulus and wipe the twisted expression off his face as he scrambled to follow James.

He wanted to take it back, make Regulus unsee him. *Stop looking through me. Stop, stop, stop.*

“This is your problem, you don’t need to react like this—”

James spun on Regulus, eyes sharp. “Oh? Tell me my *problems*, Regulus. Tell me what’s wrong with me, that I’m crazy—”

“I don’t think you’re crazy—”

“—it seems you have plenty of your own problems. So maybe worry about the fact that you don’t sleep, how you’re unlovable, or the peace you may or may not have made with drowning and stop trying to get in my fucking head!”

Regulus froze at that, and James knew he’d hurt him, but he didn’t wait long enough to feel regret. Instead, he started back towards the house, ignoring the sound of Regulus’s footsteps behind him.

When James made it up the front porch, there was the sound of laughter from inside, and he paused to pull his shirt on before stepping into the living room. That gave Regulus enough time to push past him.

“I hope you fucking rot, Potter,” he said, his voice filled with enough venom that all their friends, who seemed to have returned from brunch in the time James and Regulus were out, suddenly fell silent. “You’re a piece of shit.”

Sirius’s eyes were wide as Regulus stomped through the crowded living room, up the stairs, and slammed the door to their room. There was a heavy silence that followed, and Sirius turned on James. “What happened?”

James just shrugged. “Pissed him off, I reckon,” he said as if that weren’t obvious. His voice sounded hollow in his own ears and next to Sirius on the sofa, Remus was looking at James with narrowed eyes as if he were trying to put something together.

Stop looking at me.

James wanted to scream, he wanted to flip the coffee table, tear the wallpaper from the walls and watch his friends flinch. He wanted them to look at him in horror. Yeah, *that’s* James Potter, a fucking monster.

Instead, he turned and headed towards the kitchen.

James wondered why no one had ever taught him how to breathe.

Regulus

It was pathetic and disgusting to admit, but Regulus cried.

He stomped to his room, slammed the door, collapsed on his bed, and cried into his pillow as if he was fourteen years old.

God, how stupid it was.

He only had a few minutes of wallowing before his phone began to buzz on the bed where he’d thrown it. Pushing his damp towel onto the floor and pulling his phone out from the pile, Regulus stood, realizing he was still in his swim trunks and had gotten his sheets wet. He groaned, lashes still wet with tears, and in an undignified swirl of motion, he pulled off his wet swimsuit and answered his phone, balancing it between his ear and shoulder.

“Hello?” Regulus said, trying to conceal his snuffle as he opened the dresser, hunting for fresh clothes.

There was a long moment of silence on the other side of the line, and Regulus paused in the process of struggling into his pants. “What?” he snapped, and there was a long sigh.

“*Regulus,*” Alphard said, quietly.

“Yes?” Regulus asked again unhappily, his voice rising.

“*What’s wrong?*” his uncle asked, his voice as calm and patient as it always was. Regulus didn’t know where he found the ability; it certainly didn’t come from the Blacks.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Regulus mumbled, finally succeeding in getting his pants and trousers on with a sigh. He straightened, adjusting the phone in his hand and sitting at the edge of his bed.

“*You’ve been crying.*”

Regulus frowned deeply, crossing his arms as if Alphard could see that. “You can’t know that.”

Alphard didn’t bother responding to that. “*Do you want to tell me about it?*”

Regulus was quiet for a long minute, but Alphard didn’t speak, letting Regulus decide.

The thing was, Regulus was *nothing* like his uncle. In fact, it’d always been Sirius who found a sort of kindred spirit in him. Regulus, on the other hand, was the complete opposite in every

way. Yet, Regulus did like to think that they had a special sort of relationship, and *maybe* he liked the fact that it was special in a way that Sirius wasn't a part of.

"Do you think I'm unlovable?" Regulus whispered.

Alphard responded instantly. "*Can't be, I love you.*"

And then Regulus was bursting into a fresh round of tears, leaning over on the edge of his bed until his knees touched his chest.

"*Hey, hey,*" Alphard said softly in his ear as Regulus sobbed. "*I can think of many, many people who love you. You're not unlovable. Sirius for one, would burn down the whole world for you, Regulus. That's evidence enough, isn't it?*"

"James said I'm unlovable," Regulus whispered.

"*James? Potter?*"

"Do you know another James?"

"*Yes, Regulus, I know quite a few actually. It's a common name.*"

Despite his tears, Regulus managed to roll his eyes. "Well, James said so. Maybe he's right. I-I'm afraid that maybe he sees me too much. I'm afraid..." Regulus's voice dropped to a whisper. "I think I offer him up too much."

Alphard knew about Regulus's long-time crush on James, even though he's never said anything. He was quiet for a second, which left Regulus's heart beating overtime, unsure what his uncle would say. "*Probably,*" he began softly. "*But honestly, Regulus, as much as you'd like to pretend otherwise, when it comes to the people you love, you're a very giving person. You just need to remember that making yourself smaller for him isn't good for*

anyone. I know how hugely you feel things, I know how long you've... cared for James. But I never want you to give for someone who doesn't feel the same." He didn't say anything about this strange and sudden shift in James and Regulus's relationship, much to Regulus's relief. He didn't think he could explain it.

"I- I don't know what he feels. I've never understood him, but I thought I knew who he was, and I think I was wrong. I think we're *all* wrong, and... and lately it's almost like he wants to give too. He keeps offering up all these bits I've never seen before, and then he turns around and tries to take it back."

"And he hurts you in the process," Uncle Alphard said simply. *"You're worth more than that."*

"I don't know... I feel like he's right. I feel like he sees me, and if he thinks I'm unlovable... Maybe you love me and Sirius loves me, but that's different, you're family."

His uncle laughed at that. *"Oh, Regulus, my dear. You of all people know that family does not automatically equal love. Stop trying to fit things into your boxes so you can properly pity yourself. Take a second to examine the situation and the facts. What are they?"*

Regulus paused, taking a shaky breath. "You love me, Sirius loves me..." he began slowly.

"Yes, who else?"

"Remus?" Regulus suggested tentatively.

"Most definitely."

"And um... probably my friends. Pandora says so a lot. The others don't say it, but they must like me at least to have stuck around this long."

“Of course they do, not everyone expresses their love with words. I’m absolutely certain all of your friends love you deeply,” Alphard said sternly. *“Now, what other facts do you know? What brought you to this situation.”*

“I- okay. Fact one, James said I’m unlovable.”

“And...” Alphard prompted.

“And...” Regulus said, taking a deep breath. “And last night... James said that there’s nothing wrong with me... he said that it wasn’t my fault, everything that happened with my parents and Sirius. He insisted he never thought badly of me for it.”

“Okay, any other facts?”

“Yes... maybe? I don’t know if it’s a fact, because I’m not entirely sure of it. But I suppose there’s something going on with James. He doesn’t seem to be doing well, and I don’t think anyone else knows. Today, I was pushing him. We talked about drowning—” Regulus broke off, swallowing and wondered what sort of expression his uncle was wearing on the other side of the phone. Regulus rarely talked about what had happened to anyone. “I was pushing him... I said something about his dating life, and he reacted really badly. I think... maybe he’s in denial about some things, and when I pushed, he snapped. That’s when he said that I’m unlovable, but right before that... he did say I’m deserving of love.”

“There you are,” Alphard said softly. *“Now, I’m not saying it was alright, or that you aren’t allowed to be upset. That’s a terrible, shitty thing to say, especially if James seemed to be aware that this is a fear you struggle with. But maybe he said it because he knew it’d hurt you, not because it’s true. None of the facts point to it being true.”*

Regulus sighed, falling back to lay on his bed, staring up at the ceiling. The sun was beginning to set, and it filtered through the drapes, painting the bedroom a warm hue.

“Tell me how your renovations are coming,” Regulus said after a quiet minute, and he heard Alphard chuckle lightly.

“I’m warning you, Regulus, you’re about to get me started on the custom bookshelves I’m having made for the study. You’ll never get me off the phone.”

“That’s okay,” Regulus told him, and he listened to his uncle talk about his house and landscaping updates until the sun had fallen behind the horizon and the room was dark.

He knew he’d missed dinner, but he couldn’t find it in himself to get up. So, Regulus just laid there, phone to his ear, wet swimsuit still on the floor, his hair curling and frizzy in the summer heat. Normally, he would have cared that it was going to be dry and probably smushed in the back from where he was laying on it, but for once he couldn’t bring himself to bother.

When a knock on the door interrupted Alphard mid-sentence fifteen minutes into his heated discussion of stained glass, Regulus raised his head. A few years ago, Regulus wouldn’t have assumed it to be Sirius because he never knocked, but he’d slowly learned that even siblings have to respect each other’s boundaries (after a very stern scolding from Alphard.)

“Hold on,” Regulus told Alphard before sitting up and looking towards the door. “Yeah?” he called.

Sure enough, when the door opened, Sirius was standing there in the doorway, eyes dark and almost unreadable in its stillness. Regulus’s stomach flipped. People often considered Regulus to be the “scary” one, but the truth was Sirius was just as scary when he wanted to be. Especially when Sirius— usually an open book when it came to those closest to him, became closed off. He had a certain skill most Blacks did: the ability to hide himself away behind a mask, to close off his eyes, to stand tall and unreadable.

Now, Sirius didn’t look like he was trying to appear imposing, but he was hiding something behind his expression and it left Regulus uneasy.

“What is it?”

Sirius stepped into the room. “Is that Uncle Alphard?” he asked, even though they both knew Alphard was the only person who’d call Regulus that wasn’t already in the house.

“Yeah, hold on.” He pressed the phone firmly back to his ear. “Sorry I should go,” Regulus told his uncle quickly.

“No worries. I love you, and tell Sirius I love him as well.”

“Will do, and I love you too.”

“Okay, I’ll call to talk again soon.”

“Bye,” Regulus said softly before hanging up his phone. “Alphard says he loves you,” Regulus relayed.

Sirius’s expression had softened slightly at the interaction, and Regulus knew how important it was to Sirius that Regulus had a relationship with their uncle. Apart from Sirius, Alphard was probably the only person in the world Regulus knew how to say “I love you” to.

“Everything alright?” Regulus asked as Sirius still hadn’t said a word.

“I feel I should be asking you that,” Sirius said and there was a tightness in his voice as he moved further into the room.

“Didn’t we have this conversation this morning?”

“Yes, and you mostly deflected and insisted you were fine, but here we are and you’re clearly not fine.”

“You don’t need to be on my ass—”

“No, *no*,” Sirius said fiercely, instantly shutting Regulus up. The truth was he didn’t lose his temper often with Regulus these days, and it was almost surprising. Like they were teenagers again and Sirius was pushing while Regulus pulled, tumbling headfirst into each other, a tangle of limbs, nails, and blood. “You don’t get to do that. I try to stay back. I try to let you work things out for yourself and come to me, but you *don’t*. I let so much of it go, I try to trust you and you fucking *weaponize* it, Regulus! It’s always that I’m overbearing or butting into your life, and maybe I do, maybe that’s a problem, but I try to be aware of it. You have a problem, too! You never tell me anything and then get mad when I’m worried and scared! I’m sorry I love you and care about you, there are worse things! I can’t be the only one trying. A compromise takes two people, but I’m always the one who’s backing off and you never give anything!”

Regulus blinked. “You make me sound like a terrible person,” he said numbly, mouth twisting into a scowl. “Weaponizing? Not everything is about you, Sirius. I’m not purposely trying to manipulate you—”

“That’s exactly what you’re doing! Even right now, you’re twisting my words and making me sound absurd so you can scoff and brush it off as if I’m crazy and overdramatic. You’re not a terrible person, but you can be a manipulative bitch, Regulus.”

Regulus didn’t even know what to say to that; his tongue felt heavy in his mouth, and he swallowed around it. Sirius was rigid, a ball of righteous anger, his eyes darker than usual in the dim light. It reminded him scarily of his own. There was water rising in his throat, Regulus was choking on it, his lungs were screaming.

“Do you understand the shame you’ve brought upon this family?”

“Regulus.” As quickly and intensely as Sirius’s anger had come, it dissipated, and he just stood there helplessly for a moment before closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. “Fuck,” Sirius sighed. “Remus is going to be mad at me for yelling at you. I’m sorry... I shouldn’t have done that.”

“It’s okay,” Regulus whispered. “I’m sorry, too.”

Sirius held Regulus's gaze for a moment before his shoulders drooped and he shook his head, starting forward and sitting at the edge of Regulus's bed.

"I think... there has to be a balance," Sirius began slowly. "Between me being overbearing and you never giving me anything. I don't know if it's trust or—"

"I trust you," Regulus said quickly. "I do."

"Then what is it? Why can't you tell me things? I'm not asking for every gritty detail, I just want you to tell me something other than 'I'm fine' for once."

"It's... I don't want to put shit on you, Sirius," Regulus said quietly, looking down at his hands so he didn't have to meet his brother's eyes. "Do you understand how much you've done for me? Do you get just how much you've given? Sirius, I had no money, not a single thing to my name when you took me in. You helped Uncle Alphard pay for my school, you gave me a place to live, bought me clothes, and put a piano in your flat just for me. Even before that, you always looked out for me. You got in trouble so I wouldn't, you advocated for me when I'd never open my mouth. You've given me *everything*, and you have your own life and your own things to worry about. You don't need to take on more of mine."

Regulus dared a glance at his brother, and Sirius was sitting there open-mouthed in shock, eyes wide.

"Regulus..." Regulus quickly tried to look away, but Sirius reached out to grab his jaw, forcing Regulus to look him in the eye. "Regulus," Sirius said again, his voice quiet but fierce. "You do not owe me anything. I'm your brother—"

"Yeah, you're my brother! Not my parent, not my keeper. I shouldn't be your responsibility!"

"It's not about responsibility, it's about the fact that I love you more than almost anyone. I've never done anything for you out of a sense of *duty*," Sirius scoffed. "Yes, I acted as a parent to you, because no one else would. But that's not because I felt like I had to, I did it because *I*

love you, Regulus, and you didn't get a proper parent. I wanted you to have someone who took care of you. Are you telling me that if the situation was reversed and I came to you with nowhere to live and nothing to my name, you wouldn't have done the same thing? Even though you were never the one who had to act as the parent for me?"

"I- I mean, I would. But you don't get it, Sirius, we're different. I *would* have hesitated. You didn't. You didn't even pause, just brought me into your life when I didn't deserve it."

"Yeah, we *are* different. We're not the same person. Maybe you would have hesitated, but you always have in most things. You're always one to think things over carefully and stay in your head. I've never thought something through a day in my life, that's who *I am*. You're not somehow worse because you hesitate. You're not a bad person just because you aren't me."

Regulus blinked, and he didn't know what was wrong with him today, but suddenly he felt like crying again. He swallowed down the urge but Sirius seemed to know anyway, pulling Regulus into a tight hug. Regulus exhaled as Sirius held him tight, nudging his face into his brother's shoulder. They sat like that for a long time.

"James said something to me, it... it hurt my feelings a bit," Regulus whispered, feeling stupid even as he admitted it. "So, I wasn't fine, but I talked to Uncle Alphard and I don't think James really meant it."

Regulus could practically see Sirius's frown even without lifting his head.

"Sometimes Prongs does lack tact," Sirius said slowly. "Not that I'm really one to speak, or so I'm told, but if you want me to talk to him—"

"No, no." Regulus shook his head, pulling away from Sirius to frown up at him. "Boundaries," Regulus reminded his brother. "I'm being honest with you, okay, but I don't need you to fight my battles. It's fine, I'll talk to him."

"I know things have always been rocky with you two..."

“I know,” Regulus sighed. “It’s okay, I can handle myself. Really, I think I’m being very nice.”

Sirius snorted at that, hitting Regulus (really, much harder than was necessary) on the shoulder. “Sure you are,” Sirius said rolling his eyes disbelievingly, and suddenly Regulus felt very guilty in a way he couldn’t quite explain.

Regulus wasn’t doing anything *wrong*... but god, Sirius really had no idea.

Chapter End Notes

enter: ALPHARD!! I love him and I've been obsessed with his relationship with his siblings lately so trust you will be seeing more of him.

For my readers that are here with me, I hope you feel like you've found a little gem because honestly, this has been some of my favorite work. I've put so much care into this from actually meticulously planning out what I want to include (usually I write based on pure vibes, caffeine and mental illness). If you follow me on insta you'll see I post about my writing process and little snippets of this fic a lot. I'm just so obsessed and the sexual tension practically writes itself.

(BY THE WAY, this is rated mature... normally I rate things teen so if you're following me from my other work, please keep that in mind. You know how I said I could never write smut... I've changed my mind. don't expect like EXPLICIT but still...)

Also unrelated, but those of you who survived the Great War (ao3 being down) with me and cared enough to read my fic out of A GOOGLE DOC?? ily!! Honestly, it still shocks me when people care about my work... or even crazier recognize me out in the wild for writing anti-hero... CRAZY.

I'll see you next Friday. Mwah!!

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Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Whichever one of you was waiting for the line "In Sirius's experience, people who were fine didn't tell you that they were fine." this chapter is dedicated to you, babe!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Barty

Barty had made a lifelong career for himself in being entirely unbothered. Not in a cool and collected "*I'm above it*" way, but rather in the "*I've been as low as you could possibly go*" way. In the "*fuck it, nothing matters anyway*" sort of way.

Barty had lived with this philosophy since he was seven years old and he realized his father would never love him and his mother would never speak up, never love him *enough* .

So what if he barreled through life jumping from one hedonistic, reckless bender to another? Nothing mattered anyway!

Nothing had mattered most of his life. He looked at all the things *normal* people cared about, and he couldn't figure out why they would. School, careers, dreams... Barty didn't have any dreams aside from bringing as much shame upon his father as possible.

Everything he did, he did out of spite. Barty started playing violin because his father said he wouldn't be able to, that his fingers weren't swift or delicate enough. So, he'd gone to his mother, begged for lessons, and become the best he could possibly be. He wasn't sure he even liked playing, but he liked the look in his father's eyes when he had to live with being wrong. Barty liked knowing his name was plastered over posters and programs, not so easily erased.

When he went to study music, it was because his father wanted him to go into law or business.

“You’ve had your fun,” he’d said harshly, “but music isn’t a real career. You’ll never make anything out of yourself. I’ve allowed you to run wild for far too long, that’s going to change.”

Barty, of course, on his lifelong mission to spite his father, had then gotten into the best music program London had to offer and laughed in his father’s face.

He was used to things not mattering, and Barty didn’t care much for school aside from proving his father wrong. Sure, sometimes he wanted to play, but even so, he hated most of the stiff age-old pieces they were forced to practice. He hated playing the same measure a million times when he already knew he had it perfectly.

Then, one day in rehearsal after some stupid girl had messed up the tempo *again*, Barty had scowled, and in the middle of the room he met the pianist’s eye. The boy had rolled his eyes, looking entirely disgusted by the lack of talent and Barty’s life had probably been altered forever.

“I don’t even know how she got into this program,” Barty had muttered as he passed the pianist after rehearsal.

The boy had spun, raising an eyebrow. “Daddy’s money, I’d wager,” he said dryly.

“Hm,” Barty agreed, cocking his head. “What’s your name?”

“I’m not looking to make friends.”

“Good,” Barty scoffed. “Me either. I’m Barty.”

The pianist scrutinized him for a second before sighing. “Regulus.”

“You’re good, Regulus.”

“I know.”

And really, that was it. That was the first thing that mattered: Regulus Black.

Along with Regulus came the second thing, the biggest thing: *Evan Rosier* .

Truthfully, Barty had probably been in love with him since the first time Regulus had brought him along to lunch. He was quiet, but a little mean, and very protective of Regulus. Barty liked that, he wanted to crack Evan open and find out what was going on behind his stoic demeanor.

Regulus was Barty’s first best friend, but Evan was different. There was always something special between them, from the first time Evan had opened up a little, offering up more than his usual ten words. They existed in a quiet understanding of each other that nobody else ever really got. Yet, at the same time, Barty didn’t think a person had ever confused him more than Evan Rosier.

“ *Evan* ,” Barty crossed his arms. “I don’t get what your problem is.”

Evan didn’t even bother replying to that, turning away to rummage through the closet, pulling out a jumper.

“ *Evan* .”

“I don’t want to talk to you right now, please get out,” Evan said tonelessly, his back still to Barty.

“Why?”

“You know why.”

“You’re being unreasonable, you know I didn’t mean anything by it—”

“Get *out*,” Evan snapped, and Barty scoffed, mouth twisting into a bitter scowl.

“Fine, fuck you.”

Barty slammed the door on the way out, hoping it made Evan flinch. He didn’t want to talk to people and thankfully, despite hearing voices, he didn’t encounter anyone as he stomped through the house and out onto the front porch. Barty stopped dead as he registered James Potter standing there, hands gripping the railing.

James turned at the sound of the door, scrutinizing Barty for a moment. “What are you doing?”

“Going to kill myself,” Barty snapped.

The thing was, Barty had learned that for many people, suicide jokes were not well-received. It was usually a certain type of person, a James Potter type of person. Warm, bubbly, sheltered, bleeding hearts. Except, James didn’t do anything but raise his eyebrows. “Have fun.”

Barty narrowed his eyes at the other man. “Go inside, I’m trying to brood.”

“I was here first. You’re in a mood.”

“Yeah, shut up, I have a personality disorder. Go fuck yourself.”

James froze and Barty resisted the urge to groan or bash his head against the porch railing. He had no shame about it, in fact, Barty usually liked to see how uncomfortable it made people. At the moment, however, he wasn't in the mood to deal with perfect James Potter and his stupid wide eyes.

“Yeah, yeah,” Barty muttered when Potter still didn't speak. “I'm clinically unstable, go cry about it.”

“What is it?”

Barty blinked. “What?”

“Your disorder.”

Barty's eyes narrowed. “That's a little tactless, even for you, Potter.”

“You're the one who brought it up,” James snapped, and Barty was honestly a little surprised by James's response. Barty was not stupid enough to believe that James never lost his temper, but if he did, he never seemed to take it out on other people. But then again, they'd never really had a proper conversation. Barty *did* have a way of bringing the worst out of people.

“Fine,” Barty huffed but somehow restrained himself from arguing back. Despite whatever people might say about Barty Crouch Jr., he was not a psycho or deranged and he did care about the people around him (some of them). In fact, Barty had a *therapist*. He'd been working the past few years, away from his father.

So, he evaluated the situation just as his therapist had taught him. He considered whether he needed to remove himself and decided, what the hell, Potter was asking, and Barty had

nothing to hide.

“BPD,” Barty shrugged. “Borderline—”

“Personality Disorder,” James finished for him, mouth twisting like he was going to be sick. “Yeah, I know what it is.”

Barty sighed. “Let me guess, you had some crazy ex with BPD or a friend of a friend, and now you think you know all about it. Now you think we’re all just batshit crazy—”

“I don’t think anyone is *crazy*,” James said, spinning on Barty with a blazing expression. “Don’t fucking say that.”

“Don’t worry,” Barty rolled his eyes. “I’m not about to out you, perfect James Potter as a hater of people with mental disorders. Your reputation is safe.”

“That’s not what it is,” James protested sharply.

“*Really?*”

James didn’t seem to know how to counter that and he just swallowed, his mouth clamped shut.

“Whatever,” Barty sighed, because he had met more than a few people in his lifetime who thought badly of him for his diagnosis. “You don’t know what it’s like.”

James let out a small unhappy sound at that but didn’t say anything more, and Barty just leaned over the railing, resting his head on his arms.

“So, what’d you say to Reg to piss him off so bad?” Barty asked after a long stretch of silence.

James sighed, eyes fixed on the trees in the distance. “Told him he was unlovable,” James muttered bitterly.

Barty shot up straight, eyes wide. “You *what*? Jesus fucking Christ, Potter, why would you say that? What’s wrong with you?”

“A lot...” James scoffed, still not facing Barty. Studying his side profile, Barty could see the self-hatred leaking through James’s words, and suddenly his mind was spinning, trying to put the pieces together. “And he pissed me off.”

“You can’t just tear down the world and hurt people when something pisses you off,” Barty told him sharply, and Potter rolled his eyes at that.

“I feel like you’re the last person to be telling me that.”

“No, I’m *exactly* who should be telling you that. I’d know, I’ve learned how to take some fucking responsibility.”

“Good for you. It’s not like that, I don’t go around blowing up on every person who looks at me wrong. I’m not like *that* .”

“Like *what* , me? You’re really not helping my view of you as an insensitive prick.” Barty crossed his arms over his chest. He was two seconds away from pushing Potter over the porch railing. “I don’t know what you’re trying to imply, but that’s not what BPD is. Not everyone who has it is violent or lashes outward. You know, like quiet BPD. And anyway, even for the people that do, it isn’t like that. You can learn to control it, avoid triggers, and whatever. We’re not monsters...”

“What do you mean?” James turned to face him, some of the anger gone from his expression. Instead, he seemed confused, his brow furrowed.

“We’re not monsters?” Barty questioned in confusion. “I thought that was pretty self-explanatory.”

“No, the quiet BPD thing.”

“Oh,” Barty frowned. “I mean, from what I understand it’s not like an official subtype... but when Pandora found out I was diagnosed, she insisted on doing a shit ton of research on BPD and then relaying it all to me... it’s like... instead of lashing outwards, quiet BPD is more likely to turn inwards. I—” he broke off. “I don’t know why the fuck I’m telling you this, google it.”

James didn’t say a word, frowning as if this was the worst thing he’d ever heard and Barty exhaled, squeezing his eyes shut. He had a budding suspicion when it came to this topic seeming of particular interest (and equal parts anger) to James, but whatever he had going on, that wasn’t Barty’s problem.

“You should apologize to Reg,” Barty said after a long moment of silence. “He’s more sensitive than he seems.”

James winced. “I know,” he whispered. “I didn’t even mean it... I- I just...” he shook his head. “I don’t know. I shouldn’t have said it.”

“You shouldn’t have,” Barty agreed.

They didn’t speak anymore after that, but neither moved. Barty had the horrifying realization that maybe they got each other.

Barty knew the feeling. He knew he was the kind of person who said things they shouldn’t. Who aimed to hurt. He knew that eventually, he’d manage to scare Evan off. He’d get tired of

Barty and the constant push and pull, never settling down, never knowing peace.

“It’s not so straightforward...” Barty mumbled into the evening. He didn’t look over at James, but the man seemed to still next to him and Barty knew he was listening.

“What isn’t?” James asked, clearly confused since he couldn’t exactly follow Barty’s silent train of thought.

“Being easy to love... it’s not *easy* .”

“Yeah,” James muttered. “It’s not.” And shit, Barty must have been right in his suspicions, because James sounded heavy with the notion, as if he really did get it.

“I’m a lot,” Barty continued. “I’m not so easy to love.”

“Me either, it’s hard, it’s... *work* .”

Yes, they understood each other. *Shit* .

“For what it’s worth, I don’t think Reg would mind. He takes a little work, too.”

James straightened sharply, and Barty turned his head to raise an eyebrow.

“What are you talking about?” James demanded. “I don’t see what that has to do with this... Regulus doesn’t love me, and he doesn’t want to, I don’t want him to.”

“Who knows what Regulus wants, he’s an enigma,” Barty said, entirely unruffled. “Though, I do know he’ll probably be having a little heartbroken tantrum right now. You should go talk to him. Between you and me... he cares a lot more than he lets on. He cares what you think,

do you get that? Lord knows why. Your opinion isn't worth shit, but..." Barty trailed off with a shrug. "Yeah, go apologize." A pause. "Fuck, I need to apologize, too." He squeezed his eyes shut with a sigh.

"What did you do?" James said instead of addressing whatever Barty *knew* had been growing between him and Regulus.

"Oh, you know, terrorized Evan... loving me is work."

"Maybe Evan doesn't mind," James said quietly, and Barty turned a glare on him.

"You don't know anything about me and Evan," Barty snapped.

"No, I don't. But how long have you two been together? A year? Longer than that? If he didn't want to put in the work, I don't think he would have stuck around."

"Maybe he didn't realize how much work it would be until now."

"No offense, Crouch," James snorted, "but I doubt that. You tend to come on strong from the get-go."

"Oh, shut up," Barty muttered, but really, Potter was right. Barty wasn't good at pretending to be someone he wasn't.

The sun had begun to set in the time they were outside. Barty had never imagined that standing on the porch with bugs singing in the purple dusk with *James Potter* would be comforting, but somehow it was.

Eventually, he straightened, swallowing. "Well, Potter," Barty began and it came out a bit stilted. "Uh, you know where to find me."

It was an offer, an olive branch. Not quite addressing Barty's suspicions or forcing James to confirm them, but putting it out there. They did get each other, and Barty knew James could tell that too.

"Yeah," James muttered in response, not an acceptance but not a dismissal either.

James

Sirius was coming down the stairs when James was going up. They paused before they passed each other. The hall light was off, and it was hard to make out the shadows of Sirius's face.

"Whatever it was you said to Regulus..." Sirius said, his voice scarily smooth.

"Uh, yeah?" James prompted, feeling nervous under Sirius's cool words.

"Don't do it again."

"Okay."

"I'm serious."

A pause. A beat. "I know you are."

There was a moment there, sitting heavy between them and then Sirius's coldness cracked, a smile working its way over his face at the old joke. "Don't let Moony hear you say that." They had been firmly and permanently banned from making that joke when they were fifteen and Remus decided he'd had *enough*.

“Never,” James grinned faintly. The ban did not stop them from breaking it out whenever Remus wasn’t around. At heart, they were still fifteen, and maybe a part of them would always be. James was always that person somewhere, maybe everyone was. Maybe the whole world walked around with their fifteen-year-old bleeding, begging hearts beating in their chests. It would explain a lot about the state of the world.

“You eat?” Sirius asked.

“Nah, not yet... I’m not really hungry.”

“Yeah, okay,” Sirius nodded. He accepted it easily before he stopped suddenly, frowning. “Did you eat earlier while we were out? I know Reggie told me he had a sandwich, but you don’t like the kind of bread we have—”

“I didn’t, but I’m fine, Sirius, I told you I’m not really hungry.”

And James saw it in the flicker of Sirius’s eyes, the way he shifted on the staircase. For the first time ever, Sirius didn’t simply take the excuse, instead, he only frowned. “You should eat.”

“Yeah, I will.”

“Prongs...” Sirius began, his eyes narrowed.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Stop seeing me. Stop looking .

“I will, I just need to apologize to Regulus. Then I’ll get something.”

“Are you feeling ill? It’s not like you—”

“Sirius, I’m *fine*,” James cut him off, but there was something there between Sirius’s eyes, some recognition that James wanted to stamp out. “It’s just been a busy day, and I felt a bit sick from drinking last night. I know that you care so deeply for everyone around you, but I’m not one you have to worry about. I’ll eat later. Missing one meal isn’t the end of the world.”

There was a heavy pause, tension building between them before finally, Sirius nodded, his shoulders relaxing. “Ugh, I don’t know how I became the *mom friend*,” he grimaced. “Sorry, I don’t mean to interrogate you, I’m just so used to worrying with Reggie, and then Remus said—” he broke off suddenly, seeming to think better of continuing that train of thought. “Never mind, go talk to Reg. He’ll probably bite your head off, though. You really upset him.”

“I know,” James took a deep breath.

“Okay. I love you, Prongs, you know that?”

“Yeah, Pads. I do. I love you too.”

“Good,” Sirius grinned, reaching forward to grab James’s head and plant a dramatic kiss on his cheek. James couldn’t help but laugh as Sirius let him go, the tension between them gone. “Now, go talk to Reggie,” he raised his hand in a mock salute. “Good luck, soldier.”

James started back up the stairs, hesitating for only a moment before pushing open their bedroom door.

Regulus was lying on his side with his phone in his hand, and he looked up at the sound of the door.

James shut the door, enclosing them in the quiet stillness. Even though James’s heart was beating in his throat and he couldn’t read the way Regulus was watching him, something about the room felt safe. The bedroom was the only thing in the world that had ever been

theirs . James and Regulus's, Regulus and James's. It felt sacred and as James stepped forward, Regulus sat up. His hair was frizzy, curling wildly and James wanted to put his hands in it.

"I'm sorry," James said suddenly because he didn't know any other way to start it. "I- I didn't mean what I said. I don't think you're unlovable. I said it because I knew it'd hurt you, and because no matter what you say, it's clear *you* think that. But I don't think that, Regulus. God... you- you're like this incredibly intense, beautiful, wild person, and I don't think there's anyone in the world who could meet you and not be infatuated with you. Getting to know you is a privilege, and being torn apart by you is a blessing. I don't think you're unlovable, I think you don't let people know you because you're probably the easiest person in the world to love."

Regulus didn't speak. James didn't know if the other man was about to punch him or cry. After a moment, he shook his head, doing neither. "Jesus, you give me whiplash," Regulus muttered, and there was something brittle in his tone.

"I'm sorry," James said again. He took a step forward and then another. He was at Regulus's knees now, looking down at him. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Regulus's mouth parted and he sucked in a breath as he tilted his face up to look at James. "Will you forgive me?" James asked tentatively.

Regulus swallowed, and they were close enough that James could hear it. He watched the bob of Regulus's throat, entranced.

"Earn it. What would you do?" It was a challenge. James accepted.

"Anything."

Regulus blinked slowly; his breath was shallow. James closed the last bit of space between himself and the bed. His legs touched Regulus's knees. He was warm and the moment seemed to last an eternity.

"What do you want?" James asked him.

Regulus opened his mouth, then shut it again like he was tamping down whatever words were itching on his tongue.

“Regulus,” James whispered.

“I want you to be close,” Regulus said, his voice ragged. He licked his lips and James wanted to bite them. He wanted to take Regulus between his teeth until he tasted blood.

Instantly, Regulus seemed to regret his words, and he scrunched his face painfully. He tucked his legs, scooting back on his bed away from James.

James didn't know what possessed him, but suddenly he was climbing onto Regulus's bed, grabbing him by the waist forcefully and stopping his movement. They froze like that, James hovering over Regulus, pinning him down by the waist. As Regulus went pliant under James's fingers, breath catching, James had the horrifying, tantalizing realization that for all the things James wanted to do... Regulus might let him.

“Close enough?” James whispered and Regulus, who seemed to have lost his voice, just nodded. James had the strangest feeling that was a lie. And Regulus insisted he wasn't a liar. What a load of bullshit.

James wasn't sure how long they stayed like that, toeing a careful line. A line that James didn't know how to read. Eventually, James squeezed his eyes shut and rolled over to lie next to Regulus.

“Your bed is comfier than mine.”

“Is that why you can't sleep?” Regulus asked quietly.

“Partly.”

“We can trade if you want.”

James opened his eyes at the offer, turning his head to frown at Regulus who was watching him, eyes dark and intense. “No, you can’t sleep either.”

Regulus gave a halfhearted shrug and James shook his head.

“No, it’s fine.” James yawned, letting his eyes fall shut again. Regulus’s bed *was* comfy, and he could feel the other man’s warmth, the gentle sound of his breathing near James’s ear. The room was dark, and James didn’t mean to fall asleep, but being next to Regulus felt so... right.

As sleep claimed him, James swore he heard Regulus speak, but maybe he’d dreamed it.

“I do forgive you. God help me.”

Sirius

“I’m fine.”

The sentence turned Sirius’s stomach even as James had smiled, even as the tension had melted and his friend headed up the stairs.

I’m fine, I’m fine, I’m fine.

In Sirius’s experience, people who were fine didn’t tell you that they were fine.

Remus was on the sofa chatting with Peter, and Sirius made a beeline for him, grabbing his arm and interrupting their conversation.

“Moony.”

Remus was up in an instant, frown painting his lips, brown eyes concerned as he let Sirius drag him to the empty kitchen.

“Sirius, what is it?” Remus asked once they were out of earshot.

“Something is wrong. Something is going on with James, I think you’re right.”

“Did something happen?”

“Yes. No—“ Sirius broke off frustratedly. “I mean, I talked to him after I went to see Reg and I realized James hadn’t eaten dinner. He said he was fine, but then I realized he must not have eaten lunch, either. He’s almost always the first one down here, and he makes breakfast for everyone but he rarely eats. I’m not sure he’s sleeping, and half the time he doesn’t want to go out with us or do anything. It’s not like him. And you’re right. He never really took a break after everything, he didn’t even really grieve. I’m afraid it’s all catching up to him and —“

“Sirius,” Remus’s voice was gentle but firm enough to cut through his hysteria. “Breathe. You’re probably right. But you know James, I’ve never even seen him *cry*. He might be scared to lean on someone. Don’t jump the gun and lose your head. Grief is normal, and as terrible as it is, most people have to live through it at least once. We’ll just keep an eye on him, make sure he’s eating and taking care of himself. We’ll just be here for him if he does need someone. Don’t freak out on him, because I don’t think that will help anyone.”

Sirius took a deep breath, trying to tamp down the rising panic. “He said he was fine,” Sirius said, his voice small. “*Fine*. That’s what Regulus always said, and he wasn’t. I almost lost him. I can’t lose James, Moony. He’s everything to me.”

“I know,” Remus said gently, reaching out to cup Sirius’s jaw in his hands. He was warm and steady, a sharp contrast to Sirius’s bitter, always-raging storm. “I don’t think it’ll come to that.”

Chapter End Notes

You might be thinking, "Mere, you are posting this so much earlier than usual??" Yes, yes I am. It's crazy. It is 11:30pm on Thursday and I'm currently typing up this end note, but it will be Friday by the time I post this, I promise :0

 If you'll allow me to talk a little bit about BPD for a sec, even if you normally skip end notes, I'd appreciate if you at least skim this one!!

Firstly, if you're curious I implore you to google BPD and specifically the term "quiet BPD" as it relates a lot to James. I'm not a professional just a mentally ill girlie projecting on James Potter. However!! I think it's so important to note the differences between Barty and James. When I was editing I left a HUGE comment on the line: "Barty wasn't good at pretending to be someone he wasn't." because it shows how even two people with the exact same disorder can be so different and BPD can manifest differently. I think a lot of people don't know what BPD is or villainize it, so this silly little fic is really just me hoping at least a few people might get a better idea of just what it's like. If you have any questions or even critiques in this sense, feel free to let me know! I have BPD so I do know firsthand what it's like, but as I said every experience is different and James isn't me as much as I draw from my own experiences and what I know.

Obviously, I think my characterization of James is very, very different from how he's normally portrayed and I've been terrified of him seeming OOC. I'm happy everyone has been very happy with my characterization so far, and ily all. if you ever feel unsatisfied, I DO implore you to remember and be suspicious especially when we're seeing James through his own POV... because I've been playing a lot with unreliable narrators and differing perspectives... even like right now, Regulus probably sees him clearest, he's also clouded by his horniness and own feelings ;)

So I THINK the Serious-Sirius joke is so stupid but James and Sirius are also stupid and they'd definitely think it was funny so against my better judgment I had to include it 😭

It's now 12am and technically Friday so I'm posting!! Anyway, ily all and I'll see you next Friday for what has undoubtedly become PPP day!

Mwah! All my love <33
-Mere

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Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I'm going to start dedicating my chapters to people since I did it last chapter and I think that's cute!! So this one is for Eilah for humoring my concern with whether or not Regulus would wear shorts...

Pls see end notes for TW!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Regulus

Regulus was warm.

That was the first thing he registered when he woke up. The second was that it was bright out. The sun was shining through the drapes which meant it was morning. Which meant Regulus had slept through the *entire night?*

The third thing Regulus registered was that there was a hand on his hip.

Oh shit.

Regulus's eyes jerked open fully, and he was suddenly met with the terrifying, unmistakable fact that he was pressed up against James Potter's chest. James was lying on his back, one arm over his eyes and the other around Regulus, hand resting near his hip. Regulus had somehow tucked his head into James's shoulder in the middle of the night, and James must have instinctively pulled him in.

Shit, shit, shit.

Regulus resisted the urge to throw himself out of bed for fear of waking James. Carefully, barely daring to breathe, Regulus tried to shift out from under James.

“Change your mind?”

Regulus froze. “I- what?” He stuttered out, barely above a whisper, hoping that maybe he’d imagined it.

“About being close...” James mumbled. He removed his arm from over his eyes, turning his head to blink sleepily at Regulus. Regulus, who’d only half extracted himself, was still under James’s fingers and he held his breath as they made eye contact.

When Regulus didn’t respond, James yawned before frowning. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to put my hands on you,” he muttered. “Don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“I’m not. I- I mean, it’s okay.”

“It’s okay,” James repeated.

“Yeah.”

James inhaled. The easy warmth of the morning heated between them. James removed his hand and Regulus lifted his hips so James could retract his arm. Regulus thought surely, that was that.

Except suddenly, James was moving his arm only to use both hands to grab Regulus by the waist, swinging himself so he was hovering over him. Regulus knew there was no hiding his gasp, James felt it.

Shit, shit, shit.

“You don’t like to be touched,” James whispered, and Regulus hated that. Not two weeks ago, Regulus wouldn’t have expected James to know that. But now, all his childhood dreams were coming true, and he almost wanted to take it back. James was noticing him and it was addicting, it couldn’t last.

But god, a door had been opened. Because Regulus wasn’t delusional enough to ever believe James would love him, but suddenly the thought that maybe he could get James to fuck him... didn’t seem so farfetched.

“I don’t mind,” Regulus breathed, instead of agreeing and pushing James away as a smart person would do.

“You don’t mind,” James repeated, and the pads of his fingers were pressing in firmer on Regulus’s bare waist. He moved his thumbs, hands brushing over Regulus’s sides. Over the ridges of his ribs and then back down again, stopping at the jut of Regulus’s hip bones.

Regulus exhaled sharply when James’s fingers stopped far too close to his waistband. James was just watching him, drinking in every stutter of Regulus’s breath.

“This is okay?”

And instead of saying no. Instead of asking what the fuck James was doing or pointing out that he clearly had some unresolved sexuality issues. Regulus (like a complete idiot), nodded. “It’s okay.”

“It’s okay...” James repeated because he seemed to have lost the ability to do anything but parrot Regulus’s words back at him. And then: “Where’s the line?”

There had been one. For a long time, it was clear, undeniable. Then the stupid room-sharing had left things blurry and muddled. Suddenly, James wasn’t Regulus’s unattainable, golden,

(and painfully straight) childhood crush, he was human and flawed. James was messy and real and his hands were hot on Regulus's bare skin. He was burning blindingly, his eyes flicked down to Regulus's lips and the moment was undeniable. James wanted him. Oh, *holy fucking shit*, god above, James wanted *Regulus*?

They were sharing the same breath. James was leaning closer, and the air was heated between them.

"I don't think I have one," Regulus choked out. "The line depends on where yours is."

"I dunno, I dunno," James breathed. Oh god, Regulus was pretty sure James was going to kiss him.

The thing was, Regulus wasn't sure that *James understood* he wanted Regulus.

"Regulus, James, wake up! We're going to the lake today! It's nearly fuckin noon!"

James jerked back so suddenly that he tumbled off the bed just as their bedroom door swung open.

Sirius blinked, pausing as he registered James lying on the floor. "Uh, good morning? Prongs, what are you doing down there?"

"I pushed him," Regulus said, hoping it didn't come out too breathless.

It was a mark of how prickly their history was that Sirius accepted the explanation without question. "Oh, okay. Are you guys alright?"

Regulus knew Sirius was probably referring to Regulus's little tantrum the day before, and he just nodded.

“We’re cool,” James said quickly, picking himself up off the floor. “No hard feelings.”

“Speak for yourself, I have plenty of hard feelings,” Regulus muttered, and why did James Potter *blush* at the word ‘hard’? For fucks sake, he *blushed*, and Regulus barely managed not to choke on his own spit.

“Well, good,” Sirius said, completely unaware. “I know this is supposed to be a holiday for all of us and it isn’t really fair that you two are forced to share a room when you didn’t really want to—”

“Sirius,” James interrupted, and he seemed to have steadied himself. No one would have guessed that two minutes before he’d practically been in Regulus’s pants. “It’s fine, we’re fine,” James said gently, but firmly.

“I don’t know when you became such an anal worrier,” Regulus scoffed, to combat James’s soft understanding.

“Oh, shut up,” James rolled his eyes. “You’re not helping.”

“I’m not trying to help,” Regulus crossed his arms. “I’m pointing out how stupid he’s being.”

“Well stop, you’re just—”

“You two are *not* inspiring confidence at this moment,” Sirius cut them off.

James winced and Regulus just sighed.

“We’re fine sharing a room, Sirius,” Regulus insisted. “Nobody’s holiday is being ruined over this, and if James keeps being a dick to me, I’ll cut off all his hair in his sleep.”

“I’d prefer you *not*,” James said, his voice rising shrilly, and Sirius put a hand on his hips, looking down on them both like an unimpressed mother.

“Dear god,” Sirius complained. “Why do you make me feel *old*? I used to be stupid and wild and fun, and now half the time I feel like I’m *sixty* or something. I am leaving before either of you triggers a midlife crisis. We’re going to the lake, get dressed, *goodbye*.” With that, Sirius turned, slamming their door shut.

They were left in a sudden and painful silence as the sound of Sirius’s footsteps receded down the stairs. Regulus didn’t look at James, only stumbled out of bed, coughing awkwardly.

“I- I’m gonna shower,” he muttered pushing past James.

Regulus didn’t ask what the hell they were doing. He didn’t turn back. Even though he wanted to, even though he wanted to get on his knees and beg. Even though he was terrified James would snap out of it as soon as Regulus turned his back and never look him in the eye again.

Regulus showered.

He felt a little like he was drowning.

When he got downstairs, James was leaning against the counter engaged in some whispered little conversation with Sirius, because that was Sirius and James, even now. Like a pair of giggling schoolgirls, always caught in this little world that only existed between them. God, Regulus had been jealous for so long. The feeling was different now. Not like he wanted to be in Sirius’s or James’s spot instead of the other, but rather that he wanted to dropkick James off a bridge or maybe kiss him hard enough that he’d bleed. It was different. Regulus wanted James’s attention. *Look at me. Notice me. Know me.*

James looked.

Regulus almost flinched back in surprise. Because over Sirius's shoulder, James met Regulus's eye. His gaze was sharp, prickling as it sent a shiver down Regulus's spine.

Regulus tore his eyes away, swallowing as he quickened his steps. He joined Barty and Evan at the table. They were sitting in complete silence, which told Regulus they'd probably been fighting.

"You two need marriage counseling," Regulus muttered as he took a seat.

"I have a therapist," Barty rolled his eyes. "I'm not the one who can never let go of a grudge a day in my life."

"*Excuse me?*" Evan snapped, his eyes flashing. "You're kidding, right? As if every moment of your miserable life is not one long, bitter grudge?"

Regulus instantly stood, despite only being seated for a second. "Okay, goodbye. You two deal with this."

He left them there to continue bickering, finding Remus instead who was leaning against the kitchen counter, simply watching everyone around them in silence.

Lily, Marlene, and Emmeline were crowded over Marlene's phone, no doubt gossiping about someone they knew because Marlene was a terrible gossip. Dorcas was with Peter, packing snacks into a cooler to take to the lake with them. Sirius and James were still having some secret conversation just for them. James wasn't looking anymore.

"Do you ever get jealous?" Regulus asked softly, the words almost drowned out by the noise around them. Remus heard, tilting his head and following Regulus's gaze.

“Of Sirius and James?” Remus asked. Regulus just nodded, and Remus watched them for a moment, clearly thinking before turning to look at Regulus. “I suppose. I used to, more so when we were kids and I knew that as a friend, I was second to James... but then I realized I wasn’t interested in being Sirius’s friend.” The corner of his mouth turned up in a faint reminiscent smile. “Well, let’s just say *that* helped me get over it. As for James... well, he and Sirius have something special between them, but that doesn’t mean every other person isn’t just as important to him. It’s just different. But he still has a way of making every person he knows feel seen and important.”

Feel seen.

It sent Regulus’s stomach twisting bitterly.

Maybe Regulus was delusional. There was nothing special about him, there was nothing different. Maybe James made every person he came into contact with feel as if he wasn’t looking at anyone else. Maybe James just happened to want to sleep with Regulus as well. That meant nothing. Sex was nothing.

“Why are you asking?” Remus asked gently when Regulus didn’t speak again.

“No reason, just curious,” Regulus told him.

James didn’t look over again.

Peter

Peter was a very normal, no-nonsense, no-drama kind of person surrounded by a load of absolute maniacs.

Seriously, he didn’t know how he had wound up with the most absurdly complicated people on earth. Peter liked life easy. Nothing at the moment seemed like it was going to be easy, and he was starting to get incredibly stressed.

“I don’t think we’re going to make it through this holiday without bloodshed,” Peter muttered as Emmeline fell into step next to him. Barty and Evan weren’t talking; Dorcas had to forcibly separate them before they left the house, and now Evan was walking unhappily ahead and Barty had his arm around Regulus’s shoulder. Peter was fairly certain that this was the only reason Regulus was even walking straight, because his gaze was fixed on the ground, brow furrowed. He was clearly very deep in thought. Peter caught Sirius glancing over at Regulus every few seconds and then to James. Remus was watching Sirius do this, eyes full of something heavy, the kind of looking he only let himself do when Sirius wasn’t watching. But Peter... he was a watcher. He didn’t like getting involved, and he rarely told anyone the things he saw, but he still saw them.

See, here’s the thing. Peter loved his friends. He really truly did, but he’d always known he was a little different from most of them. He and Remus had always had a special kinship when it came to being the quieter of the four boys, but even so, despite being introverted, Remus Lupin had a secret wild streak. Peter wasn’t introverted, even though he was quieter than James and Sirius, and as exhilarating as running wild in school had been... he’d never *craved* it the way the others did. Peter had fun, he went along with their pranks and outlandish plans, but most of the time, it just made him nervous. He’d always been the first to back out. He would have rather owned up and dealt with detention than worse consequences while the other boys... well, let’s just say they’d take a dead horse and beat it until it was nothing but dust, decomposing into the dirt.

They all just saw the world a little differently. Peter didn’t want to be anyone. He’d started his mundane office job, as soon as he graduated. It’d been the same place he’d interned at. People he already knew, a place where he was already comfortable. The work was easy enough and often boring, but Peter liked it that way. He liked being home by six every night to feed his two rats and having enough time to do a little reading or watch some telly. Peter Pettigrew had never had any desire to *be somebody*, and he liked to think that was perfectly fine. He told himself it was fine, in his life surrounded by the brightest, most passionate people. He was sure his friends would all do big things, at least *one* of the girls was certainly destined to take over the world, and he’d support them through their endeavors, but it wasn’t something he dreamed of.

Emmeline slipped her hand into his, following his gaze to Remus and tilting her head. “Why?” she asked softly. “Because of Barty and Evan? Or something else?”

“Among other things,” Peter murmured. “I don’t even know what’s going on, but I feel like we’re not far away from a full-blown crisis.”

Emmeline hummed, leaning into him slightly, and she didn't ask Peter to air anyone's dirty laundry (not that he had much more than suspicions). They were all surprisingly private when it came to the things that mattered most, and really, he thought someone ought to throw them all in therapy.

So yes, Peter loved his friends, but they were also incredibly stupid.

However, it was not Peter's business, and he wouldn't say anything to anyone unless it came to that. He didn't pry or try to dig into whatever was going on, so really all he ever caught was tension and hidden looks.

Like right now, Regulus was still looking at the ground, but James was looking at Regulus. Glancing back every so often at the younger man. Peter wondered if he was still a little obsessed with the fact that Regulus didn't like him. He always brushed it off, but Peter knew it upset James. Regulus was so important to Sirius, he was a vital part of all of their lives, yet he didn't like James. And secretly, Peter suspected that James probably hated Regulus just as much. He wasn't really an angry or volatile person, but if their little spat yesterday showed anything it was that James definitely wasn't Regulus's biggest fan and Peter didn't think the forced proximity was helping.

When they got to the lake, Peter pretty instantly forgot about anyone else's drama when faced with the sight of the beautiful expanse of water (and Emmeline in her bikini, but that wasn't anyone's business). The lake was peaceful and smooth, disturbed only by the occasional bug skimming the surface. The trees seemed to bend their branches towards the water and for Peter, who had known nothing but the city streets for the past four years, the scene was breathtaking.

Peter dropped his stuff and stripped off his shirt carelessly. He didn't even think about it these days. Not that his friends had ever made him feel self-conscious, in fact, they'd been incredibly supportive and loving through every step of his transition, and even long before that. Still, it didn't matter how supportive other people were when he'd felt like clawing his way out of his own body every second of every day for so long. He used to have panic attacks because of how much he hated himself. He'd shower with the lights off because he couldn't bear to see himself. So now? Not even thinking about it, that was a blessing Peter had once thought he'd die before he ever got.

His friends had always been his number one supporters, so Peter wanted to do the same for them. So for now, he'd watch, but keep his mouth shut and his nose out of their business.

Well, *mostly*.

James

“Not swimming, Prongs?”

James blinked, looking up. The sun was shining from above and he had to squint to make out Peter's face.

“Huh?” he asked dazedly. Truthfully, James wasn't paying much attention. He could barely hear over the memory of Regulus under his palm.

This was fine, this was normal, right?

Objectively, Regulus was incredibly attractive. It wasn't really an arguable fact, even if he wasn't your type he was still breathtaking... fuck, even if you weren't attracted to men, you'd see it. Marlene was as much of a lesbian as you could get and she'd said as much. Regulus was perfect, everything from the line of his nose to the sharpness of his jaw and cheekbones. His skin was pale, but lately because of the summer, dotted with freckles, and his cheeks were always tinged pink from their time outside. He never wore his hair slicked back like he used to when they were young, but he still put a great deal of care into styling his curls. James found he liked it best when Regulus's hair wasn't neatly styled. It was longer than Regulus usually kept it, and James couldn't stop himself from staring in the mornings when it fell messily around his face. James wanted to put his hands in it. To tug and see if he could finally tear a sound from Regulus's mouth.

He'd been quiet that morning, only the smallest intakes of breath telling James the touches affected him in any way. James wondered if Regulus ever got noisy... and if not, what it'd take to *turn him* so.

So yes, okay, James wanted to touch. But people want to touch pretty things, and Regulus Black was the prettiest fucking thing James had ever seen. *God*, he was perfect, and maybe every part of James was screaming to flip Regulus on his back and sink his teeth into him, but that was normal. James hadn't had proper sex in forever, he was not the first sexually frustrated twenty-something, and he would not be the last. Regulus was simply right there, and so pretty, and so intense. It wasn't strange that between their tension, proximity, and lingering dislike of the past, it'd blurred into something mildly sexual. James just needed to find someone to get off with and it'd all go away. Sex had never *meant something* to James, it was what it was.

"Sorry, what?" James swallowed, suddenly realizing Peter was speaking. He'd gotten embarrassingly caught up in thinking about Regulus Black and sex. *God*, he definitely needed to find a hookup somewhere, and *soon*.

"I was asking if you plan to swim?" Peter asked expectantly.

"Oh, no." James held up the notebook in his hands. "I was planning on writing."

"Oh?" Peter asked excitedly, because James hadn't really written in the past year. "Is that the same story you were working on?"

"No, no, something new," James smiled so he didn't have to think about the way his stomach flipped. No, he'd never pick that story back up again. It reminded him of blood and grief.

Peter left him to it, his questioning gone. Everyone knew that when James got into a project, it'd take a lot to pull him out. Everything else faded away as James sat on the grass, scribbling in his notebook as the sun shone down on him. It wasn't really quiet as his friends splashed and chatted in the water, but the quiet was more of a *feeling* and less of an actual sense. The lake felt peaceful. Not in the same way it was when it was just James and Regulus, but still, easy enough, gentle.

Eventually, James was broken from his hazy state. He wasn't really writing much, rather staring at the page intensely.

“Writing?”

James frowned down at the page. “Possibly, maybe... no. I’m planning, I suppose.”

“*You’re* planning?”

James looked up to glare at Regulus, who was standing over him. “Yes, I can do that.”

“Really?” Regulus asked dryly. “Seems unlikely.”

“I- okay, maybe I don’t *usually*, but I’m trying.”

Regulus blinked, and James was *not* thinking about the jut of his hip bones or how he wanted to run his tongue over them, *thank you very much*.

“Why are you dry?” James asked abruptly, suddenly taking in his appearance.

“Didn’t go in,” Regulus muttered, plopping down on the ground, a far enough distance from James so it might look as if they just happened to sit near each other. No one was looking, far too engrossed in enjoying themselves in the water. James put his notebook down, leaning in slightly.

“Is this the ‘other times’ then?” James asked him.

“Huh?” Regulus questioned, eyebrows furrowing in confusion.

“You said sometimes you can make peace. So is this one of the times when you can’t?”

“Oh,” Regulus’s gaze flicked away from James’s face, fixed on a spot of grass next to him instead. “Yes, I suppose. I just... I dunno, can’t stomach it today,” he admitted quietly. “It happens. Not sure why, since I slept better than I have in ages—” Regulus broke off suddenly and James straightened.

“You slept well last night?”

“Well... yes.”

“Even though I fell asleep in your bed?” James asked, before rushing to tack on: “Sorry about that, by the way.”

Regulus paused, chewing at his cheek. He just looked at the ground for a long moment, gaze sharp as he seemed to consider something. James didn’t say anything, too caught up in watching him intently. James swore his breath caught in his throat when Regulus suddenly looked up, meeting James’s eye. He observed, transfixed as Regulus’s spine straightened, his jaw squared. James got to *watch it*, how he picked each piece of himself up and built his courage.

“It’s fine. It was... better actually, than sleeping alone. Less cold.”

James swallowed. Regulus didn’t drop his gaze.

“Oh, okay.”

“Okay,” Regulus repeated.

James didn’t look away. He could have, a part of him wanted to. The other part was much louder. The part that wanted to see how long Regulus would hold his ground. To see if James could make him break.

The piercing grey of Regulus's eyes filled James with spiraling dizziness. The fervent heat of his stare made James want to grab him right then and there and make sure he never looked at anyone else like that.

Eventually, after what felt like an eternity, Regulus looked away. James would have given anything to know what he was thinking as he laid back, closing his eyes and proceeding to ignore James's existence.

James decided to pretend that he didn't want to grip Regulus by the hips until his fingerprints were bruised into Regulus's skin. He turned back to his notebook, trying to focus on anything else but his best friend's little brother's *bare fucking torso*. It didn't work. All of James's words were about Regulus Black.

--

It started with a game of Never Have I Ever.

Out of all the things that might have tipped them over the edge to the point of no return, it was a stupid game James was pretty sure he hadn't played since he was seventeen.

It was Mary's suggestion because she insisted they had "too much alcohol and nothing to do with it." Because just drinking it was not enough, apparently.

Evan clearly thought it was stupid and James was fairly certain Regulus rolled his eyes so hard they might have gotten stuck in the back of his head, but somehow, they all agreed anyway.

"Who's starting?" Lily demanded as they all crowded into the living room, making a loose circle.

"I'll start, do something easy to get us going?" Peter suggested.

“Sure, sure. Go ahead, Pete,” Lily agreed, putting an arm around Mary’s shoulder as she leaned back in preparation.

“Okay, erm—” Peter broke off, clearly he hadn’t thought that far ahead. “Okay, okay um, never have I ever broken a bone.”

“*Boring!*” Sirius declared taking a sip. Quite a few of them did because of course they’d managed to put together the group of clumsiest motherfuckers on earth.

Lily looked far too proud of herself as she didn’t touch her drink, but neither did Evan or Dorcas, so she was hardly special. James took a sip of his own drink, not bothering to feel stressed over it. He’d played football for most of his childhood, everyone knew James Potter was not a stranger to broken bones.

“It’s supposed to be boring,” Peter told Sirius. “That’s what we just agreed on.”

“Well, someone else go,” Sirius urged, rocking forward on his knees. Next to him, Remus just shook his head at Sirius’s antics.

“My turn!” Barty said from Peter’s right. “I can do exciting,” he smiled wickedly and James didn’t think that was a good sign. “Never have I ever blackmailed a professor to get a better grade.”

There was a moment of silence before Regulus scoffed. “Oh, fuck you, you’re not allowed to target people,” he muttered but took a sip anyway.

“Nuh-uh!” Barty singsonged. “There’s no rule against targeting.”

“Regulus?” Sirius said accusingly, spinning on his brother. “*Blackmail?*”

Regulus just raised his eyebrows, entirely unmoved. “Yeah, and?”

“*And?* And—” Sirius broke off suddenly, shaking his head as Regulus crossed his arms in a challenge. “You know what? I don’t even want to know. But that better be the worst thing I find out about you tonight.”

“No promises,” Regulus muttered, but Sirius thankfully didn’t seem to hear him and the game continued.

By the time it’d begun to get truly late, James was definitely a little tipsy (as were all his friends, if the sheer volume of their laughter was anything to go by). James often found existing was a little easier when he had a cushion. He was jealous of anyone who *didn’t* have to live as James Potter. People who woke up every day without his messy, twisted mind.

“Never have I ever...” Marlene began slowly. “Been in a car accident!”

James froze.

A few people drank. Peter began saying something about a fender bender, but there was a buzzing in James’s ears. He was holding his glass in the air. Unable to put it down, unable to drink either.

James could taste the blood in his throat. He could hear the crunch of metal, the wet hot drip of his life falling from his lips.

No one ever said *it’s your fault*.

James heard it anyway.

“What did you do?” his father asked instead, an accusation.

Not “what happened...” but blame, a slap to the face. “*What did you do?*”

You, you, you.

This is your fault. You did this. You ruined everything.

James Potter with the black hole in his chest. James Potter, tainting everything he touched.

Finally, maybe an eternity later, after everyone else had moved on, James put his glass down. The clack the cup made on the coffee table sounded like a gunshot in James’s ears, but no one else seemed to notice. They were all too busy laughing at whatever Sirius was saying and so James stood, quickly exiting the room.

No one called after him. They probably wouldn’t notice his absence. No one cared about James, no one needed him.

James made it into his room, shutting the door. He could hear his breath thundering in his ears. It was loud enough that he almost didn’t hear the door open.

“James?”

He spun, heart pounding.

James.

It was James again, not Potter?

Regulus was standing there. The only light came from a lamp on the bedside table which they must have accidentally left on. It shadowed his face... painted every curve in sharp contrast. He was gorgeous. Like an actual star handpicked from the sky and handed right to James. Because yes, *yes*, he was beginning to feel quite certain that Regulus Black belonged in the palm of his hand. And James? James *wanted*. He needed it like he was breathing the first gasp of air that had ever kissed his lungs. He was drowning. He was trying to keep his head up and Regulus was the dizzyingly perfect light in the distance.

“You left suddenly, are you okay?”

James stepped forward. Regulus’s dark eyes watched his movement, flicking over James’s form. Slow, calculating.

He’d learned that Regulus was less of a bitch than he pretended to be. He was softer, more caring and loving... yet, he was also more dangerous than he pretended. Because having an attitude was one thing, but the sharp look in Regulus’s eyes, the curve of his lips, his expression perfectly smooth... This was a man that had learned to manipulate at the same time he’d learned to read. James wondered if he was being manipulated. Was this all some elaborate plan?

To what end? James wasn’t sure, but Regulus had too much power. James could feel it, the crackle in the air around him. The heat of Regulus’s skin, even at a distance, James swore he could taste it.

“What are you doing to me?” James whispered.

The coolness of Regulus’s expression broke. His brow furrowed, his mouth turned down, and he was frowning. That *goddamn*ed frown again.

“What do you mean?” Regulus asked hoarsely.

James took another step forward, watching how Regulus swallowed when his space was invaded. “I mean,” he growled, “that I can’t stop thinking about you.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Regulus said, and it seemed as if he was fighting to keep his voice steady. “*You* touched me.”

“You let me. Why did you let me?”

Regulus didn’t answer at first, exhaling sharply. “Doesn’t matter.”

“It matters...” James breathed.

“Then I don’t know what to tell you,” Regulus choked out, looking up so he could keep holding James’s gaze as he stepped forward.

James got the feeling that wasn’t true. “You’re really not beating my suspicion that you’re lying about *not* being a liar,” James paused. “I bet you know plenty of things to tell me.”

Regulus was silent for a moment. He didn’t look away from James, despite the fact that he got the feeling the younger Black wanted to. “I don’t have anything to tell you that won’t hurt.”

“What was it we said this morning? Something about a line... I think we’ve crossed it,” James told him.

“Probably.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

The moment felt frozen. James could feel the weight of it, teetering at the edge of a precipice.

“Regulus...” James began, his voice heavy, dripping with a painful sweetness.

And then: “Touch me.”

“Reg—”

“*Touch. Me.*”

James needed absolutely no other encouragement before he was grabbing Regulus by the jaw.

Frankly, he probably *should* have been thinking about the fact that he was kissing a boy as their lips met hard, but the thought hardly even crossed his mind. The only coherent thought he could form at all was one word.

Regulus, Regulus, Regulus.

He was hot. His lips were practically blazing under James’s, cracked from the day in the sun. Regulus tasted like alcohol and James wanted to lick the flavor out of his mouth. Wait... James *could*, so he did.

Regulus, sharp, cold, unyielding Regulus Black was putty in James’s hands. Regulus let James lick his way into the younger boy’s mouth. Let the hand that wasn’t gripping him by the jaw find its way into Regulus’s hair.

And *finally*, James got to tug on Regulus’s curls and swallow the strangled noise he made. Oh, and how easy it turned out to be to turn Regulus’s quiet intakes of breath to an actual sound torn from his lips. James greedily accepted them all.

A shameful little fear James carried around was that there was something wrong with him. Because the truth was, he never really got turned on by sex. It was a good way to relieve his tension, but often, he felt like he wasn't truly invested. Like eventually, he'd usually get there, but it wasn't always quick or easy, and often he just covered by taking care of his partner and then dipping.

Except now, James's trousers were already getting a little uncomfortable. He was pretty sure a part of him died a little and went to heaven when Regulus seemed to find his senses enough to put his hands on James's chest and push him backward. Pushing, until the backs of his legs hit the side of the bed, and James was falling backward. Regulus wasted no time scrambling on top of him, barely breaking the kiss to straddle James's hips before returning to his lips with fervor.

James grabbed Regulus by the hips to steady him as he leaned forward, kissing James with enough force that it knocked his glasses crooked, digging sharply into his cheek. Regulus huffed angrily, pausing only long enough to push James's glasses onto the top of his head so they couldn't interrupt again. James took advantage of the moment's pause to tug at Regulus's shirt. Regulus understood instantly, sitting upright to help James tug it off.

And god, there he was. Regulus Black.

They both paused, breathing heavily. Regulus's hair was a mess from James's hands and his lips were red and bitten. James had seen his bare torso plenty of times, but never had he had the opportunity to stare. He tilted his chin up, taking in as much of Regulus as he could when he wasn't wearing his glasses. He almost wanted to put them back on so he could see every detail properly, but that would mean moving his hands and they were very, very happy where they were. Slowly, James splayed out his fingers, running his hands from Regulus's hips up to the dip of his waist and the rungs of his ribs.

Regulus exhaled shakily at the soft touch, the barely-there whisper of James's fingers. "You can be rough with me."

James nearly choked on his own spit. "Do you mean that?" he asked once he'd taken a sharp breath and regained a little bit of dignity.

"Yes."

“So, you’re saying that because *you* like it? It’s enjoyable for you? Not because you think it’s what I want?”

“James, I want you to make it so anytime anyone else touches me, I think of you.”

James felt a surge of bitterness rising at the back of his throat as he imagined other people touching Regulus. “I don’t want anyone else touching you.”

“Well, that fucking sucks. This is happening one time. *One time*. Make it count, Potter.”

And James had no room to argue. Because this was not anything, it was just pent-up tension that needed somewhere to go. James didn’t even like boys, so there was no reason to ask why Regulus was only allowing it once... much less begging for more times.

Liking boys or not aside. Regulus was practically sitting on James’s dick, which was dangerous enough alone. Not to mention he was *begging* James to be rough with him.

“Get off,” James commanded. Regulus, much to James’s surprise, obeyed instantly scrambling off of James. “Up,” James said lowly, and Regulus scooted up the bed until he got to the headboard. “Good, on your back.”

And with every word, Regulus obeyed. James was pretty sure this was only because this was their *one time*, but somehow that only made it better. Because that meant Regulus was *choosing* to listen to James, that he wanted to. When Regulus was flat on his back, James crawled over him, propping himself up. It mirrored their pose from that morning and honestly, it was dizzying. James really had no idea how they’d wound up here.

James couldn’t stop himself from kissing Regulus again, enjoying the way he arched into James’s touch as his hands found their way down to Regulus’s hips.

James was going to leave those bruises now.

“Tell me if it’s too rough,” James murmured, breaking the kiss to draw his lips down Regulus’s neck.

Regulus gasped, turning his head so James had better access. “It won’t be.”

James pulled back suddenly, and Regulus frowned.

“No, no, Regulus. I’m not kidding. I don’t care if you *think* right now that it won’t be. If you don’t like anything, anything at all, you’ll tell me.”

Regulus blinked and he almost seemed... *surprised* by that. James didn’t like that. He didn’t like the idea that there had ever been a moment in Regulus’s life where his complete comfort and pleasure hadn’t been considered. “Okay,” Regulus swallowed.

“Good.” James pulled his glasses off the top of his head, leaning over Regulus to drop them on the bedside table. Regulus’s fingers grabbed at the edge of James’s shirt as he moved back.

James stilled as Regulus looked up at him, eyes wide and starry. “Can I?” he murmured, pulling lighting at James’s T-shirt.

Normally the answer was no. The end. Hard stop.

But...

But Regulus had already seen everything. He’d even made James feel semi-okay about his scar. As okay as he *could* feel.

Fuck, it.

“Yeah, yeah,” James breathed, and Regulus instantly began pushing the fabric up James’s torso. James reached up, pulling his shirt the rest of the way off and tossing it on the floor. “Anything you want, love.”

“Anything?”

“*Anything*,” James confirmed, his voice tight as Regulus’s hands tentatively found their way over the planes of James’s torso.

It was almost unexpected, how carefully Regulus touched. Like he was trying to memorize every inch of James’s skin.

Regulus’s fingers paused, his eyes which had been fixed on James’s torso flicked up and their gazes locked. “Then I want you to fuck me.”

The words sat between them for maybe half a second before James was nodding. “Yes, *yes*.”

James grabbed Regulus’s waistband, fumbling to undo his trousers. Regulus instantly lifted his hips to help, kicking his legs out as James pulled down his jeans and tossed them to the side.

“Have—” Regulus began breathlessly. “Have you ever... I mean with a guy—”

“Yeah.”

Regulus paused at that, eyebrows shooting up. “Really?” he asked incredulously.

“I- yes,” James said, resisting the urge to scoff at the disbelief on Regulus’s face. It was perfectly normal. He’d been drunk and nineteen, did everyone not fool around a little at that age? It was normal to explore. Hell, James knew Remus had slept with a girl before, and he was fully gay. Sometimes it happened, it was happening now, it couldn’t be that much of a shock.

“Okay, fuck it, whatever. We’re not even going to acknowledge that further,” Regulus muttered, his hands pulled James back in eagerly. “Just kiss me or take off my pants or do *something*—”

James decided to shut him up by doing both, reveling in the sound of approval Regulus made. The air between them was sizzling, Regulus’s mouth was a blazing inferno and James thought that he’d probably be happy to do just this forever. To simply sink into the space between Regulus’s ribs and beating heart and live there for eternity. Regulus’s hands were pulling, demanding, and James didn’t have time to revel as he pulled back from the kiss long enough to help Regulus kick off his pants as well.

“Anything you want, anything,” James whispered into Regulus’s cheek as the younger man started pulling at the button of James’s trousers. *Of course*, Regulus undid James’s zipper with much more ease than James managed on him. *Figures*.

And despite his insistence, James hadn’t been entirely sure he believed it when Regulus said it wouldn’t be too rough. Except, clearly he knew himself, and he’d been right. James left his bruises and marks and Regulus *delighted* in it. He only begged for harder, for more.

Mine, mine, mine.

Regulus had burrowed under James’s skin from the beginning of the trip, and James didn’t think he’d ever get him out. Even if he never touched him again. Because James couldn’t. One time was fine, it was just fooling around, even though each point of contact felt like a brand on James’s skin. Even though he didn’t think he’d ever be able to fuck anyone again without thinking of the little intakes of breath Regulus made and how if James timed his movements just right, Regulus let out an actual sound, louder than just a breath. And god, just every breathtaking inch of Regulus Black.

Even without his glasses, even in the dim light, James knew Regulus was perfect. Every bit of him from the sharpness of his hip bones to the more rigid planes of muscle on his stomach and softness of his inner thighs. All of it was entrancing, beautiful, and addictive. James *was* addicted. He was pretty sure Regulus was a drug, and once he'd gotten just a small taste, he was a goner.

James was so truly and utterly fucked. But he wasn't going to think about that, not when he got to watch Regulus's face as it scrunched in pleasure, not as he tensed. No, it still wasn't enough, but it was as close as James was going to get, so he was going to take it.

It really, really, really should have been awkward when James rolled off of Regulus, collapsing in a fuzzy, slightly guilty, but sated puddle. Because shit, he'd just fucked his best friend's little brother.

But *shit*, James had just fucked his best friend's little brother, and it was probably the best experience of his life.

Regulus was silent, and James instantly rolled to look at him. "I- you..." Okay, so maybe it was a little awkward. "Sorry," James muttered trying to find his words. "Are you okay? Was that okay?"

Regulus was silent for a second longer, still sprawled out in the exact same position, but he huffed out a weak laugh. "Yeah, bloody hell..." he muttered, eyes shut as he breathed deeply. "You're gonna have to give me more than a second to string a sentence together."

"Oh," James frowned. "Like in a good way or..."

Regulus blinked open his eyes, turning his head to look at James. "Jesus Christ, Potter, yes in a good way. Now shut up. This is never happening again."

"Okay," James agreed.

“Never. So, you can take your stupid pretty face and sexual frustrations elsewhere.”

“Okay,” James agreed again. Then a pause. “Wait, you think I’m pretty?”

“No, shut up. I’m going to sleep.”

“I- okay...”

A pause. “You can stay if you want.”

James blinked. “O—”

“Do *not* say ‘okay’ again,” Regulus grumbled.

James opened his mouth to say okay, before snapping it shut again. “Uh- sure, fine,” James stuttered out.

Regulus huffed a very drawn-out and dramatic sigh. James rolled his eyes, glad that Regulus had shut his again and couldn’t see it. He didn’t need Regulus whining about James being mean again.

“Get off the blanket, then,” James said tugging at it. Regulus, of course, did not move and James resisted the urge to roll his eyes a second time, because that was bordering childish. Instead, he stood heading to their bathroom. He wiped himself down before wetting another flannel with warm water and heading back into the bedroom. Regulus was exactly in the same position he’d been a few moments earlier. James came around to Regulus’s side of the bed, sitting at the edge and nudging Regulus’s leg.

“C’mon, you’ll be all disgusting.”

“Hm?” Regulus questioned sleepily.

James just shook his head, using the wet flannel to wipe Regulus’s stomach. Regulus opened his eyes at the contact, lifting his head to frown up at James.

“Didn’t want you to fall asleep like that,” James explained. “Spread your legs a little.”

And Regulus did, letting James gently wipe him down with the face of someone who’d just been told their puppy was dead. James couldn’t stop himself from letting his hand linger on Regulus’s thigh for only a minute before standing and tossing the flannel in the laundry basket.

Regulus seemed to find it in him to move, because he scooted up, kicking the blanket down and crawling under it. James switched off the lamp before stopping to grab his pillow from his own bed and crawling in next to Regulus. Because no way in hell was he sleeping in the uncomfortable cot again... Regulus had offered, after all. It wasn’t weird, right?

“This is weird,” Regulus muttered.

“Because you’re lying there stiff as a board,” James told him.

“Because it’s weird.”

“Regulus?”

“*What,*” Regulus snapped unhappily.

“We slept in the same bed last night. I just had sex with you. It’s only weird if you make it weird. Relax.”

Regulus simply scoffed in response.

“I’m going to touch you,” James said after a moment of silence.

“Fine,” Regulus said, and there was something so achingly young and tender in his voice. James didn’t understand what it was. Still, he was so very gentle as he scooted into Regulus’s space, reaching out and tugging the other boy to his chest. They fell together easily, into the same position they’d woken up in that morning. Something about it just felt right. They were both still naked, which by all accounts should have made things even weirder, but somehow, in an entirely non-sexual way, the warmth of their bare skin pressed together was perfect. Like there was something there, existing between their bodies that couldn’t be named or touched.

“You never did tell me why you left the game earlier,” Regulus mumbled into James’s chest.

“There’s just... there are things I don’t know if I’ll ever know how to talk about, and I can’t even bear the thought of being asked,” James said into the darkness. “You know?”

“Yeah, I do.” It was clear Regulus meant it. He knew exactly what it was like, to have something so massive and terrible happen that even putting it into words was unfathomable. Maybe that was why James felt so intrinsically connected to him. They understood each other on some aching level.

“You- you followed me,” James murmured, barely above a whisper. As if speaking the words any louder might make them untrue.

“You seemed upset.”

“You noticed...”

Regulus was quiet for so long after that James thought he’d fallen asleep until he suddenly spoke again. “Yeah, James. I notice.”

James found that when it came from Regulus, the notion of being seen didn't seem quite so scary.

Chapter End Notes

CW// semi explicit sexual content

Hellooo! Welcome back to another pathological people pleaser Friday! This one contains smut!! I hope you liked it well enough I really like the emphasis on an emotional aspect of sex and I hope u guys liked how I did it even without anything graphic ;))

(Also note: I've literally never written smut before but I am an adult and I'm not your parents and I'm sure you've all read worse anyway... so lmk if you feel about it)

I'm posting this from my phone at work so forgive any formatting errors etc. I will double check when I get home!

Until next week my loves!!

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Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

NORMALLY I hide the TWs in the end notes but I'm putting it here today for safety!!

 TW// graphic depiction of suicidal thoughts and ideation

(if you want to skip this, just skip from the beginning of James's POV and then to "James watched his phone buzz on the table.")

Feel free to leave a comment or message me on any of my socials if you want a summary of what happened without any triggering details

This chapter is dedicated to each and every single one of you who left a comment about Effie <33 y'all are so smart.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Evan

He usually woke before Barty. That was how it typically went. They had their routine and their expectations. Barty liked to sleep in— unless he was going through some phase or episode, then sometimes, he'd be up at the crack of dawn. Today, however, was not one of those days. He was fast asleep, face unmarred by the weight of existing.

They'd been fighting, and frankly, Evan was still pissed. Sometimes trying to communicate with Barty was like talking to a brick wall.

It wasn't hard to simply say: *"Sorry, Evan, for flirting with people in front of you. It won't happen again!"* Except for Barty, it couldn't be so simple. Because in Barty's mind, the flirting meant nothing. It was a little harmless fun, and he didn't want anyone else anyway, so why shouldn't he flirt? It's not like he was going to cheat!

Evan wanted to grab Barty by the shoulders until he could understand that, to Evan, the flirting felt like cheating. That every time Barty looked at someone else, joke or not, it reminded Evan starkly of how inadequate he was. There was probably someone out there, someone who could keep up with the wild hurricane of a person that was Barty Crouch Jr., even Regulus would be better suited. If it weren't for the fact that Regulus had been half in love with Potter since they were children, Evan might have worried. Regulus would be able to understand Barty in a way Evan couldn't. He didn't know how to put himself in his boyfriend's shoes.

Barty Crouch and Evan Rosier were so starkly different that Evan knew it'd never work. They were biding their time until eventually, one of them would refuse to give when it was needed, and they'd fall apart.

Evan was selfish. He knew he never should have indulged himself because a breakup might tear apart their friend group, one of the only good things the two of them had. Barty hated his family, and Evan was fairly certain his own had forgotten he existed. That was fine. It was fine because Evan always had Pandora and Regulus. But the truth was, even though Evan had known him longer, Regulus and Barty had a special sort of friendship. Evan lived in fear, knowing Regulus would probably choose Barty in a breakup.

Now, as angry as Evan currently was, he couldn't help but look down fondly at Barty's sleeping form. The flutter of his lashes and the sharp curve of his nose. Something equal parts love and indescribable fear bloomed in Evan's chest.

There was a sharp knock on the door, and Evan straightened suddenly, glancing at the digital clock. It was eight, which was not too early for their housemates to be up, but someone knocking at that hour was a worrying sign.

"Yeah?" Evan called quietly, and Barty shifted, his eyes fluttering open groggily as the door opened.

"Wha..." Barty muttered, leaning onto his elbow and rubbing at his face.

Regulus stepped inside their bedroom, closing the door behind him with a quiet snap. He just stood there for a second, his hands gripped tightly together and his jaw tense.

The sleep was gone from Barty's form in an instant, sitting upright. "Reg? Is something wrong?"

"I had sex with James."

Barty's eyebrows shot up, and he let out a choked noise of shock while Evan simply frowned.

"Come here," Evan said quietly.

Regulus only hesitated for a moment before crossing the room, climbing onto the bed, and scooting up between them.

"Are you okay?" Evan asked him, because they all knew how much of a crush Regulus always nursed, and *ouch*... yeah, sleeping with the man you'd secretly been in love with for years was an agonizingly painful thing. In Evan's case, he'd simply never *stopped* sleeping with Barty, but that certainly hadn't made things better.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Regulus muttered, which was definitely a lie. He was always lying.

"Was it at least good?" Barty questioned, and Evan reached behind Regulus to smack his partner.

Barty managed to dodge the brunt of Evan's attack. "*What?* I'm just wondering. If it was terrible, then there you go."

Regulus let out a pained sigh. "It wasn't terrible."

"Passable?"

“More than passable,” Regulus admitted in a small voice.

“Oh, *really*? You’re kidding?” Barty’s eyebrows arched in surprised amusement.

“It was really good, like... some of the best sex I’ve ever had.”

“Well, fuck,” Barty shook his head. “How big is his dick?”

This time, Evan managed to hit Barty squarely on the back of the head. “We are not talking about Potter’s dick,” he scolded.

“We literally are, c’mon Reg, give us an estimate. I’m dying to know.”

“It’s decent,” Regulus muttered.

“Holy shit,” Barty sputtered. “In Regulus Black language that means huge, doesn’t it?”

“Barty, I’m going to push you off the bed,” Evan growled. “And Regulus... this is probably not good. Is- I mean, isn’t he straight?”

“I think he *thinks* he’s straight.”

“Reg...” Evan sighed, and Regulus took a deep breath, squeezing his eyes shut before opening them slowly.

“I know. I can’t get involved in James Potter's sexuality crisis. I can’t ever sleep with him again,” Regulus said, his mouth twisting painfully.

“You can’t,” Evan agreed firmly. “Regulus, you like him—”

“I don’t—”

“—and you have for *years*,” Evan continued, ignoring Regulus’s protests because they all knew the truth. “Maybe he’s realizing he’s into guys. Maybe sharing a room means he got a glimpse of you or something and he’s sexually attracted, I don’t know. But you *like him*, you’ve liked him since you were a child. You cannot let a man who sees you as a fuck toy sleep with you when you’re emotionally invested.”

“I know,” Regulus said tightly. “I already told him it won’t happen again. I know he doesn’t feel that way about me. We were both a little tipsy and things have been weird between us... I- it won’t happen again.”

“Don’t let it,” Evan said firmly.

“But what if it isn’t that... *just sex*?”

Evan and Regulus both turned to look at Barty, and he just shrugged under their gazes.

“*Barty*... now is not the time to play devil’s advocate,” Evan hissed under his breath.

“I’m not,” Barty said, crossing his arms. “I’m being serious. What if it’s more to Potter too?”

“He cleaned me up after...” Regulus mumbled. “He was really... *soft* with me,” he whispered hoarsely.

“Because he’s James Potter,” Evan said sharply, casting a glare at Barty. “Regulus, he doesn’t like you, he’s just being chivalrous. Don’t sleep with him again, don’t let him string you

along. Do you hear me?"

Regulus was silent for a moment before he nodded, swallowing thickly. "Yeah, I do."

"Good," Evan said firmly.

"I'm going to go see Sirius," Regulus muttered after a moment, sitting up.

Evan nodded. He wished he could be more comforting, but that was Pandora's forte. However, even if Regulus couldn't tell Sirius what was going on, he'd still offer Regulus whatever warmth he was looking for.

"Look, I'm sorry. I don't mean to be hard on you, Reg, but I know you. I know Potter, too. I've watched you pine over him since you were a preteen. I just don't want you to give him the chance to break your heart. I don't want you to get hurt if you can help it."

"I know," Regulus said quietly as he stood, heading towards the door. "You're right, it's what I need to hear. I'll see you guys later." With that he turned, shutting the door behind him.

As soon as Evan heard Regulus's footsteps recede, he turned on Barty. "What the fuck, Barty?"

"*What?*" Barty snapped, eyes narrowed.

"Why would you say that?"

"I talked to Potter the other day. I think maybe you're wrong, he does care about Reg."

“Of course he does, James had never met a person he *didn't* care about,” Evan scoffed. “That doesn't mean Regulus isn't going to be destroyed by it if he keeps sleeping with him. Even by the off chance that James *does* like Regulus, it would still be a terrible idea. That is his brother's best friend, his childhood crush. Not to mention if Potter is having some kind of sexuality crisis, Regulus shouldn't get involved in that, not after everything—”

“He's not breakable, Evan,” Barty rolled his eyes.

“You don't get it.”

“I know Regulus,” Barty countered, his mouth twisting in a scowl.

“But you weren't there. You never saw it after—” Evan broke off, his voice cracking. “You didn't know him then, after the accident...”

Regulus had been one of Evan's only friends most of his life. One of the few people Evan trusted and stuck by. When he suddenly disappeared during their last year of school, there had been a moment where Evan thought he was dead. That's what Mulciber had said, grinning wickedly.

“Guess you'll have to find someone else to follow around now that your little ringleader is dead.”

The world had frozen. Stopped right there in the school hallway. Regulus, *Evan's Regulus*, his best friend... *dead?*

Nobody gave two shits about Evan, no one had ever cared. He was the middle child in his family, if he got good grades and stayed out of trouble no one paid attention. His parents were always away on business, and he'd spent more time with his nannies growing up than them anyway. Regulus and Pandora were the only people who ever cared, the only people who really knew him. Regulus being dead was unthinkable, Evan loved Regulus, he couldn't exist without him.

Mulciber's crew left Evan standing there, shell-shocked. But to Evan's absolute shock, Severus Snape had lingered, turning back when the rest had left.

"He's not actually dead."

"What?" Evan choked out, his brain barely working.

"Black, he's alive. I don't know what happened to him after..." Snape shifted guiltily. "Well, I think he might be gone... but not dead, just gone."

And Evan had turned on his heel instantly. He'd run to Pandora's classroom and interrupted class to pull her out, ignoring the professor's protests as they made a break for it. Evan knew that if Regulus was gone but not dead, there was one place he'd be.

So, at twelve p.m. on Monday, Evan and Pandora had shown up at Sirius Black's London flat and banged on the door until someone had let them in.

And there was Regulus, not dead, but not really alive either.

Barty hadn't been there, he hadn't known Regulus yet. Barty couldn't get it.

Regulus wasn't delicate, exactly, but he could be broken, and Evan had seen it.

"I know Regulus," Barty repeated stubbornly.

"I never said you didn't."

"That's exactly—"

Evan stood, putting a hand up to cut him off. “Barty, I cannot deal with this right now.”

He missed the pained look that crossed Barty’s face at the dismissal.

James

James killed his mother.

It was not something that had ever been expressed aloud, but it was true.

He’d sat there at the funeral. The only thing James really remembered about it was that his plastic chair had wobbled on the uneven grass. Sirius had held his hand, warming James’s cold fingers with his own.

James didn’t feel grief, even as Sirius had cried, tears dripping down his cheeks. James’s aunts had sniffed into their handkerchiefs, but all James had felt was guilt.

He shouldn’t have been there. James should have been behind bars, locked up for life. His loved ones should have forgotten about him or whispered in horror whenever they heard his name. Instead, people expressed their apologies and pity as if James weren’t a murderer.

No one knew, no one except his father.

James’s dad, who had always been so warm, suddenly wouldn’t even look at him. They were strangers; James wasn’t his son, but rather the man that had killed the love of his life.

“You’re going to live at home for a little while,” he’d said in the car after the service.

“I don’t need to—”

“James,” his voice had been sharp and firm, but still, he didn’t look James’s way. “You’re going to take a break from school and take time off from work. You’re going to come home until I can trust you’re not a danger anymore.”

A danger to whom? To himself or other people? His dad didn’t say.

“Dad—”

“No, don’t argue with me. I don’t have the patience for you right now, James.” His tone had been so cold and unfeeling, James didn’t even recognize this man as his father. “Either you will take a break at home, or you will do it in hospital. Which would you prefer?”

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” James had whispered helplessly.

“There’s always been something wrong. I can’t turn a blind eye to it any longer.”

James hadn’t known if there was something he *could say* to that, so he’d kept his mouth shut. It never felt like James and his father ever talked again after that. Or they never *listened*, at the very least.

The truth was, maybe James could fool his friends, maybe he could tamp down every ugly twisted bit... but you can’t hide those things from your parents. Not forever. His mother had noticed first when he was a preteen... the high emotions and the mood swings. *Just puberty*, they’d shrugged.

Until puberty came and went, and James became increasingly unstable. He knew his mum had been concerned. He knew his parents were aware that something wasn’t *quite* right, but no one had any real reason to act. Even if James was a little volatile, he’d always been an

intense personality. They could play it off and make excuses because nothing major happened.

Until the year before.

James didn't know what happened. He didn't know what triggered everything to fall apart. He'd already been living away from home, already settled into university the best he could. Sure, sometimes he was homesick, but he had all his friends, plus new ones. Regulus had moved in with Sirius and was beginning to improve. Everyone around him was happier, everyone but James.

James, who woke up every day with a cloud over his head. With the urge to burn down the world at any minor inconvenience. School was hard and everyone else—even Sirius who'd never cared for academics—breezed through. None of it came naturally to James. He'd always had at least passable marks growing up, even if he needed to work for it. Suddenly, his failure was written in red ink over and over again. James would slave away at his schoolwork and still, it just kept coming. He couldn't stay on top of it, he couldn't juggle school, his job, and his social life. James had to put all his energy into putting on a front. So, his marks kept slipping and he kept spiraling further with every failure.

His parents had given him everything. They'd put him through school and paid part of his rent. All James had to do was work to cover the other half and pass his classes. But he failed, time and time again. He was letting them down.

James dreamed of their disappointment. Of the looks on their faces when they realized the sort of person they'd raised.

He hated himself. He always had, since he was young. Since the first time someone said: "You talk too loud." He'd realized he was too much. It got harder to ignore. So, James kept on his cheery front for his friends. He got drunk and slept with girls to feel something other than the sickening, all-consuming self-hatred.

His mum called him two days before.

“Sweetheart, is something wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong,” James had insisted.

“We haven’t heard from you lately. You haven’t been home to visit in months.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“I know, I know. You’re grown up and have your own life. But I worry about you. I can’t shake the feeling that something is going on.”

“Mum,” James complained, sighing at her fear. “Everything is fine, you worry too much.”

“It’s my job as your mum,” she’d laughed softly. “Anyway, it’s just that you were so agitated the last time we saw you. I’m not saying something is wrong, but if it was, you could tell me. You can tell me anything, I love you to death, you know.”

“I know that. I would tell you if there was something to tell.”

“Okay, okay. Give Sirius and the boys my love, okay? And remember, if anything comes up, no matter when, no matter what, call me. I’ll be there. You’re my baby, I love you.”

James resisted the urge to roll his eyes at that because he knew she meant well. “Okay, I love you, too.”

James had no plans to take her up on that. He would spend the rest of his life wishing he hadn’t.

Because James Potter had killed his mother. Maybe he didn't put a bullet through her head, but he'd killed her, nonetheless.

The straw that broke the camel's back was his exam grade. It was a stupid required course, philosophy or something. He couldn't even remember exactly what it was now, only the feeling as he stared at that failure and realized that he wouldn't be passing the class. In fact, he wouldn't be passing *period*. It was the fourth class he'd be failing. All of his friends would graduate and move on with their lives, and James would be stuck there. His parents would find out. *Everyone* would find out, and then they'd finally know that James Potter was a terrible, weak excuse for a person.

That was that. Full stop, the end. James couldn't do it anymore. He couldn't live another second in his skin.

He shouldn't have called his mum. He wished he hadn't.

It'd been late, she shouldn't even have been awake.

"James?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Mum, I fucked up, I'm so sorry."

Maybe he was born this way. James could feel it. A burning under his skin. Maybe, if he could just peel back the layers and get to the bone underneath he could find what was wrong. The dark, twisted, sickness that was always *itching*.

"James? James, sweetheart, what's going on? Are you okay?"

"No, no, no. Mum, I'm so sorry. I don't want to do this."

How *weak*. Everyone else could do it. Everyone else was perfectly fine. They could take a failure without falling to pieces. God, what must his mum think? She'd given him everything. He'd never had any reason to complain, never wanted for anything. But something in him had just been made *wrong*. His parents had raised him right, but they couldn't undo the black hole in his chest.

He was probably a weight on their shoulders. One that needed to be lifted.

"Do what? James what's going on."

"Live. I don't wanna live," he choked out, and he heard the gasp that stuttered out of her, heard how she was instantly moving on the other side of the line.

"Where are you? Have you hurt yourself?" She spoke calmly, her tone careful, like she didn't want to spook him. She dropped the phone for a moment, her voice muffled. *"Monty!"* The pure panic in her words would haunt James forever.

God, he was just hurting people. Everyone around James was being tainted and twisted. Maybe there was something evil growing in his soul. It was better to stamp it out. He couldn't breathe around it anymore.

"I'm gonna, I want to," James whispered. "I hate myself. You deserve a better son. I'm so sorry, Mum."

"No, James, I deserve my son," she said fiercely. *"You're my son, my baby. I love you so, so much. Anything that's going on, we can figure it out, okay?"*

"You're gonna be so disappointed in me."

"No, no. I love you no matter what you do. All I need from you is for you to stay here with us and not hurt yourself, okay?"

“Mum, mummy, I want to die.”

And there it was. The looping urge that had been scraping at the corners of his skull since he knew that was something a person could do.

His mum had picked up a bunch of second-hand books. One of them contained a collection of real-life stories. They were probably supposed to be inspirational or heartwarming. However, the particular story James had landed on, had been about a woman who had created a suicide prevention organization after her son killed himself. James hadn't read this and felt inspired. Rather, he had one thought... *people do that?* Instantly, he'd considered and then decided that he would never. Except, well, *maybe* he could see the appeal. It'd be nice to be mourned.

“Okay,” his mum said, and this time, she couldn't stop her voice from cracking. James heard the sob that rose up in her throat. “*Monty, I'm getting in the car,*” she choked out.

“*You don't know where he is!*” James heard his father say from a distance.

“*I'll figure it out,*” she whispered fiercely. “*I'll text you when I do, call the police.*” James heard her say all of that. He wanted to hang up, but before he could she was talking to him again. “*James, I'm coming, where are you?*”

“I- I don't know. I just... I was just driving.”

“*Can you send me your location?*”

“Mum, I don't want to. I don't want you to stop me.”

He hadn't really *decided* when he'd gotten in the car. He hadn't decided when he'd pulled over. He hadn't decided until he was standing there, overlooking the water. Every time James

crossed a bridge, he imagined what it'd be like to jump. That was just normal. Tonight, he'd stopped.

So he didn't feel scared or unsure. He didn't feel like he'd made a choice, but he'd stopped.

"Listen to me," she said, her words firm and unarguable. "I don't care what you've done. I don't care if you've committed a crime or murdered someone. We will figure it out, I will love you no matter what. So please, please, James, send me your location."

He didn't want to, but he loved his mother so much and she sounded terrified in a way James had never heard before. "Okay," James whispered, and he listened as his mother let out a sob of relief. He fumbled with his phone, managing to share his location.

He didn't want *her* to have to mourn him. She didn't deserve that, but she didn't deserve him either. Still, she sighed in relief as if James was something better than he was.

"Oh, good, thank heavens... I'm not far, I'm on my way. I have to hang up so I can drive, the roads have been flooded around here. But I'll be right there. Can you call your dad or Sirius or someone?"

"Yeah, yeah, okay."

"Okay, good, I'm ten minutes away. I love you."

"I love you too, Mum. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry, it's okay. We're okay, we'll figure it out," she assured him.

That was the last thing she ever said to him.

James didn't call anyone else, but he didn't move either. He just stayed there... stopped, waiting. Ten minutes passed. His mum never showed up, but the police did.

It'd take an entire day before his father would finally tell him that his mother was dead.

It had been late. The roads had been flooded. Another driver had been on the wrong side of the road to avoid the water. They'd come around the corner and hit head-on.

They'd both died.

James had killed his mother, and no one knew but his father.

He knew his dad blamed him. He knew it was his fault.

In the aftermath, his father had forced him to stay at home and watched him around the clock. James had *almost* managed to convince him that it was a one-time thing. That he'd just snapped once.

Almost.

Then it happened again. The crunch of metal, the ripping of his ribs through his chest. Then there were doctors and hospitals and a *diagnosis*.

James wasn't crazy. He didn't need help, he didn't need meds and since then, he'd been fine. There had been no more slip-ups. James didn't need his father on his back all the time, but he was calling again.

James watched his phone buzz on the table.

Buzz, buzz, buzz.

“Prongs, are you going to answer that?”

James couldn't breathe, all he could do was stare at the caller ID.

He'd woken up alone, Regulus's spot cold. James missed him, even though he knew it wasn't supposed to happen again. It was better if it didn't. Regulus wouldn't want to be caught up in someone like James anyway.

“Prongs,” Sirius leaned over James's shoulder and suddenly everyone was looking at him, the lazy chatting while they waited for dinner to cook had ceased. “It's your dad.”

“Yeah, I know,” James said quickly. He wanted to decline the call, but he didn't know how to do that without raising the alarm. So, swallowing around the dryness in his throat, James grabbed his phone.

“Hey, Dad.”

“*James—*”

“Sorry, can I call you later?”

“*No, you cannot, don't you dare hang up on me,*” James stiffened, and he saw the way Sirius's eyes widened as he seemed to catch the tone.

“Dad...”

“*No. Where's your bill for school, James?*”

James clenched his jaw. "I think you know."

"I do, but I want you to say it to my face."

"There's no bill."

"You realize you're throwing your life away?"

James stood suddenly, pushing his chair back and heading into the living room to put some distance between himself and his audience. "You realize I don't care? Fuck school! I was failing anyway. You were there!"

"You just have to redo one year, James."

"I can't make it one more year, Dad! It was killing me! Don't you get that? I can't do it!"

"You say that, but you hardly seem any different. It's not as if being out of school has made any improvements to your behavior."

"Behavior?" James repeated bitterly. "I am not a schoolchild who's acting out. I'm an adult, and what I do is not your problem."

"You're not a child, you're ill, James. You're ill and you wouldn't keep seeing the doctor, you won't take the meds. You're throwing away your chances. It's my problem because you're my son."

"You don't even like me!" James said, and it came out far too loud, far too sharp, he was sure his friends heard it from the other room. "You should just set me free to do whatever I want. Then you won't have to lose sleep over what a disappointment I am!"

"I love you," his father said quietly, refusing to match James's tone.

"That's not the same."

"No... no, it isn't. I don't like you, James, I don't like the person you've become. You are cruel and angry. I know you're hurting. I know you're sick, but I can't find sympathy for you when you won't even entertain the idea of getting better. I love you, but you're not someone I want to be around. I'm sorry, I really wish that I had your mother's patience and empathy, but I don't and she's not here."

"Do you think I don't know that? I know she's not here! I know Mum is dead and she isn't coming back and now you're stuck with just me! How terrible for you! I'm sorry I'm an awful person and you can't stand to be around me!"

"Enough yelling, you're going to school, James. It's just one year."

"You don't get it. You don't even *try* to get it!"

"You don't have any other options, James," his dad said sharply. *"You realize that? You can't get by on just your current income, and I won't support you if you don't go to uni. You know the terms of your inheritance—"*

"I don't want it! I don't want your money or *any* money that comes because Mum is dead!"

His father was silent for a moment. *"I think you need some time to cool down. We'll talk soon. I hope you'll think about starting treatment again and taking the meds. You can't hold out like this forever, you will spiral, it's only a matter of when. I'm not trying to be mean, but I can't coddle you and I can't watch you destroy yourself. I have done everything I can short of physically grabbing you and locking you up. I- I don't know what else I'm supposed to do..."* he trailed off, his voice cracking at the last word and James was too angry to feel anything, even at the emotion in his father's voice. *"I know you think I'm the bad guy, but I can't lose you too."*

“Maybe your life would be better,” James scoffed.

“*Don't say that,*” his dad said instantly. “*Please... if- if you start feeling that way again, you have to tell somebody.*”

“I always feel that way,” James snapped. He didn't wait for his dad's response, instead, he abruptly ended the call. James only resisted the urge to throw his phone at the wall or break something because he knew his friends would see. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.* How much of that would they have heard? James should have gone upstairs or outside. Anywhere they wouldn't have heard him lose his temper.

James turned numbly, heading back to the kitchen. He sat down, dropping his phone on the table with a thud. As James looked up, he realized the room was deadly silent.

“Sorry,” James said quickly as he realized that yes, everyone had heard him yelling. James rarely lost his cool, at least not where his friends could see it, and he felt raw and exposed. “I-um—” James swallowed. “My dad and I are having a disagreement.”

“Did I hear that correctly at the beginning? You're not going back to school?” It was Sirius who dared to meet James's eye, the same look back from the other day. Like he was trying to pry inside James's chest.

“I- yes... you knew I had to take a leave of absence when—” James broke off. “Well, you know... after my mum died,” he forced out. “It was going to take me another year, I just... I don't think it's right for me.”

“And your dad isn't happy?”

“No, no he's not,” James muttered.

“Okay...” Sirius said slowly. “I understand that, but I heard you say to your dad... that you were failing?”

“Yeah.”

“Like before Effie—” Sirius hesitated like he didn’t want to speak the word. “Um, *died*?”

“Yes, before then,” James said quietly.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Sirius asked. “I had no idea.”

“Well, I wasn’t exactly proud of it,” James scowled.

“But I wouldn’t have judged you, Prongs. You’re my best friend, you don’t have to keep things from me.”

“I didn’t want to worry you. It’s fine, Sirius,” James insisted firmly. “Now you know.”

Sirius opened his mouth to speak again, but Remus reached out to touch his arm, effectively stopping him. James took advantage of the pause to stand.

“You know what, I’m not really hungry. You guys can eat without me.”

James left the room before anyone could protest. He hurried up the stairs, not bothering to turn on the lights in the bedroom as he collapsed on Regulus’s bed. James curled into himself; he didn’t punch the wall or throw anything. He just pulled sharply on his own hair until his eyes watered and he didn’t have the strength to do anything but breathe. Shallowly, in and out, in and out.

He'd changed the sheets that morning and they didn't smell like Regulus anymore. James missed him.

It was a long while later when James heard the door open.

"How much did you all hear?" James mumbled when he felt the bed dip.

"Mostly just the stuff about school, and then when you yelled pretty loud about being a disappointment and your dad not liking you... don't worry, nothing too revealing," Regulus said softly.

James opened his eyes, lifting his head to frown up at Regulus. "Revealing?" he repeated.

"Yes, I- well, I overheard you before, when you were talking to your dad," Regulus admitted. "You said something about... not being crazy and meds or something. I don't mean to draw conclusions and maybe I'm entirely off the mark—"

"You're not," James cut him off, and it felt like the first time he'd ever been honest. "You're not wrong. I mean, I'm *not* crazy," he amended, "but maybe some people think I am. Maybe my dad thinks so. The doctors tried to give me some stupid diagnosis and pump me full of drugs, but it's not me. It can't be right."

Regulus just looked at James at first, his face shadowed. The only light came from the moon. As always, Regulus had pulled back all the drapes that morning. Even in the darkness of the hour, it still managed to brighten the room. James wasn't sure why that was the image that looped in his mind so often. If someone had told James that he could only keep one memory of Regulus, it wouldn't be his body or the sex that James would choose. Rather, the memory of Regulus pulling open the drapes, standing on his tiptoes to tie back the ones that covered the balcony door. How the sunlight illuminated him as it was revealed. James could live in those memories forever.

"*James*," Regulus spoke finally. He said James's name with so much care, so much meaning as if it were bigger than it really was. "Be entirely honest with me. Do you genuinely believe that?"

“Yes, I’m fine,” James said stubbornly.

“Okay,” Regulus took a deep breath. “Let’s pretend that doesn’t even matter. I’m not saying you aren’t, I’m not saying you need help or that whatever diagnosis they gave you is right... but do you genuinely believe that there’s *nothing* wrong?”

“Yes—”

“Nothing?” Regulus cut him off. “So, you wake up every day and you feel perfectly okay? You aren’t hurting? You aren’t angry?”

And of course not. No, everything was wrong, James knew that. Everything had been wrong for as long as James could remember.

“I- I’ve always been this way,” James whispered.

“That doesn’t mean you have to be forever.”

“I don’t know how to be any other way,” James admitted, hating how small and weak his voice sounded.

“Have you ever tried?”

That hurt. James had done lots of trying. He had called his mum because he was trying, and he’d gotten her killed.

“You don’t understand,” James said, clenching his jaw.

Regulus lifted his feet from the floor so he was sitting cross-legged on the bed. “I didn’t claim to, I’m just putting it out there.”

James didn’t respond and Regulus just watched him, head cocked slightly to the side as his eyes skimmed James’s features.

“What?” James sighed under his scrutiny.

“Are you going to get pissed and call me unlovable again?” Regulus asked hesitantly.

“No,” James said instantly. “No, no. I- I really didn’t mean that, Regulus. I’m sorry, again.”

“I know, I got the memo with the first apology.”

James frowned at the tone of Regulus’s voice. Not bitter or angry, but almost heavy. Like that apology meant something James couldn’t understand. James lifted up onto his elbows so he could see Regulus’s face better in the darkness. His gaze was intense, filled with something that James was pretty sure was... *sadness?*

“Sometimes you look at me and I get the feeling I’m hurting you,” James said into the quiet between them.

“Sometimes I’m just hurting, it doesn’t mean it’s your fault.”

“Okay. Sometimes I’m hurting, too.”

“I know,” Regulus paused, shifting as he looked down at James. “Did this work? Have I comforted you?”

James couldn't help the faint smile that crossed his face at Regulus's uncertainty. "Feels like you tried to pull me apart first, but kind of..."

"Oh, sorry... I could give you a handjob."

James sat upright sharply, choking on his breath. "Excuse me?" he asked shrilly.

Regulus suddenly looked embarrassed. "I'm just saying, that might do a better job of cheering you up than whatever I say."

"I thought we weren't having sex," James said, his voice strained.

"I hardly think a handjob counts," Regulus rolled his eyes and James was not going to argue what did or did not constitute as sex because shit, Regulus was offering...

"I- okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah, if it doesn't count, no harm?"

"Right," Regulus agreed.

James was pretty sure this was going to come back to bite him.

Regulus

How did Regulus end up getting James Potter off not even twenty-four hours after he'd vowed nothing of the sort was ever going to happen again?

Well, to be technical, it probably started when Regulus was twelve. He was freshly dealing with his gay awakening and James had smiled a little too warmly. If he was talking in recent terms, however, well then it was probably because Regulus had offered. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

Regulus was pretty sure this *did* count. Because James's head had fallen onto Regulus's shoulder. He could hear each intake of James's breath, the way it stuttered when Regulus twisted his wrist just right.

But God, Regulus needed this. He needed to take control because he was afraid if he didn't, he'd let James own him.

So really, this was a compromise.

"Can I," James whispered when Regulus was done, hands not touching but gesturing to Regulus's waistband.

"No, I think that'd make it sex," Regulus mumbled. And he decided not to think about how sometimes just the intensity of James's eyes felt like sex too.

"Okay. Go wash your hands," James said after a moment. "I need a cigarette."

"Smoking after getting off?" Regulus raised his eyebrows. "Cliché."

"Yeah, yeah," James shook his head in amusement and Regulus rose to obey and go wash his hands.

When he emerged from the bathroom, James was outside on the balcony. He didn't turn at the sound of the door, but he flipped open his pack of cigarettes, pulling out a second one. Regulus joined him at the railing, and James reached out, grabbing Regulus by the jaw. James was looking at Regulus now, using his thumb to part Regulus's lips before putting the cigarette between them. Regulus let him. He just stood there under James's fingers as the other man lit it for him. James held Regulus there a second longer before stepping back and leaving him with the burning cigarette.

"Theoretically," he began slowly, "if I wait a long enough period of time and *then* give you a handjob, would that count as sex?"

"*Theoretically?*" Regulus repeated mockingly. "Yes, you're not doing that."

James let out a sigh, and Regulus was *not* thinking about how James had touched him. Firm, possessive, but almost reverent in his moments of gentleness. Like Regulus was something to be cherished and worshipped.

"What if I kissed you?"

"Not sex, but I'd still push you over the edge of this balcony."

James laughed at that, a low chuckle that sent shivers down Regulus's spine. "Sure you would, Princess."

Regulus choked, coughing violently. "Stop calling me that," Regulus forced out, hoarsely, his eyes watering.

"Why?" James asked, stepping forward. "Because you don't like it... or because you *do*?"

"You're way too cocky for someone who was having a mental breakdown not even an hour ago," Regulus muttered.

James dropped the butt of his cigarette on the ground, grinding it out with his heel before stepping closer. "I'm waiting for the part where you throw me off the balcony," he murmured as he stepped into Regulus's space, the words a whispered breath between them.

"I'm working up to it," Regulus scowled. Of course, James took this chance to lean down and kiss away the twist of Regulus's lips.

It was still warm and intense, sending a fiery storm raging through Regulus's veins, but James kissed him gentler than the night before. He tasted of smoke and something sharp, but quiet. It was careful, like James was answering an unasked question. There was no direction as James's fingers tangled in Regulus's hair, tilting his head back for easier access. It was a directionless sort of kiss, not intensifying but steady and burning.

A part of Regulus wanted to know what sort of lies James must have been telling himself to rationalize this. Sex was one thing, lots of people succumbed to sex, but kissing for kissing's sake? That was harder to twist.

The other (louder) part of Regulus didn't care what mental hoops James was jumping through. Not as long as he kept kissing Regulus like it mattered.

And he did, until Regulus had wasted his cigarette and they were shivering in the chill of the night. Even when Regulus finally pulled back, James looked like he wasn't done.

"I'm going to bed," Regulus whispered.

"Okay, I'm going to have another smoke. I'll be in when I'm done."

Regulus turned, slipping into their bedroom. It all felt painfully domestic.

Chapter End Notes

So... PSA: remember to trust me guys.

You might be like... "wait, Mere, James has barely addressed the hookup, why isn't he freaking out?" "When are we getting back to xy&z?" YOU HAVE TO TRUST ME! I have my reasons.

This was a heavy chapter so I hope you appreciated some of the cuter bits. Like James putting a cigarette in Regulus's mouth and making out with him on a balcony for zero reason... all the while being like, yep this is totally not a blaring sign of homosexuality? (EEEEK AKAJDLLAKAKKA) The return of James calling Reg "Princess" and ofc, rosekiller being a menace!! ALSO, Regulus "I'm going to pick and choose the definition of what constitutes sex" Black 🥹.

I just realized I forgot to say I'll see you guys next Friday... but you know the drill by now. Every Friday babes, I will be here! Mwah!

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Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

This chapter is dedicated to ao3 user jqnnqq who asked me for some Marlene and James friendship! Here you are!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Regulus

“How’s the no sex going?”

Regulus looked around to make sure none of their friends were around them. Barty looked up at the massive painting in front of them casually. As if he weren’t talking about Regulus’s sex life, which was supposed to be a secret.

“Ugh,” Regulus groaned in response. He pretended to read the little description under the art, so he didn’t have to see Barty’s raised eyebrows.

“You already slept with him again, didn’t you?”

“No! I mean—not exactly.” Barty stepped in front of Regulus’s line of view, blocking the painting. “Get out of my way, I can’t see,” Regulus snapped.

“You’ve been to one museum, you’ve seen it all,” Barty countered. “Now, spill.”

Regulus let out a long sigh. After confirming again that no one was within hearing distance, he swallowed. “A handjob doesn’t count, right?”

Barty let out a shout of laughter far too loud considering the quiet of the museum. “Yes, it does.”

“No, it doesn’t. I didn’t let him touch me.”

“But did you like it?”

“I’m not telling you that.”

“Okay, so you did,” Barty grinned gleefully. “If it were like... just two random guys and one gets off I’d say *sure*, that’s meaningless, you could do that in a bathroom or an alleyway. But it wasn’t. I think it probably *was* sex because it was clearly important to you. Not to mention it was Po—” Regulus put a hand over Barty’s mouth, effectively cutting him off as Remus Lupin suddenly appeared.

Barty sputtered, trying to pull Regulus’s hand off him as Remus raised his eyebrows. *Shit*. How much of that had he heard?

“We’re moving onto the other exhibit, I’ve been sent to fetch the two of you.”

“Okay,” Barty said once he’d licked Regulus’s hand, effectively forcing him to let go. “I wait in anticipation. My entire life has led up to this moment.” Regulus kicked at him as he turned, falling into step beside Remus.

“Look, whatever you heard—”

“I didn’t hear much of anything,” Remus shrugged. “And frankly, you’re an adult, I’m not going to tell on you for talking about sex.”

Okay, so surely he hadn't picked up any of the specific details?

"We were discussing whether a handjob constitutes sex," Barty supplied unhelpfully, throwing an arm around Regulus's shoulder.

"Yes?" Remus questioned. "It does, how is this a debate?"

"Of course *you* think that, Lupin..." Barty shook his head. "But what if it doesn't mean anything?"

"It's still a sexual act you're doing with another person, that's sex. Shall I pull up the exact definition?" Remus questioned.

"I don't think it counts," Regulus muttered with a frown.

"I think it doesn't if it's meaningless!" Barty said again. "But for you, it does, Reg. You've failed, you slept with him again."

"It doesn't mean anything!" Regulus protested sharply.

"Did you kiss him?"

"Not during..."

"After?"

"Maybe..."

“Oh, Reg, you are *fucked*. So terribly, *awfully* fucked,” Barty sighed, and Remus was looking between them, brow furrowed.

“Who are we talking about?” Remus asked in confusion.

“No one!” Regulus said sharply.

Barty used his free hand to pat Regulus on the cheek. “I won’t tell Evan, by the way, but you are fucked.”

Regulus frowned, but thankfully Remus didn’t question it any further.

It was true, Regulus *was* fucked. He wasn’t exactly known for his weak resolve. But suddenly, he didn’t know how he was supposed to stand his ground. *Especially*, when they joined the rest of the group and Regulus felt James’s eyes on him instantly.

It washed over Regulus’s skin like the prickles of pins and needles. He could feel it. Even when he refused to meet James’s eyes, lest he somehow realize they’d been discussing him.

Regulus knew Evan was right. Regulus needed to let it go, to cut James out. He couldn’t forget feeling when he’d woken after they’d slept together, the shame and heartache that had filled him... because James might desire him, he might fuck Regulus and kiss him as if it mattered, but it *didn’t*.

It pulled at something old and tender, a weak spot in Regulus’s chest. He’d slept with lots of people, but none of them had ever mattered. None of them had existed beyond sex. In fact, he rarely hooked up with the same person more than once. But James...

James rolled his eyes at Regulus when he thought he wouldn’t be caught. He looked as if he was trying to tear pieces away with just his eyes. He handled Regulus as if he wanted to break him and then gently put him back together again. Regulus had never been loved, and he

was terrified that he was going to mistake this for *that*. Because it resembled Regulus's distant idea of what it might feel like to be loved by James Potter.

So, Regulus didn't look, even though he knew James did. Even though he knew, maybe in some sense, they did have something special between them. James was open with Regulus, more so than anyone else. But maybe that was by chance. Maybe they were only bound together by a similar memory of what it was like to meet death.

Barty still had his arm around Regulus's shoulder as the group moved on together. He seemed to notice the change in Regulus's demeanor.

"Reg," Barty said, leaning in close so no one else would hear.

"Yeah?" Regulus mumbled.

"I won't judge you... if you don't stop sleeping with him. I get it. It's okay. Maybe it will work out, who knows? I don't think Evan was giving Potter enough credit, but... I don't want you to get hurt either."

Their steps slowed and Regulus knew Remus was looking back at them as they were left behind. This, of course, meant Sirius was as well. Regulus ignored them.

"I think... I'm probably getting hurt anyway. I think it was going to hurt even if I never touched him in the first place," Regulus admitted.

Barty let go of Regulus's shoulder, pulling back and spinning to grab Regulus's face in his hand. "I know," Barty said gently, a rare piece of softness. Then, because he was Barty Crouch Jr., he kissed Regulus loudly and obnoxiously on the forehead.

Regulus swatted him away. "You fucker. Get off of me!"

Barty just laughed loudly. He paid no attention to the other people in the museum who shot him looks. “C’mon Reg, more exciting old paintings to see!”

Sometimes, Regulus wished he could have fallen in love with Barty instead. He was pretty sure Barty sometimes wished that as well. It would have been easier, they made sense to each other... Instead, Regulus was stuck on James Potter and Barty was head over heels in love with Evan. Regulus secretly feared that Barty would never learn how to let Evan love him, and Evan would never learn the patience needed.

Regulus had always known they were in love with each other, but sometimes, love just wasn't enough to make two people fit.

Marlene

It would be nice if everyone got to meet the love of their lives by the time they were twenty-two and live happily ever after.

Something many people might not guess about Marlene is that she loved to read. Not in the way Remus or Regulus did with books written by dead guys who thought they were better than everyone else. No, Marlene liked modern books, adventure, and romance. She read every popular book series as a young teen, and one thing in particular plagued her... *they couldn't all live happily ever after.*

So they win the war, beat the bad guy or whatever, and then the couple would ride off into the sunset. But in half the books she read, they were fifteen or sixteen-year-olds, and that just doesn't work. Very few people date the love of their lives at fifteen. Hell, even meeting in university had a low success rate from what Marlene could see. So statistically out of all of their friends, at least *someone* had to break up.

It was never going to be Sirius and Remus, those two defied the odds. If they were even capable of untangling themselves, it would have happened years ago. It certainly wasn't Lily and Mary. Marlene wasn't supposed to know yet, but she'd figured out that they were engaged. Pete and Emmeline were still new, but they were good at communicating. They took things slow, and they were starting their big kid lives together. Pandora and Xenophilius had just gotten married, and Marlene doubted it'd be them.

The only other contenders for a breakup would be Evan and Barty. But even while they fought constantly, Marlene thought that was actually a good thing. It meant they cared. She was fairly certain they would work things out eventually.

Marlene and Dorcas... didn't fight. They didn't really talk or have sex, they simply existed together out of pure habit at this point. So, Marlene was taking one for the team.

She was going to break up with Dorcas.

Marlene had known this was going to happen from the beginning. As soon as she'd gotten the email, even before she'd responded and accepted the job. She'd known. She'd known a year prior when Dorcas mentioned moving back to their hometown. Marlene couldn't go back, she couldn't be that person. Maybe she was terrible for not instantly breaking up with Dorcas... but Marlene *did* love her. Ending a relationship with someone you love is easier said than done. Not to mention she knew it'd probably tear their friend group apart. Better to have the holiday they'd been planning first. And maybe, a small naïve part of Marlene thought Dorcas would convince her otherwise. She hadn't. Her girlfriend's behavior had only filled Marlene with *more* conviction. This was the right choice. That didn't mean it didn't hurt.

Marlene felt like everyone else was living their happily ever afters, and she was stuck watching from the outside. Or *almost* everyone.

"James, James, James," she threw an arm around his shoulder as they walked.

James turned to look at her, his serious expression fading to a grin. "Hello, Marls. Fancy seeing you here."

“What do you think of this place?”

“It’s nice. Lots of... art.”

“You think it’s boring,” she clicked her tongue, shaking her head. “How uncultured.”

“You also think it’s boring,” James said accusingly as they walked.

“I think we all do, except Remus probably.”

“And Regulus,” James added. “He seemed particularly interested by some of the paintings.”

“I mean yes, but I also overheard him, Barty, and Remus. They were definitely talking about sex, not paintings.”

James let out a choked sound at that and Marlene raised her eyebrows. “What? It’s not like they were being particularly loud about it. I just happened to be walking by.”

“Right,” James swallowed, clearing his throat. “Let’s just hope no one gets kicked out for indecent behavior.”

Marlene nudged him playfully. “Is that a challenge?”

James laughed at that, and it seemed easy. Smiling was almost always the first thing James Potter did. Marlene had been afraid it might look different in light of the day before. James still smiled like there was nothing else he’d rather be doing.

Sirius had been worried. Marlene had watched him get up, pacing the kitchen while Remus talked him down. It wasn’t like James to keep secrets. No one had any idea that he wouldn’t

be finishing school, much less that he had been failing even before his mum had been in that car accident.

They knew James had taken a leave of absence following the funeral. They knew that he still had another year left of school. But so did Regulus, Barty, and Evan. It wasn't like he was being entirely left behind. Nobody had thought badly of James, that was normal, plenty of people took different lengths of time to graduate. Not to mention, he'd had an awful year.

Marlene remembered the day he'd come back from his parent's house, how everyone had held their breath. He'd been practically catatonic at the funeral, simply staring into space while Sirius held his hand. Nobody had known how they'd handle it if James were different. When he'd stepped into Sirius's flat for the first time since he'd left, he'd simply smiled tiredly. James had been quiet that night and there was a healing cut on his cheek, but he'd smiled.

"Got it doing yard work for my dad," James had shrugged when Peter had dared to ask about the injury.

He'd seemed a bit beaten down, he moved stiffly as if each step hurt, but within weeks, he seemed back to normal. James laughed. He went out and continued on with his life as if nothing had changed. Marlene had selfishly been relieved that tragedy hadn't turned her friend into somebody she couldn't recognize.

Sometimes, Marlene got the strangest feeling that the world was holding its breath. Waiting for *something*. For one of them to tip, causing everything to fall, shattering on the asphalt.

Marlene loved her friends. She'd never really had anyone but Dorcas growing up. As obsessed with romance books as she'd been, she also loved the idea of a found family. The thought that there were people out there who would love her regardless. Her own family would never be able to hide the twist of their lips at her name. Even if no one told her not to come back for holidays or took her off the family Christmas card, they didn't really want her either. Cutting her out would mean accepting that she was a lesbian, so it was easier for them to simply ignore it. When she had left town for university, Marlene had barely dared to dream of finding somewhere she belonged... but she did.

She loved her friends, but this wasn't going to last. She woke up every day with the impending end hanging over her head. They were going to split up and go their separate ways. It was hard to make new friends once you were an adult, so Marlene was probably going to spend the rest of her life alone. No friends, no family, no girlfriend.

Maybe she would at least be able to keep James. She could probably tell him the truth.

Marlene turned to watch James's profile. His smile had faded slightly and his eyes were fixed on Sirius and Regulus as they walked. She wondered what he was thinking.

They survived the museum without being kicked out. As they were arriving home, Marlene grabbed James by the wrist.

"Can I talk to you?" she asked quietly.

James frowned, shooting a glance at his friends who were heading inside. The two of them lingered on the porch for a moment before James nodded. "Yeah, of course."

Marlene swallowed. "Uh, maybe somewhere..." she gestured at the yard and James nodded understanding. They left the porch in silence, heading out of earshot of the house. Marlene paused when they reached the tree line, turning to look back at her friend.

"Is something wrong, Marls?"

"No—" she broke off. "Yes. Maybe, kind of. It's like... it feels like the right thing, but I need to tell someone before I lose my mind."

James's brows furrowed, eyes scrunching behind his glasses as he scrutinized her. "Okay, you know you can tell me anything."

“Right,” Marlene took a deep breath, it shuddered in her chest. “I’m leaving.”

James blinked at her for a confused moment. “Like... the holiday?”

“No, after. I got a deal working with a physical therapist... it’s for a football team and well —” she broke off shrugging. “I dunno, it’s everything I’ve ever wanted.”

“That’s amazing, Marls,” James shook his head. “Seriously, I’m proud of you. Why do you seem so upset over it?”

“Because... it’s in Scotland.”

“Oh...” James said in a quiet realization. “So... you’ll be leaving the area.”

“Yes, I know, I had these plans. You know, stay in London, eventually move back home. James, I don’t want that. Those are *Dorcas’s* plans.”

“So, what are the two of you doing then...” James asked, kicking the toe of his shoe into the dirt.

Marlene watched him shift, fixing her gaze on James’s feet rather than meeting his eye. “She doesn’t know...”

“Oh... *Marlene*—”

“I *know*,” she said quickly, daring to look up. James didn’t look angry or disappointed, only a little sad. For her, Dorcas, or something else entirely—Marlene didn’t know. “I’m breaking up with her,” Marlene forced out in a strangled whisper.

There was a silence long enough to quicken her heartbeat. It pounded loudly in her ears.

“Marls...”

“Don’t try to talk me out of it, I know I sound crazy—”

“You don’t,” James reached out, grabbing her wrist, his hand a warm steadying force. “Is that what you want?”

“I- I’m scared, I’m *terrified*, but only of things changing. I love Dorcas, I always have and probably always will. I used to think that was enough. But it doesn’t feel like enough anymore. She doesn’t see me, she doesn’t make me feel loved. Actually, she kind of makes me feel like shit. I’d do anything for her and I know she loves me, but I don’t think she *likes me*. It feels like a habit. I’ve been unhappy for a long time, and the job offer was just the push I needed.”

James looked at Marlene for a beat, and she had no idea what he was going to say, but then he was pulling her into a tight hug. Marlene wrapped her hands around his neck instantly. She was unable to stop the tears that were suddenly dripping down her face.

“I’m sorry,” James whispered into her hair. “I had no idea you felt that way.”

“I- I didn’t want anyone to know...” Marlene sniffed. “I feel so stupid. Everyone else can make it work but me. Maybe I just need to try harder. Everyone else is keeping their relationships together. Fuck, even Barty and Evan are hanging in there, not to mention stupid perfect people like Sirius and Remus...”

“Marlene, *Marls...*” James pulled back, grabbing her face in his hands. “Listen to me,” he said firmly. “If you’re not happy, then don’t stay in a situation that’s hurting you. If the only thing holding you back is an obligation, then you need to do what’s right for you. People like Remus and Sirius are freaks of nature. They’ve managed to make their relationship work, but they’re not you and Dorcas. I think you’re allowed to give up. No one likes to tell people that. It’s always ‘keep trying’ or ‘never give up’, but if trying is hurting you... then I think giving up is okay.”

“Oh,” Marlene said, taken aback. “I... I was afraid you’d think I’m out of my mind. Do you really think it’s okay?”

“You seem pretty sure about it. Clearly, you’ve had a lot of time to think. It seems like you know exactly what you want. I’ll support you no matter what, Marls.”

Marlene threw her arms around James again and he simply held her tightly. “I love you, you’re the best.”

“*The best* might be overstating things...” he said softly. “But I love you too.”

Monty

Fleamont Potter had done a lot of learning. He’d spent hours on Google. He checked out books from the library and joined online groups. He had talked to doctors and watched hours' worth of YouTube videos. None of them helped him understand his son any better.

At the end of the day, he didn’t think James understood himself.

Monty had instead come out with the irrefutable knowledge that he had failed. It was probably— no, *definitely*, his fault.

Borderline Personality Disorder. When the doctor had first spoken the words, Monty didn’t know what that was. James had instantly balked. *It was wrong, it couldn’t be true. They were just trying to lock him up.*

Monty was freshly widowed. He sat there alone in the hospital as they stitched his son back up and pushed his ribs back into place. And James, who sounded half out of his mind, had the audacity to fight it. *How dare he?* Monty was angry. He was absolutely furious. But mostly, he was scared.

He watched his son lose his bloody mind and there was nothing he could do. It was like looking at somebody else.

James had been a happy baby, a happy kid in his early years. And then, everything changed.

James was young when the Potter's company tanked. It was shocking and sudden. One of Monty's oldest friends and trusted employees had been siphoning money for himself. Suddenly, everything Effie and Monty had spent their lives building had fallen apart. They'd waited so long to have kids because they wanted to solidify their careers first, so when everything had begun to crumble they were put in a difficult position.

In the end, they'd sent James to stay with Monty's sister for a few months while they figured things out. They'd had to do so much traveling and work, it didn't seem right to neglect him at home. Effie hadn't wanted to, but Monty had thought it'd be best. Eventually, she'd agreed.

Monty loved his sister, but she had a lot of kids, six of them to be exact. He hadn't known it at the time, but she'd also been in an abusive relationship. She'd sworn to Monty that James had never been touched, but he'd been there. He had been neglected for months, abandoned by his parents, and left in an unfamiliar place full of hostility.

So, James came back different. A little quieter, a little quicker to anger or closing himself off. While he used to sniffle a little whenever Effie and Monty would leave him, he started to throw tantrums. He would spend hours screaming his lungs out. He'd physically cling to his parents, begging them to stay. It'd been a hard year, but Monty didn't think the reaction was entirely unsurprising. They took him to therapy, but the doctor just told them James was a kid. They advised they start giving him fish oil vitamins to keep his brain healthy. *Fucking vitamins*. That was it.

Somewhere, deep in his chest, Monty knew his son had charmed this therapist. He knew that something wasn't right. Even if a ten-year-old James wasn't threatening to hurt himself, even

if he wasn't violent or talking crazy. Because he presented as sound of mind, there was nothing to be done. No one wants to believe their child is ill, so Monty shrugged it off. He took the doctor's word for it.

Now, every day, Monty would wake up and wonder what would have happened if he'd stood his ground. For *years* everything was fine. There weren't any outward signs of anything being wrong. Not outside of the tantrums, which eventually stopped. Then, James hit his teenage years and things escalated. By the time he was in university, it was undeniable.

"*Something is wrong,*" Effie had said only weeks before she died. Monty had nodded. He didn't bother to pretend otherwise this time.

They'd planned to stage an intervention. Instead, James had called Effie first.

It played on a loop inside Monty's head. It showed up in his dreams, always lurking in the corners of his mind. James sounded almost *calm* as he announced that he didn't want to live. Sure, there was an agitation, an ache behind his words, but he spoke like it was insignificant.

It haunted Monty. He didn't know what to do about it. He didn't know how to understand his son. He couldn't see James without flinching away. Because surely, it was Monty's fault.

The doctors said a lot of things could cause BPD, not just trauma, but Monty remembered the shift. He remembered choosing to leave his son and getting back one that seemed entirely different. So maybe, it was just the chemicals in James's brain, or maybe it wasn't. Either way, Monty would always blame himself. He couldn't help but think if only he'd acted sooner, he could have saved them all a world of pain.

So when James promptly hung up on him, Monty couldn't help but wonder what the hell he was supposed to do. It felt like he'd exhausted every option. James wouldn't listen. He just kept getting worse.

It was frustrating and devastating. How do you help someone who doesn't want to be helped? Someone, who in James's case, wouldn't even admit there was anything wrong? He was adamant. Since he was an adult, there was nothing Monty could do. Not until James was on

the edge and an immediate threat to himself. Monty didn't want to wait until that day, he didn't want to lose his son.

He was afraid he already had.

The line rang. Once, then twice. He didn't expect James to pick up. Monty had tried to give him a little space, but he'd never been the most patient.

Much to his surprise, the call was answered.

There was no sound on the other side of the line and Monty frowned. "James?"

Another moment of silence. Then: *"Will you stop calling me?"*

"Will you ever hear me out?" Monty asked his son quietly. "It's like talking to a brick wall. I'm tired of playing this game."

"Then stop playing."

"I'm worried about you. What you said last time we talked—"

"Dad, I don't want to fucking talk about this! You turn everything into something. You can't just let me be—"

James broke off suddenly and Monty didn't know why. Then, he heard another voice.

"James..."

James must have dropped his phone from his ear because his voice got fainter. “*This isn’t your fucking business, Regulus.*”

“*I know. Hang up.*”

“*Excuse me—*”

“*If you’re just going to yell at him, hang up, it’s too late for this.*”

“*You don’t get to tell me what to do.*”

“*James, please.*”

There was silence and Monty tried to imagine what was happening. He couldn’t picture it. He knew Regulus, but not well. He’d always been such a quiet boy. Monty had never known Regulus and James to be especially close. Yet, by some blessed miracle... James *agreed*.

“*Fine.*” James’s voice got closer again as he lifted his phone. “*Bye, Dad.*”

Usually, these phone calls ended with Monty feeling like he’d been punched in the gut. This time, he felt strangely hopeful.

James had listened. Regulus Black cut James off mid-rant. Then, with only a bit of fighting... James had *listened*. Monty was shocked. He’d never seen anyone get through to James like that aside from Effie.

Maybe, James *wasn’t* completely lost to Monty just yet.

Remus

Remus couldn't remember whose brilliant idea it was to take a dozen twenty-somethings and lock them in a house together for the summer... What could possibly go wrong?

Everything.

Every. Single. Fucking. Thing.

It was the end of their fourth week when Sirius had spoken the fateful words. "Things could be worse."

Yeah, it *could*.

See, nobody had cried yet. They'd only had two drunken accidents, no fires, and only a few arguments. Namely, between Evan and Barty who clearly had some relationship spat going on. However, the two had taken to pretending nothing was wrong recently. They seemed dead set on ignoring the issue. This at least spared Remus from hearing their fights.

Regulus and James were the other sources of tension. Yet, by some miracle, they seemed to have reached some tentative truce. After their last argument, there hadn't been any more fights (at least not as far as Remus was aware). They bickered, which Sirius hated, but Remus actually didn't think that was a bad sign. Often, they'd both be up early, and Remus would walk in to find them at the table together. Sometimes they were sitting in silence and sometimes they were arguing, but it didn't sound so sharp these days.

Remus knew *something* had shifted between them, he just wasn't sure what.

The first domino fell because Remus couldn't sleep. Or at least, that's when Remus became aware that it was falling.

He'd gotten up to make tea in the hopes that it might calm his brain. Remus wanted to call his mum, but even if it weren't late, it was Friday night. This meant Shabbos. His mum wouldn't be on her phone until sunset the next day. Remus didn't want to wake Sirius either. It happened sometimes, his mind got a little loud and twisted. Remus had long learned how to untangle it. So, he got up to make tea. Except someone was already in the kitchen, two people actually.

Remus slowed in the hall at the sound of their quiet voices; he could just make out their figures through the doorway as he got closer.

"...but you can't ignore him forever. You can't just lose your shit every time he calls."

"I can. Fucking try me."

"Don't snap at me, James. I'm not telling you what to do, I'm pointing out a fact."

"You're butting in!"

"*You're* being mean."

There was a moment of silence, and Remus froze as he registered that this seemed to be an important conversation. One Remus probably shouldn't interrupt.

James let out a breath. Remus watched from a distance as he rubbed his eyes under his glasses. "Sorry," James muttered.

Regulus crossed his arms. "I'm just saying logically, you cannot continue starting fights with your dad forever. He's going to keep calling you, and it's going to keep stressing you out. You've been snapping constantly ever since you talked to him a few days ago."

"I haven't—"

“You’ve been snapping at *me*.”

“You can’t just pull the mean card whenever you don’t like what I’m saying.”

Regulus scoffed. “There’s no *card*. Have you considered that maybe you’re just being an asshole? You’ve been terrible to me the past few days. I know it’s not even about me, but that doesn’t make it okay.”

“Have I?” James’s voice was small. “I’ve been terrible?”

“You haven’t been particularly nice. You basically ignored me the entire time at the museum yesterday. Then at lunch, you practically flinched when you had to sit next to me.”

“Tha- *Regulus*. You know why that is.”

“*Really?*” Regulus challenged, the word was drawn out and taunting as it fell from his lips. “Really? Enlighten me.”

“*You know*. You said you didn’t want it to happen again!”

“Oh, so you can’t even look at me without—”

“No! I can’t! I cannot fucking look at you without wanting you! Is that what you want to hear, Regulus?”

No. No way.

Surely, Remus heard something wrong. He couldn't be reading the situation right. Because James and Regulus? No way, the two of them—

Oh.

The two of them had always had some weird conflict. They interacted with one another in a way they didn't with anyone else. They fought, they bickered constantly. Regulus managed to get under James's skin.

Once the initial shock had made it through Remus's mind... the two of them made a lot of sense. Like an absurd amount of sense. Remus couldn't believe he'd never considered it sooner.

However, Remus couldn't be entirely to blame for never realizing. James had never given any indication that he liked men. Shouldn't he have? Why wouldn't he have come out? He was surrounded by gay people, he couldn't possibly think they wouldn't accept him.

Neither Regulus nor James spoke again, and Remus suddenly spurred himself to action, hurrying quietly back up the stairs. Once safely shut in his bedroom, he listened for the sound of footsteps. Sure enough, a moment later someone was coming up the stairs and a door slammed shut.

“Moony?”

Remus spun. “Sorry, didn't mean to wake you.”

“Is everything alright?” Sirius asked sleepily, squinting at Remus in the darkness.

Remus let out a slow exhale. He couldn't say anything to Sirius. *Fuck*. He couldn't out James or whatever was going on. It wouldn't be right.

“Yeah, I just couldn’t sleep. Needed to get some air.”

Sirius nodded, accepting Remus’s words easily. His head fell back onto his pillow and Remus took a deep breath. He climbed into bed, letting Sirius instantly attach himself to Remus’s body. It felt wrong to keep things from his partner, but surely, Sirius would understand. Right?

James

The first time he decided he wanted to be a writer, he was fifteen. James had never had any dreams aside from playing football. He thought that was something that made sense. He was good, incredibly good, and everyone said so. Football was easy, it was something to focus on, to push through. He didn’t have to think or exist past the game. All that mattered was playing. And James? He needed that. He needed something to zero in on, something that existed outside of the heaviness of himself.

Truthfully, there was probably a close correlation between quitting football and when he started losing control.

James never thought much past football. He certainly hadn’t considered writing until one day in class, Remus had peered over James’s shoulder.

“Where’s that from?” he’d asked, pointing to the line James had scrawled in the back of his notebook.

“What do you mean? I just wrote it,” he’d shrugged in response.

“You wrote it?” Remus had paused, cocking his head.

“Yeah, doesn’t everyone do that? Think of little lines or stories and write them down?”

“No,” Remus had shaken his head. “*Writers* do that.”

“I’m not a writer.”

“I think you are.”

James had just frowned. He didn’t think that was true. Still, he’d gone home that night and looked through his notebooks. A part of him had decided—even without his permission—that yes, James Potter *was* going to be a writer.

The truth was, there was just too much in James’s head. He just needed to get it out. He wrote things, ramblings, messy line after line. Then he started writing stories. They were short at first. They got longer and longer the more James wrote. He found things were easier to understand when they were happening to a character. When it was somebody apart from James. He could find sympathy for that person. Sympathy he could never dig up for himself.

James hated himself. He hated every word that he’d written at every other point in his life. He hated his past self for being him. James wanted to gut that man. To rip his muscle from his bones for daring to exist. How cruel that he was a dark spot in James’s mind. His own presence marred every memory he would ever have.

James looked at every decision he’d ever made in disgust. He didn’t mean for Regulus to be one of those things. He wished he knew how to explain. *It’s not you. It’s just me. Everything I touch feels like I’ve ruined it and every time I look, I can see my handprints on your skin.*

You were perfect, the problem is that I was there too.

Regulus went upstairs and James stayed. He stared at his notebook, hoping he could pluck out some words. He should have gone upstairs. He should have apologized for snapping. Regulus was right, James *was* being mean.

Instead, James stared at the blank page until his vision blurred and his breath caught in his throat. He didn't feel as if he'd had anything to say in a very long time. That was why he'd stopped writing. Every time he tried and nothing came, it felt like a sign. James was out of words. It felt like the universe was telling him he was at the end of the line.

Eventually, James snapped the book closed. He headed up the stairs, one step at a time. His movements were slow as he opened his bedroom door. Regulus didn't stir, but James knew he was awake.

"Can I sleep here?" James asked hesitantly as he approached the bed.

Regulus didn't reply instantly. James waited.

"You don't like the other bed," he mumbled eventually.

James didn't move. "That's not yes or no. Regulus, can I sleep here?"

Another moment of silence. Regulus shifted over to make space for James. "Yes."

He was always saying yes. Stubborn, unforgiving Regulus Black was always giving James whatever he wanted. James didn't understand why.

James climbed into the bed. He could feel Regulus's warmth as he pulled the blanket up around them. Regulus rolled over so they weren't facing each other, and James felt his stomach flip. *Fuck*. James had messed up again. He ruined everything he touched.

"I'm sorry." James tilted his head to look at Regulus, but the other man didn't roll back over.

Look at me, look at me, look at me.

“I—” James swallowed, taking a deep breath. “I didn’t mean to ignore you.”

“I’m not some cheap one-night stand. I’m not something you can just use and discard.”

“I don’t think you are.”

There was no response. James reached out, stopping himself right before he touched Regulus’s shoulder. His hand hovered there; neither of them seemed to breathe.

Regulus rolled over so suddenly that he hit James’s hand and they both froze.

“Then what *do* you think?” Regulus asked, his voice strangled.

“I- I don’t know.”

“Because you talk sometimes as if I matter to you,” Regulus said fiercely. “Then you turn around and snap at me or ignore me. You’re always trying to take it back. You fucked me, James. Boo-hoo, you can’t undo it now. I don’t care what’s going on in your mind, you don’t get to treat me badly over it. Not when I’ve only been good for you.”

The last part is what froze James’s heart in his chest. *For you. I’ve only been good for you.*

Once, James would have scoffed at the idea. Regulus Black? *Never*. Yet, it was true. Regulus had only snapped when James did first. Otherwise, he stayed surprisingly level, even when James was being an asshole. Regulus—the Regulus James had known half his life to be harsh and rude... was soft. Pliant and giving. Warm and sweet under James’s hands. James couldn’t begin to understand what any of that meant.

“You do matter to me. I just- Regulus... I’m confused. All of this is complicated, and my head is twisted. My entire life I’ve felt like I’m trying to grab ahold of it, but I’m always losing control.”

“It’s only complicated if you let it be.” Regulus instantly winced, as if he wanted to unsay the words. James blinked, entranced by the twist of his lips.

“What do you mean?” James breathed, brow creasing in confusion.

“I- never mind. Forget I said anything.”

“No.” James reached out, grabbing Regulus by the shoulder before he could turn around again.

“James...” Regulus didn’t say anything else. Just his name.

“I mean—” Regulus swallowed shakily. “I mean, what happened, happened, but it doesn’t have to control everything. We can be... normal.”

“Do we have a *normal*?”

“I- we can figure it out.”

“So, what... should we be friends?”

“No. Do you want all your friends to rail you?”

James choked on his own spit. “*Jesus fucking Christ*,” he cursed. Regulus didn’t react as James coughed violently. “I- I’m sure some people feel that way about their friends. You

know... like friends with benefits.”

“We are *not* friends with benefits,” Regulus scoffed.

“I know, because you said it could never happen again—”

“*Right.*”

“—except then you got me off, so that was a little contradictory.”

“It wasn’t sex—”

“—and then you let me kiss you on the balcony,” James continued.

“Shut up! You’re the one who kissed me!”

“You let me! You didn’t need to do that. I was waiting for you to push me over the edge!”

“Oh, so you’re blaming me now?”

“Well, I’m saying that at the very least it takes two—”

“Shut your fucking mouth, Potter. There are no friends. We cannot be friends.”

“So, it’s just the benefits.”

“No?” Regulus said shrilly. “There are no benefits!”

“Well, there *were*. But it’s fine, then we can just be friends now.”

“There are not, and never were *benefits*,” Regulus scoffed, his face scrunched in indignation.

“Technically—”

“*Technically* nothing! James, I will punch you.”

“No look, I’m just saying, twice is probably a pattern.”

“Or it’s just stupidity.”

“Okay, fine, yes,” James conceded. “So, we’re friends?”

“Fine!”

For a moment there was silence, and then realization seemed to dawn on Regulus.

“James...”

James instantly let go of Regulus, rolling guiltily onto his back so they were no longer face to face.

“*James*,” Regulus repeated, more insistent this time. “Did you just *manipulate* me into agreeing to be friends with you?”

“No,” James scoffed, crossing his arms.

Regulus sat upright, making a strangled sound. “Oh, for fucks sake,” he muttered under his breath. “You manipulated me!”

“Did not!”

“Did too!”

“No, you agreed. What’s done is done,” James said firmly. “No taksie backsies.”

“*Excuse me?*” Regulus said the words with such revulsion and disgust, James thought he should probably put it on his resume as a special skill.

“Yup,” James said with a pop, feeling a little proud of himself. “You heard me.”

“Oh, I am going to *kill you*,” Regulus muttered. The words were sharp, but then Regulus was clambering onto James, pinning his hands above his head, and despite the force, his hands were soft.

“*Oh*,” the word punched itself out of James and they both seemed to freeze as they registered the compromising position.

Regulus flushed; he didn’t move. He was straddling James’s waist, leaning forward as he pinned James’s wrists to the pillow.

“There are no benefits,” Regulus said, but it came out a little breathless.

“I know, we’re friends.”

“Right,” Regulus swallowed. “It wouldn’t mean anything. Because, I *guess* we’re friends now. And some friends, they probably do have sex. And I matter to you because... we’re friends?”

“Right.”

“So, this can mean nothing, and you can... y-you can care about me?”

“I *do* care about you,” James whispered. “I don’t know if anyone has ever known me like you.”

“Okay,” Regulus said, his voice quiet, but they were close enough that James heard it perfectly. “Because neither of us can really bring people home right now. We’re bound to get frustrated. So, it’d make sense, you know. If we’re friends and it happened once. It wouldn’t be crazy if it happened again.”

“Yeah,” James said instantly. “It’s not something else. You know—”

Regulus kissed the words out of James’s mouth.

Chapter End Notes

I'll be entirely honest with you, I didn't want to break this chapter here but things were getting too long. But the next one I'm esp excited about :.)

Also, if you know much about BPD or HAVE IT you may be wondering about a few things, that haven't really been present yet... like a favorite person etc. Trust me... you'll

see it.

On an entirely separate note, thanks to everyone who has been so sweet and supportive of me lately. I'm genuinely so honored that so many of you read anything I write :,)

I'll see you next Friday as always! Bye babes! xx

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Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

This chapter is dedicated to Regulus Black and his shorts

See end notes for warnings!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Regulus

Regulus wished he could say he wasn't thinking when he kissed James.

When he'd climbed on top of James, *sure*. That was not a fully thought-out plan. Regulus was just getting far too comfortable. He didn't like proximity or touch from most people. There were exceptions, Sirius of course, often Barty and some of Regulus's other friends. But it'd taken a long time for Regulus to become comfortable with it. James had touched him once and now it never seemed to stop. Regulus didn't want it to stop.

Regulus had a faint memory of leaning into James when he was drunk. Of the way James had been warm and strong the night he'd punched a guy for Regulus. He touched Regulus gently, took care of him, and never flinched away.

If Regulus had been in love with James before the trip, he wasn't sure what to call it now. It felt infinite. Like his soul was breaking into a million little pieces every time their eyes met. As if Regulus was the glass shattered under James Potter's heel. He'd probably let James do whatever he wanted, and Regulus was pretty sure James knew that.

A small, guilty, masochistic part of Regulus wanted to believe James felt something. Clearly, whether he would admit it or not, James was not straight. But there was a big difference between being *not straight* and loving Regulus Black.

So, Regulus did think it through. He spent two seconds with James's wrists pinned under his hands, and he knew what he was going to do. He was going to play into whatever delusion James needed to allow this to happen.

It means something, Regulus thought as James arched up against him, trying to press closer. He just needed to put the notion out there, for it to exist *somewhere*. Because Regulus knew it.

He knew it meant something and he knew it'd kill him, but this was what he got. Regulus had never been able to feel even a fraction of what he did with James for anyone else. He'd never had anyone touch him like that. So, if Regulus managed a few weeks out of his entire life where James not only wanted to fuck him, but do it as if Regulus were something *sacred*... then yeah. *Yeah*, Regulus was going to take that. He was going to cherish every moment, even when he could feel fragile shards of his heart breaking off in his chest.

James struggled slightly under Regulus's grip. He could easily tear his arms away and flip Regulus onto his back if he wanted. Regulus knew James was far stronger than he was. But he didn't. Instead, James let Regulus do what he wanted. That felt more powerful than if Regulus were simply pinning him down by force. Because James was *choosing* to give himself up.

Regulus mouthed down James's, jaw biting at his neck. James instantly let his head fall back onto the pillow to give Regulus free rein. He let out a shuddering gasp as Regulus dragged his teeth over the spot where his neck met his shoulder.

"Do you always like that this much?" Regulus murmured, pulling back just enough to see the way James's face was flushed and his eyes dark.

"Dunno," James said softly, his voice already strained. (Though in his defense, Regulus *was* practically sitting on his dick.)

"What do you mean you don't know?"

James shrugged, almost looking embarrassed. “I mean, I don’t normally do…” he gestured between them, “this part.”

“This part?” Regulus repeated in conclusion. “You mean *foreplay*? So you stick it in a girl and then ditch her?”

“No, no,” James said quickly. “I mean I do it for the girl, but not for me. I don’t like them to touch me that much.”

Regulus instantly pulled back, letting go of James’s wrists. “Oh, fuck should I—”

“No,” James said instantly. “Not you. No, Regulus you can do whatever you want. You can touch me, anytime, *always*.”

You’re saying I’m different.

Regulus didn’t dare acknowledge the notion aloud, but it sat there, lodged between his lungs, nonetheless.

“I’m going to ruin you,” Regulus announced. He didn’t even mean to speak, but the words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. He needed to touch James, brand his fingertips into the other man’s skin. Regulus knew anyone who touched him in the future would be uselessly competing against the memory of James’s hands. If James got to engrave himself into Regulus’s soul, then Regulus was going to do the same. At the very least, he was going to leave his mark.

“Right, okay,” James gasped breathlessly. Regulus felt powerful.

Regulus wasted no more time, leaning forward and returning his lips to James’s. This time, when James pressed his hips up, Regulus pushed down. James let out a soft noise at the friction, and Regulus resisted the strange urge to laugh. It was addicting.

Regulus liked being treated roughly, he liked the way James had handled him. But he liked this too. Knowing that no one else got to touch James like this. Regulus took his time. He worked James up. Regulus delighted in the way James's face became more flushed and his breath came out in short bursts.

When all their clothes were discarded on the floor, Regulus leaned back to admire his handiwork. James's lips were parted, eyes glassy as he simply looked up at Regulus. He looked as if he'd never seen anything better. Regulus moved to climb off and James's hands caught him by the waist.

Now, Regulus was man enough to admit that he *really* liked the way James's hands encased his waist. He'd always been a little insecure over how small he was. Too short, too bony, too sharp. Regulus knew he was attractive, but his body wasn't for everyone. Yet, the way James's hands caught him easily, was strangely attractive. Did this point toward some unresolved daddy issues? Probably. Regulus didn't care at the moment.

"Wait," James said, and Regulus suddenly remembered that James had probably stopped him for a reason. "You should—" he swallowed. "Here, on top, I mean. I- stay..."

Regulus couldn't help but giggle once he realized what James was asking.

"*What?*" James asked unhappily, frowning as Regulus's shoulders shook with laughter.

"It's just—" Regulus began with a snort. "For someone who seems to be all about communicating during sex, you can't even say it."

"You know what I mean!" James protested.

"Hmm, no, I don't think I do."

“Fuck you.”

“You wish.”

James scowled. “You’re being difficult.”

“No, I’m not. I just don’t know what you’re trying to ask,” Regulus said innocently.

“You’re a brat, you know that?”

“I’ve been told.”

“Regulus…” James said with a frustrated groan.

Regulus leaned forward. They were close enough that their noses almost touched. James lifted his head, trying to capture Regulus’s lips, but Regulus instantly put a hand on his chest pushing him back down.

“*Ask,*” Regulus demanded. “Say the words.”

James blinked. He opened his mouth. “I’m asking you to ride me.”

Regulus grinned, leaning back again. “Now, that wasn’t so hard.”

“I’m going to make you pay for that,” James growled. Regulus did his best to hide the shiver that overtook him at the low timbre of James’s words. Of course, James noticed. He looked very smug about that. Stupid dickhead.

Regulus almost wanted to tease more as payback, but sue him, he was getting a little impatient, too.

The thing with James is that the sex was really good. Regulus had known that from the first time, the second only made it clearer. He could now say with absolute certainty that it was probably the best sex he'd ever had.

Despite whatever Barty might say, it had nothing to do with James's body or the size of his dick (though Regulus could admit it was just the right sort of size). Rather, it was the way James watched. He paid careful attention to every move, every gasp. Instead of getting lost in his own pleasure, he focused on Regulus's instead.

Regulus never had anyone who did that before. No one listened so attentively, touched him so reverently. *God*, it was going to make him sick.

When James came first, Regulus moved off of him. He expected James to collapse for a moment or catch his breath, but instead, he was scrambling up instantly. He grabbed Regulus by the hip, switching their spots easily so Regulus was on his back looking up at James.

Then, James did pause. "Hi," he murmured, leaning in to press a quick kiss under Regulus's eye.

"Hi."

James's hand crept down his waist, lower and lower. Dragging slowly, inch by inch.

"That was really good," James whispered. "God, you're just so—" he broke off, shaking his head as he pulled back to situate himself between Regulus's legs. "You're so fucking perfect." He punctuated the words by peppering kisses on Regulus's hip bones.

What? What the hell was that supposed to mean? Did James talk like this to everyone he slept with? *Perfect* was a big word, wasn't it? Regulus had friends with benefits before, he'd

never thought any of them were perfect. The problem was that they *weren't*. If they'd been perfect, they wouldn't have been friends with benefits at all. So, did James mean that? Did he think Regulus was perfect, or was it just post-orgasm rambling?

“*James...*” Regulus complained, his voice tight.

“Sorry? Did you want something?” James asked. He bit playfully at Regulus’s inner thighs, pushing his hips down onto the mattress when Regulus squirmed.

“I’m going to kill you.”

James looked up with a wicked grin. “That might be a little counterproductive, don’t you think, angel?”

Angel... angel?

Princess was bad enough, but Regulus was pretty sure his mind whited out at the new name. Though, it might have had something to do with the fact that James *finally* put his mouth to good use.

Oh, and that thing James did where he paid attention... yeah, it really came in handy now. Regulus was pretty sure he’d never felt so good in his entire life. This was worth it, inevitable heartbreak and all.

Regulus wished James could have fucked him like he was nothing. If it’d felt empty, Regulus could have just moved on. Instead, James was slow and purposeful. He pulled sounds from Regulus’s mouth he didn’t even know he could make. Regulus had never considered himself loud, but maybe he’d just never had a reason to be. Because as Regulus tensed, James had to pull back. He reached up and put a hand over his mouth to muffle the sound that tried to escape.

James only moved it once Regulus had collapsed on the bed (and also licked his hand to force him to let go).

“Don’t lick me, you asshole,” James complained, wiping his hands on the sheets.

Regulus looked down. “You have bigger problems than my spit.”

James shook his head at Regulus’s attitude. He let out an overdramatic sigh in lieu of a response.

“If you were man enough to swallow, we wouldn’t have this problem.”

James scoffed. “Firstly, we’d need a bath either way. *Secondly*, I would have if I didn’t have to stop you from waking the entire house. *Oh yeah*, what’s that noise? No biggie, just me sucking off Sirius’s baby brother!”

Regulus let out a small laugh at that, rubbing tiredly at his face.

James looked down at him with a frown. “It’s not funny!” James scolded. “You’ll get me murdered.”

“Good.”

There was a sliver of purple-tinged light peeking through the drapes. Regulus didn’t realize how long it’d been, but the sun was already rising. James followed Regulus’s gaze, sitting up suddenly.

“Let’s go watch the sunrise.”

Regulus blinked. “Huh?”

“Sunrise,” James repeated, clambering out of the bed and holding out a hand for Regulus. “Well,” he paused, “maybe a quick shower first.”

“No, I’m going to sleep.”

“No, you aren’t. We both know you won’t fall asleep again. It’s practically the morning now anyway. Come on.”

Regulus sat up, crossing his arms. “I don’t want to go *outside*.”

“Yes, you do,” James insisted. His eyes flicked over Regulus's face, his head tilted. “Come on, *angel*.” James said it purposefully. Regulus knew he was being tested. He failed, instantly choking on his breath.

Regulus knew why James was using it now. It was because he’d noticed Regulus’s reaction the first time. But that didn’t explain where the name had come from in the first place. Regulus had heard James constantly call people pet names and nicknames. He had a way of making his affection clear. James often used “dear” or “babe” when talking to his friends, but never, not once, had he uttered the word *angel*. Wasn’t that intimate? It wasn’t the kind of thing you called a friend, or even a fuck buddy. “Princess” was one thing, it was James just teasing, pointing out how stuck up and prissy Regulus was. “Angel” was like a sucker-punch to the gut. It was sweet, like warm honey in the back of Regulus’s throat. It burned a little when he swallowed.

James broke into a smile as Regulus froze. “That’s even better than your reaction to Princess. I’ll be using that.”

“And *I* will be murdering you slowly and violently.”

“Will you do it with your hands?” James asked hopefully.

“Ugh!” Regulus stood, pushing past him, but he still didn’t stop James when he followed him into the shower.

They did wind up watching the sunrise because James had a pretty smile and Regulus was *weak*.

They sat together on the worn wood of the front porch. The morning had a slight chill, and that was the only reason Regulus pressed close to James. He held a cup of warm tea between his hands, bringing his knees up to his chest.

James took a sip of his coffee before putting it on the porch next to him. “You never wear shorts,” he noted, reaching out to put a hand on Regulus’s bare ankle.

Regulus looked down at his legs. It was true, the shorts he was wearing at the moment were some of the only ones he owned, and they were pajamas. He never wore them out.

Suddenly, Regulus had never been so glad for shorts as James’s hand crept up his calf.

“I- I don’t really like my legs,” Regulus admitted softly.

James’s eyes widened, looking down at Regulus’s legs and then back up to his face. Regulus would wager James *did* like them, if the hickeys he’d left on Regulus’s thighs were anything to go by.

“Oh, okay.” James didn’t try to ask why. He didn’t tell Regulus that his legs were beautiful or perfect. He didn’t spout any bullshit that would only fall flat. Instead, he simply leaned forward, pressing a kiss to Regulus’s knee and then another to his lips.

He tasted like coffee. Regulus hated the taste of coffee, but it wasn’t so bad when it came from James’s lips.

When he pulled back, James's eyes didn't leave Regulus's face. He reached out, tugging on one of Regulus's still-wet curls with a small smile. "Pretty angel," he said, softly bringing his hand down to cup Regulus's jaw.

Regulus blushed. The stupid pet name was bad enough, but *pretty? Pretty!* What the fuck?

"I'm not going to escape that stupid name, am I?" Regulus muttered, trying to ignore the way his heart was trying to beat out of his chest.

"Nope," James grinned wickedly. "It's your own fault, if you hadn't reacted that way I wouldn't have thought twice. But you really like it."

"I don't."

"Whatever you say, Regulus. Whatever you say."

James turned, gently knocking their shoulders together. They didn't speak again for a long time, but it was comfortable. *This*, this was worse than any of the other things. Worse than the way James kissed as if he wanted to eat Regulus alive. Worse than the sex being stupidly incredible.

James and Regulus as two people, just existing quietly side by side. That wasn't supposed to happen. It certainly didn't happen to friends with benefits, which they apparently were now. They were too comfortable, too at ease.

The sun rose in front of them, and James was warm against Regulus's side. He could perfectly imagine what it would be like if James were his boyfriend. James had kissed him a few minutes ago, soft and sweet. His hand was still on Regulus's ankle. There was something warm and affectionate between them that shouldn't have been there. If James was his boyfriend, it'd be *exactly* like this.

It was everything teenage Regulus dreamed of. He was going to be sick.

Regulus took a deep breath. “If I bring up our argument last night, will you promise to let me talk before getting upset with me?”

James’s thumb was rubbing a gentle circle on Regulus’s ankle. He didn’t respond at first, taking a small sip of his coffee. “Yeah,” James said after he’d swallowed. “Are you still mad at me over it? I thought we had talked it out a bit.”

They hadn’t. They’d settled on something that would mean James wouldn’t continue ignoring Regulus. They’d eased the tension created over not having sex by deciding to have it anyway. Nothing was talked out. It was just more lies and excuses piled on top of each other. Regulus had no one else to blame for that. He’d helped create the stupid cushion between the truth and James’s denial.

“I’m not mad.” That much was true at least. “It’s about before, the stuff with your dad.” James didn’t stiffen, but his thumb paused its movements. Regulus took this as tentative permission to continue. “I won’t butt into the situation again. I shouldn’t have tried to tell you how to handle it. I guess, I owe you an apology, I-I’m sorry. I know I push you too much.”

He looked at Regulus now, head cocked. There was something in James’s expression Regulus couldn’t read. Like there was a storm brewing behind his warm eyes. Regulus just sat there, letting James’s gaze flick over his face. After a second, James softened. His brow furrowing, but not in confusion or a frown that Regulus could recognize. The way James’s forehead scrunched was almost *pleading*. It seemed strangely like adoration. His eyes were glassy, as if he couldn’t contain the sheer volume of whatever he was feeling.

“You...” James began. Nothing else for a moment, just the single word. He swallowed. “You make me fucking crazy sometimes.” He didn’t say it like a bad thing, rather, there was a hint of wonder in his words. “Like I’ve never met anyone more difficult or with a worse attitude. You’re impossible to get along with, you turn everything into a fight. I’ve seen you call men twice your size bitches to their faces. You’re not very nice at all, the only tone you know how to use is sarcasm. But Regulus Black, you are *so good* for me. And when you said it last night, it threw me through a loop. Because yes, you can be a bitch... but most of the time you’re this soft, sweet little thing and I don’t even know what to do with that.”

“I’m not little,” Regulus mumbled, and James let out a quiet laugh.

“You are. That doesn’t mean you can’t be scary and cruel... but you aren’t to me. Not even at the beginning of this holiday. I can’t think you’re mean when I know now you don’t mean any of it.”

“I could ruin you,” Regulus protested.

“Oh, I don’t doubt that.” James squeezed Regulus’s leg. “I’m not saying you aren’t still terrifying, but *I’m* not scared.”

“Whatever,” Regulus muttered.

James smiled. His thumb went back to rubbing its circles on Regulus’s ankle. “You were right,” he said after a second. “About my dad... Sorry for being a dick to you about it.”

“It’s okay,” Regulus said softly. He was afraid he really meant it. Not only would he let James hurt him, but even worse, he’d *forgive him* for it.

Remus

Let it be clear, none of this was Remus’s fault.

Seriously, he was probably the only person in the entire house who *wasn’t* teetering on the edge of insanity. Or maybe he was, who knew?

Remus had barely been able to sleep, the weight of keeping a secret from Sirius was heavy in his chest. By the time the sun had begun to rise, Remus gave up. He slipped out of bed and headed downstairs. It was quiet, but there was a pot of coffee on the counter. That should have been a warning sign, but Remus didn't really think about it. He poured himself a cup and headed towards the front door, hoping to read and drink his coffee in peace.

Yet, when he got to the front entryway, he stopped. Through the window, Remus could see two figures.

Oh fuck, not again.

If Remus had any doubt before, he didn't now. Regulus was clearly leaning into James who had his hand on his leg. And *then*, Regulus said something softly and James leaned in, kissing him sweetly on the lips.

Okay, okay. *God*. Remus didn't know what to do. Should he confront them? Should he simply keep his mouth shut and wait for them to tell people? What was this, and how long had it been going on?

Publicly, neither of their behavior towards each other had changed. Regulus was still mean, and James still shrugged it off. They still fought; it was probably *worse* lately. So really, there was no telling if they'd been together a week or months. *Shit*, it could have been years with how close and comfortable they seemed to be. Something like that didn't just come around. Remus knew that because it was how it was with Sirius. There was a tie between them, so strong it was tangible.

Remus was beginning to feel incredibly stupid. It was so obvious he couldn't believe he'd never seen it before. James and Regulus were made for each other.

Slowly, Remus stepped backward. He hadn't been planning to put on shoes to go outside, but he opened the closet. Pulling out his shoes, Remus purposefully slammed the door, hoping the noise was loud enough to alert the pair to someone else's presence.

Hesitantly, Remus opened the front door. There was an acceptable amount of distance between Regulus and James when Remus stepped outside.

It was Regulus who looked nervous, swallowing as he met Remus's eyes. James just smiled.

“Morning, Moony.”

“Morning, Prongs,” Remus greeted in what he hoped was a casual way. “I didn't realize anyone was out here, I was coming to read.”

“Hm. I couldn't sleep, and of course, I woke Regulus up by accident. I came out here to apologize before he gets in a mood all day.” James sent Regulus an unamused look, and Remus realized with absolute horror that James was lying.

He was lying with the straightest, most casual expression Remus had ever seen.

Regulus and James had most certainly decided to go out on the porch together. They were purposefully spending time together. There was no chance that James had *just* joined Regulus, but if Remus hadn't already caught them together, he would have believed James. He lied like it was natural. He didn't flinch, didn't stutter.

Remus didn't even hear whatever sarcastic remark Regulus made in response. Remus's blood was roaring in his ears, vision tunneling. James was lying and Remus would have never known. He was filled with a sickening sense of dread. If he lied so easily, right to Remus's face... What else was James lying about? Did Remus even know his best friend?

James was a terrible liar. It was a fact. Just like how Peter got carsick or how Sirius was secretly afraid of heights. They knew this. When they pulled pranks in school, James was never left to make excuses. They all knew he'd panic and mess it up. Was that all a lie? Had James manipulated them into believing he was a bad liar? And if so, to what end?

Remus realized James was standing. "...going to get dressed." He left Remus and Regulus on the porch and Remus took a shaky breath.

"Rem?" Regulus questioned, looking up with a frown. "Is something wrong?"

"What the fuck is going on?"

Regulus looked taken aback, blinking silently in surprise. "W-what do you mean?"

"Regulus... he was lying, right? Lying right to my face as if it was nothing. What was that? How often does he do that?"

"What? No, no," Regulus protested. He wasn't as good a liar as James. Usually could hold his own, but now he was clearly off guard.

"Is something going on?"

"No, it's nothing."

More lies. "It's something else, not just..." Remus waved a hand. "Whatever you two have going on."

"We don't have anything *going on*."

"Okay," Remus shook his head, making it clear he didn't believe that. "If something is wrong ___"

"Remus, please. Everything is fine."

Remus didn't know what to say. He'd had a bad feeling for a while. Now, it was twisting in his gut.

"I don't understand what's going on..." Remus said slowly.

"No offense, but it's not your business."

"And it's yours? How the hell did it become yours, Reg?"

Regulus just shrugged. "Please let it go... Don't say anything to Sirius, okay?"

"I wouldn't," Remus said stiffly. "I don't want to worry him. He's been a mess lately."

"I know," Regulus said guiltily.

"Will you tell me something?" Remus asked after a moment's pause.

"Maybe," Regulus said, and Remus at least appreciated the honesty.

"You're probably right, and it's not my business. But if something serious *is* going on, or if you need something, will you go to someone?"

"Yeah," Regulus replied softly. "If for some reason, it came to that, I would."

"Good," Remus swallowed. "Good... sometimes I feel like everything is spiraling out of control. Like there are all these things I don't know about happening around us. I always feel like I'm missing something."

“You are,” Regulus shrugged. “So am I. There are a lot of things we probably don’t know about each other, and that’s okay. People are allowed to have secrets.”

“I feel like Sirius would disagree.”

“Because Sirius is a lot. He’s anxious and obsessive. He’s never let things go a day in his life,” Regulus didn’t speak unkindly. Despite the way he rolled his eyes, it was fond. “That’s why I keep things from him. That’s why *you* keep things from him.”

“I- I don’t—”

“Shut up, Remus. How many hours a week were you working before this trip? You were barely around. I’m not saying you have to explain why that was, but you keep things to yourself, too. That’s not a crime.”

Remus didn’t have any defense for himself.

Regulus nodded, turning away to watch the sun, now shining brightly overhead. “You’re allowed secrets,” he muttered quietly.

Remus wasn’t sure who he was trying to convince.

Chapter End Notes

cw// semi-graphic sexual content

SO... if you follow me on tumblr, you know my goal the next two weeks is to finish writing this fic... you should be happy to know that I'm almost done! This chapter is the calm before the storm... enter the shit show!!

Also, MULTIPLE people sent me that tweet that was like "slow burn but they're having sex the whole time" THANK YOU GUYS! YOU SEE ME! You get the vision. It's me vs. the Jegulus friends with benefits tag so this was my contribution.

I want you to know that before this fic I had never actually written anything close to smut in my life, I just didn't think it was my style. So know the line: "I'm asking you to ride me" almost did not make it into this chapter, and please appreciate it

Biggest thanks to @rsbarelle and @pieceofchocolate for really helping me sort out the intricacies of Regulus's POV during the sex scene. I don't think a lot of people realize just how much intense thought and care goes into every single decision you make as a writer, and sometimes I just cannot do it on my own.

There are so many little things peppered into this chapter, I hope you notice them ;)

Mwah! Until next Friday xx
-Mere

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Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

the shitshow :)

Chapter Notes

See end notes for TWs

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

James

James was pretty sure he'd loved Lily.

Maybe he hadn't known what love felt like, but what else could it be? James had been obsessed with her. He thought of her constantly from the time they were teenagers. James analyzed every word she said to him, clung to every bit of attention. When eventually, she'd finally agreed to go out with him, James had been ecstatic. He'd loved being around her. She could brighten his day with a text or ruin it if she left him on read.

That was love, wasn't it? James had always thought it was love. Lately, it didn't feel right.

“Do you want to go to the lake?”

James looked up from his laptop. The sun was shining through the window. Regulus's form was backlit. He really *did* look like an angel, like a star lighting up the space around him.

“Just us?”

“Yeah, everyone else seems occupied.”

James glanced around. He could hear some of the girls giggling in the distance, but there wasn't another person in sight.

“Okay, sure.”

James hadn't realized that Regulus was anxious about James's response until he suddenly relaxed at the agreement. That was strange, Regulus caring so much about what James did, seeking his approval and company. Something about it was just so *warm*. Like some powerful, unbearable fist squeezing his heart in his chest. It wasn't desire, James knew what desire felt like. Desire was sharper, insistent, burning under his skin. This feeling was softer. It was just as intense, but it didn't scald James's organs. It *heated* him, from the inside out. Blooming from his chest down to his fingertips. It stopped James dead in his tracks. It froze him in the moment, eyes unable to look away from Regulus's form.

It wasn't desire, but James still found himself *wanting*. It was a vague swirling feeling. He couldn't place it or properly describe the hugeness of it. James just wanted.

James kept looking at Regulus. He didn't realize how much he used to stop himself until he was allowed to look when it was just the two of them. So, he did. He watched Regulus as they walked down to the lake. A pair of birds flew overhead, and Regulus tilted his chin up to watch. The trees overhead cast speckled dots of light over Regulus's skin. He wasn't wearing a shirt, and James was entranced by the small dusting of freckles on his shoulders. Regulus was usually so pale, but the weeks in the sun had brought some color to his skin.

James had never gotten to admire Regulus's body in broad daylight before, so he took his time to now.

James loved it all. Everything about Regulus was perfect. From the planes of his muscles to the sharpness of his hip bones. His skin wasn't smooth or unblemished, but James liked that too. He liked that Regulus never squirmed away when James's fingertips touched his scars. He didn't seem self-conscious or worried that James might find the raised bumps unpleasant. He didn't like the fact that the scars were there in the first place, but there was nothing to be

done about it now. They were a part of Regulus, and James liked *every* part of him, so he liked those too. He liked the spot on the inside of Regulus's inner thighs where his skin was so pale it was almost colorless. James liked the way Regulus's lips were often too dry and cracked. He liked complaining that Regulus needed chapstick, only to kiss it off of him and make his lips *more* chapped. James liked how dark and long Regulus's lashes were, the way they framed his grey eyes. Eyes that James had once thought unreadable, but he was quickly realizing, gave a lot away. They were probably the only thing that gave Regulus away. He was good at keeping his expression blank; he'd grown up in a house where he wasn't allowed to flinch. But if you looked close enough, Regulus wasn't *nearly* as cold or unreadable as he seemed.

“Where are you?”

James took a moment to process the words. “Huh?”

Regulus was stopped in front of him now, the lake wasn't far ahead, just through the trees. James hadn't even realized how long they'd been walking.

“You seem far away.”

“Oh.” James wet his lips, eyes scanning Regulus's face for a second before shrugging. “I'm just thinking.”

“About?”

“You.”

Regulus blinked. James searched his eyes. He saw it, one of the things he was beginning to pick out. A flicker in Regulus's eyes. It looked almost like... pain. As if he were flinching internally, somewhere guarded and safe where James wasn't supposed to see it.

James could see it.

“Sometimes you look at me and I get the feeling I’m hurting you,” James had said, the night he’d fought with his dad.

Regulus’s reply had soothed James at the time. *“Sometimes I’m just hurting, it doesn’t mean it’s your fault.”*

But Regulus had never said *you’re not*.

James wanted to take Regulus by the shoulders and beg him. *What am I doing to you? Why are you looking at me like that? This isn’t supposed to be hurting you, but I know it is. Why is that?*

“Sure,” Regulus rolled his eyes. His voice was steady, but James had seen the flinch.

“I was,” James said, hurrying after Regulus as he started walking again. They broke through the trees. The sun was beating down and the lake glittered happily in its presence.

James didn’t ask Regulus what was going on. He couldn’t begin to fathom what could make him react that way, and he didn’t think Regulus would tell.

“I *was* thinking about you,” James said again as Regulus dropped his towel on the ground.

“Oh, shut up,” Regulus sighed. “Take your shirt off.”

James raised his eyebrows suggestively. “Oh well, *okay then—*”

“So, we can swim!” Regulus said in exasperation. “We are not having sex out here, that’s disgusting.”

James only laughed at Regulus's outraged expression. Because James had quickly learned that maybe Regulus *wasn't* lying most of the time. He did mean it when he said those things. It was only that his resolve crumbled fast. All James had to do was look at him a little too heatedly.

So, it was no surprise when they eventually got out of the water and Regulus wound up licking the drying water droplets off of James's abs. Regulus's resolve was weak and they did have sex. It was slow and easy, Regulus's nails scratching lines down James's back, their faces pressed together.

In the past week or two since they'd come to this friends-with-benefits arrangement, James had learned that apparently there was something between them that couldn't be sated. It didn't get old. In fact, James found himself craving Regulus more. Like a drug, the more he took, the more he needed.

Sometimes it was urgent, quick, and messy, an intrinsic, insatiable need to touch. A blazing fire consuming them together. But it wasn't always. Sometimes they were soft and sweet. James would crack dumb jokes and Regulus would try and fail to stifle his giggle, or James would get sidetracked and they'd somehow wind up talking or just kissing for long periods of time. They usually got back to it eventually, but James found he didn't even mind. The sex with Regulus was good because it was *Regulus*.

Regulus was good, everything about him was fucking perfect, sex or no sex.

The sun was warm, drying the water from their skin, but Regulus was warmer. His nose was pressed into James's cheek, his arms around his neck. Regulus sighed in contentment and James smiled.

“Was that alright?”

Regulus scoffed; the sound was muffled by James's cheek. “I think you always ask me that to stroke your ego.”

“No, I ask you because I want to make sure you’re enjoying yourself.”

“Well, my answer is always yes.”

“Doesn’t mean it always will be.”

“Oh, shut up,” Regulus muttered. James might believe he was mad if he sounded a little less fond.

“You like it.” James gently removed Regulus’s arms from his neck, rolling over onto his back and pulling Regulus with him. Regulus grumbled but he quickly molded himself into the new position comfortably. This was how they slept every night. James on his back, arm around Regulus who tucked himself into James’s chest. No one slept on the uncomfortable blow-up mattress. It remained untouched, sheets tucked in and unwrinkled. James’s pillow lived on Regulus’s bed.

Regulus was silent for long enough that James didn’t expect him to reply, so he startled slightly when the other man spoke.

“No one has ever done that before,” Regulus said softly. “Asked if it was good for me. I guess I’m used to being with people who just... don’t really care either way. Not that most of them treat me badly,” Regulus clarified, as if he could sense James’s sudden frown without looking, “but like they only chase *their* pleasure and you chase yours, and it just happens that you’re doing it together. Plus, it’s not like it’ll happen again, so there’s no need to know because it’s not like they could make notes for next time.”

James raised his hand, threading it through Regulus’s damp curls. “You...” he began uncertainly. “You don’t normally sleep with people more than once?”

James felt the way Regulus’s breath froze in his throat at the question. “I- no, I guess not. I mean, rarely. Sometimes I will twice if they’re decent and convenient enough.”

Oh, *convenience*. Of course, that was what made James an exception. Right.

James swallowed. “Hm, okay,” he said quietly. “Are you sleeping with other people right now?”

That was enough to have Regulus picking his head up from James’s chest. He lifted up onto his elbow to frown down at James. “I could if I wanted to,” he said quickly.

“Right,” James said, even though the notion brought a bitter taste to his mouth. *Mine, mine, mine*. “Of course you could, I don’t own you.”

“Yeah, you don’t,” Regulus said. He swallowed. “But I’m not sure where you think I’d get the time. You fuck me enough for three people. I wouldn’t be able to walk if I was meeting up with other people too.”

Some instinct that James wasn’t very proud of reared its head in delight. No one else was touching Regulus, only James.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” Regulus questioned.

“Yeah, angel. You can do whatever you want, but I can’t say I don’t appreciate your sole attention.”

James wasn’t sure what he used to call Regulus. Probably just his name, but James couldn’t imagine that. It wasn’t even that he solely called the other man angel, he liked his name too. *Regulus, Regulus, Regulus*. It was perfect for him. However, at this point, James called him angel just as often, that it felt like Regulus’s name too.

“That’s just because you’re insatiable,” Regulus rolled his eyes, far too dramatic for someone who was just as guilty.

James only hummed in response and Regulus flopped back down. They laid together for a long time, the silence only broken once when Regulus made sure James had reapplied sunscreen.

The sun was so warm that it was putting James to sleep. His eyes were shut when Regulus suddenly spoke. The words out of his mouth were the last thing James was expecting.

“Do you ever think about dying?”

James’s eyes flew open. He looked down at Regulus, who’d turned his head away from James to watch the water.

“Yeah... Do you?”

Regulus hummed affirmatively. “Sometimes,” he whispered. “It’s hard to forget about. But... I mean, I don’t think about killing myself anymore.”

James’s voice was very still when he responded, each breath measured. “D-did—” James exhaled slowly. “You used to?”

Regulus turned his head away from the water to look up at James. His grey eyes were wide as he blinked, and James thought he looked so strangely young. “When I was a teenager.”

“But not anymore?”

“No,” Regulus confirmed, his voice quiet. “Not anymore.”

James was almost afraid to ask, but he forced himself to anyway. “What changed?”

A few moments of silence passed. James didn't know if Regulus was considering the question or simply figuring out how to say it aloud. “I died.” The words sat there for a long moment. Cold and undeniable under the warmth of the summer day. James didn't speak, even when Regulus didn't continue. James knew he needed a moment.

Sure enough, after James had spent at least five minutes gently untangling Regulus's curls with his fingers, Regulus seemed to work up the nerve to continue.

“My heart stopped for two minutes,” Regulus said hoarsely. “That's what the doctors said. I don't remember anything really. There was no light at the end of the tunnel, I was just cold. I was cold and alone. Then I woke up, and I realized I was just as alone in my life as I was dead. I tried to talk to my parents about it and I realized they didn't fucking care. They only saw me as their heir to the Black empire, not as a son. Losing me would be like losing an asset, nothing more. They wanted to cover everything up. Hide the attack and put me back in school with the people who tried to kill me. You know how school was, all those influential families. Couldn't go around calling their kids murderers.”

Attack? Murderers?

James had never known what happened to Regulus. He'd known there'd been some sort of “accident” and that Regulus had nearly died. That was it. He was only aware of that because Regulus had shown up at Sirius's door looking as if he'd been dragged through hell. As far as James was aware, Regulus had never even talked to Sirius about it.

“So, you went to find Sirius,” James said quietly.

“I did, and here we are.”

“Here we are,” James agreed. It felt a little surreal.

Regulus must have thought so too because he let out a soft laugh; James found himself suddenly very relieved to hear it. “Not sure exactly how getting thrown off a bridge led me to sleeping with James Potter. I suppose it could be worse.”

James couldn't see Regulus's eyes, which was a shame. He would have liked to know if that was a lie.

—

Barty, Evan, and Remus were in the kitchen when James and Regulus returned.

“There's stuff in the fridge for sandwiches,” Remus told them, and James suddenly realized he was starving.

“Thanks, Moony,” James said, squeezing his friend's shoulder gratefully. Regulus paused to drop his towel on the back of an empty chair as James headed toward the counter. James watched as Regulus stole James's towel, folding it to put on the chair. No matter that he was practically dry, James smiled faintly over how meticulous he was.

He pulled out the supplies, grabbing two plates. James paused, staring at the assorted meats and cheeses. “Hey, angel?” he called absently.

“Yeah?” Regulus asked. He looked up from the towel expectantly.

“What do you want on your sandwich?”

“Oh, I don't know, James. Surprise me. I'm not picky.”

“Yes, you are,” James snorted, but he chose for Regulus anyway, deciding on what he thought the other man would like.

James turned back around to give Regulus his plate when he realized Barty was looking at James very strangely, Evan was frowning, and Remus wore a conflicted expression.

“Did I miss something?” he asked slowly, looking at the three in confusion.

Regulus looked vaguely upset, and James couldn't fathom what on earth had happened in the two minutes he'd had his back turned.

“No,” Regulus said quickly. “It's nothing.”

James hesitated before shaking his head. It probably had something to do with Barty and Evan, and those two were *not* James's business. Rather than commenting, James just pushed Regulus's plate forward. “Turkey?” he offered.

For a second, Regulus seemed taken aback. “Turkey?” he repeated.

“Yeah, do you not like it? That's what you ate in school. You used to have it every day.”

“In school? I- you mean when I was twelve?” Regulus asked incredulously.

“Well, I guess. I don't remember when it was exactly. You just ate it a lot, so I figured you liked turkey.”

“I do,” Regulus said. “I'm just surprised that you remember what I ate when I was twelve.”

James just shrugged. “I just know it was the year before you had your soup phase. Sirius thought you'd consumed so much liquid you'd start to float.”

Regulus sighed. “Why must you always bring up the least flattering memories?”

James smiled faintly, but he couldn't get the looks on everyone's faces out of his head. Had he done something?

“We're going out tonight!” Marlene called, skipping into the kitchen. “Let's get fucked up!”

James agreed with an easy smile. There hadn't been any incidents since the first time, but James still found himself a little leery. There was something raging and protective in his chest.

Once James was showered and clean, he dressed and sat himself down on the bed to watch Regulus get ready. His shirt was just slightly cropped. Enough that when he lifted his arms, James could see the tantalizing strip of skin above his waistband.

Regulus leaned over in front of the mirror to see as he carefully drew on eyeliner. “Don't look at me like that,” he muttered.

James blinked. He leaned forward, but there was no way Regulus should have been able to see him in the mirror. “How do you know how I'm looking at you?”

Regulus paused, finishing his eyeliner before capping the pen and turning around. “Because I know you, and I know you're looking at me like you want to eat me.”

James let out a vaguely inhuman sound as Regulus leaned back, and James could see the line of his hip bones disappearing beneath his trousers.

Regulus snapped. “Oi, eyes up here, Potter.”

James swallowed, tearing his eyes from Regulus's skin. “Right,” he swallowed. Looking at Regulus's wasn't any better because the eyeliner made his eyes look lighter, striking.

“*Stop*,” Regulus complained, shifting under James’s gaze. “These trousers took forever to zip up, they’re not coming off until the end of the night.”

James raised his eyebrows. “Then I suppose we’ll come back to this at the end of the night.” A pause. Regulus watched him, gaze intense. “And I *do* want to eat you.”

Regulus let out a strangled cough, turning back around. James smiled, feeling like he’d won their stand-off. Regulus started messing with his eyeliner, rubbing at it with his fingers.

James felt it. That warmth, heavy and intense in his chest. It felt like his heart was being squeezed as he watched Regulus’s frown in the mirror, a small crease between his brows. He licked his finger rubbing away a smear of makeup under his eyes. James wanted.

That was the only way James could describe it. Yet, it still wasn’t a big enough word, it didn’t encompass the overwhelming, dizzying feeling that filled him.

He didn’t realize Regulus had turned back around until their eyes met. “What?” Regulus questioned.

James didn’t know what expression was on his face. He didn’t care, he needed Regulus right now. “C’mere.”

“I already told you these trousers are not—”

“I know, come here.”

Regulus did. He stopped at James’s legs, looking down in confusion. James reached out, tugging on his arm. Regulus leaned down and James caught his face, pulling him into a kiss. It was easy and sweet. No rush, no direction. Only Regulus’s lips, warm against James’s.

He'd put on chapstick and he tasted like strawberry. James caught his bottom lip, biting gently at it and Regulus laughed against James's mouth.

"You can't complain about my lips being chapped when you're always fucking *biting*," he whined.

James responded by turning his head, dragging his teeth over Regulus's cheek.

Regulus pulled back, shoving at him. "Jamie, I'm wearing makeup! Please do not lick it off."

He didn't even seem to realize what he'd said as he dabbed at the wet spot on his cheek. James sat there in shocked silence.

Jamie.... *Jamie*?

Regulus was entirely unaware of James's state of shock because he continued talking, turning to frown in the mirror as he examined his cheek. "You know, Sirius is worried about me. He thinks I've picked up a nervous habit of biting my lips. All because *you* are a menace—" Regulus broke off as he turned and registered James's frozen state. "I- what?"

"You called me Jamie."

Regulus blinked, once and then twice. "Oh," clearly, he hadn't realized he'd done it. "Sorry, I didn't even mean to. I know you don't like that name—"

"It's okay," James said quickly. "I don't mind when it's you."

He didn't. Regulus was perfect, James would love anything he did.

The door burst open, startling them both, and James was very glad they were a respectable distance apart.

“Have you heard of knocking, Sirius?” Regulus complained.

Sirius just grinned widely. Clearly, the pre-gaming was already in full swing. “C’mon, c’mon, we’re leaving soon! Get your asses downstairs.”

--

Regulus was *dancing*.

James was standing across the room, leaning against the wall next to Remus and Lily. The two were chatting, nearly yelling over the loud thump of the music. James was staring.

Staring at Regulus who had an arm slung over Barty’s shoulder, the colored lights reflecting off his skin. Even from a distance, James could see the sweat on Regulus’s skin and the flush of his cheeks.

James didn’t just want, he *needed*. He needed Regulus Black as if he were the oxygen in his lungs or the blood in his veins.

The feeling was so intense, James almost thought he’d be sick.

What was this?

There was a hand on his arm and James turned, needing to focus on anything other than the heavy feeling in his chest. He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t think through it.

“Hi.” A woman was touching his arm, a soft smile on her lips. She was blonde, with dark skin and bright eyes. A stark opposite to Regulus. James liked the twist of her blonde curls, it was pretty.

“Do you want to buy me a drink?”

It was forward. James nodded. He didn’t like games. Not if it wasn’t Regulus.

James followed her to the bar, and they drank for a little while, exchanging small talk.

“I’m not looking for a date,” she told him, blue eyes sparkling in the dim light.

“Me either.”

“Good,” she smiled.

James didn’t even know her name, that had never mattered before. He followed her through the club, into the bathroom which was thankfully empty.

She was gorgeous, probably perfect by some people’s standards. Her lips were impossibly soft when she kissed him.

All James could think about was Regulus’s cracked lips, the taste of strawberry chapstick. She pulled at his shirt, unbuttoning his top button.

It was wrong, it was all wrong. There was no heat, no zing. Maybe James *was* broken, maybe Regulus was just an exception.

“You’re not into this,” she said, pulling back suddenly.

“I—” James didn’t know what to say. He shrugged. “No, no. Sorry, I just can’t—”

“That’s okay,” she stepped back. “I’ll see you around.”

She wouldn’t, they didn’t even know each other’s names. She left the bathroom and James took a deep breath, stepping back out into the club.

Regulus wasn’t on the dance floor anymore.

James returned to Remus, who was still in the same spot. He gave James a strange look when he returned.

“What?”

Remus frowned before shaking his head. “Nothing.” James saw him mouth the word, rather than actually hearing it through the noise of the club.

Not much later, Sirius stumbled over, incredibly drunk and ready to start a fistfight with Barty. After a near brawl, the mood shifted and they decided to call it a night.

James only caught sight of Regulus once as they were leaving, getting into another cab. His eyeliner was smeared under his eyes and James tried to catch his eye, but he didn’t look over.

When they returned to the house, Dorcas, who was barely drunk, herded Barty to bed while Evan trailed hopelessly behind. Marlene and Emmeline had a case of the giggles and they were whispering to each other in a way only girls could.

Regulus had disappeared upstairs before James even got into the house, and bidding his friends good night, James followed. He wasn’t that drunk, especially compared to his friends,

but he was tired and ready to sleep.

When James entered the bedroom, the bathroom door was slightly ajar and James could hear the water running.

He changed into comfortable clothes before collapsing on the bed. A moment later, Regulus emerged from the bathroom. His makeup was gone and his face looked slightly pink from scrubbing it.

“Do you know what happened between Barty and Sirius?” James asked.

Regulus didn't respond. He didn't even acknowledge James as he crossed the room, pulling out a t-shirt.

“Regulus?”

Still, silence. James sat up, his mouth twisting into a deep frown.

“Is something wrong—”

“What was her name?”

James paused in confusion. “Huh?”

“The girl? Was she at least a good lay.”

James's heart froze in his chest. “I- Regulus...”

“No, you know what? Never mind.”

Regulus turned away and James stood suddenly. “No, what’s your problem Regulus?”

“There’s no problem.”

“*Clearly* there is,” James scoffed. “Spit it out.”

“I just don’t see why you needed to hook up with her.”

“When did I say I hooked up with her?”

“So you disappeared to have a heart-to-heart?” Regulus finally faced James. His eyes were blazing in cold anger. “I’m not fucking stupid, the least you could do is be honest.”

“Why is this even an issue? Did we not have a conversation *today* about how you were allowed to sleep with other people if you wanted? How come different rules apply to me?”

“I never said you weren’t allowed to—“

“Except you’re clearly pissed!” James said, his voice rising.

“I only asked a question! You’re the one who’s lying to me!”

“I’m not lying! I didn’t hook up with her. I kissed her and left because I wasn’t feeling it!”

“Why?” Regulus spat out. “Why would you do that?”

James scowled, taking a step forward. “You’re such a dick, Regulus! So you’d be mad if I slept with her and you’d be mad if I didn’t?”

“I didn’t say that, I just don’t understand! Why are you doing this to me?!”

“What are you talking about? I’m not doing anything to you—“

“You’re destroying me!”

Silence.

A beat, then two. James didn’t know what to say because there were *tears* in Regulus’s eyes.

Regulus wiped angrily at his face, his expression anguished. “You’re so fucking dumb! You’re a hypocrite! If I’d been the one fucking a stranger, you’d be livid! It bothers me, is that what you want me to say, James? I don’t want you sleeping with her!”

“I didn’t sleep with her!”

“*Why?*” Regulus yelled, his voice sharp in the quiet of the house.

James didn’t have an answer. Because it hadn’t felt right. Because maybe there was something wrong with him and it was only different with Regulus. Maybe because James had made an irreversible mistake and he’d never be able to even kiss anyone else without thinking of Regulus Black.

“I don’t know—“

“I do!”

“Regulus—“

“You don’t like girls, James! We’re not just blowing off steam, this isn’t just a convenient arrangement! You like men, and you’re too much of a fucking coward to admit it!”

“That’s not true!”

“Really?” Regulus sneered, cruel and drawn out. “Do you pretend I’m a woman when you fuck me? *Or* did you pretend that she was me?”

“I didn’t fuck her! How many times do I have to tell you that? You think you’re special, Regulus? You’re not! What, because I *opened up* to you, or let you tell me what to do? You don’t know me! You don’t know anything about me, so get out of my fucking business once and for all!”

James pushed past Regulus, yanking the bedroom door open.

“I do know you! I do, and I would give anything not to!”

“I would give it too! You should have learned to mind your business. I can’t fucking stand you, Regulus!” James slammed the door in Regulus’s face.

He paused in the hallway, heart pounding as he realized he had an audience. Sirius and Remus were in the hall, blinking in shock.

There was a beat of silence. James wanted to speak, but he didn’t know what to say.

“Sorry, we just...” James trailed off. *Just what?*

Sorry, Sirius, we just had a fight because we've been sleeping together behind your back and I didn't fuck some girl tonight.

Sorry, Sirius, I think about your brother 24/7.

Sorry, there's this hole in my chest. I swear I wasn't born with it, but I can't remember what it was like to be anyone else.

James just shrugged instead of finishing his sentence.

He thought Sirius would be angry with him. Instead, he took a deep breath. He suddenly seemed very sober.

“Come on, Prongs.”

“*Huh?*”

“You can sleep in my room tonight.”

Remus shot Sirius a tentative look before nodding.

James swallowed. He didn't really understand what was going on, but he followed Sirius to his bedroom anyway. They used to share a bed a lot when they were young, so it wasn't uncomfortable, but as soon as he laid down, James missed Regulus.

Remus sat on the edge of the bed. No one spoke.

Chapter End Notes

TW// vague sexual content, death, suicidal ideation

Hi!! I told you guys shit was going to GO DOWN. I was giggling while I checked through this chapter this morning because I was so excited.

Remember when I said to trust me about why James wasn't freaking out yet? Please allow me to talk my shit!! He was in complete denial. James couldn't bring up this point himself, he couldn't even consider himself gay. He'd sooner assume he's not attracted to people sexually than admit that he might simply be gay. James is a severe victim of comphet. Before now, the thought had never crossed his mind aside from the one moment he got offended and insisted he DOES like girls. So like Regulus knows, it's obvious to him but James hadn't even considered it. You can't freak out about something when you've made little mind boxes and locked it all up. NOW we get into him freaking the fuck out.

Anyway, I want to thank you guys because I recently got an influx of brand new readers because of TSITP au and it made me realize how rare and special it is that so many of you leave really detailed thoughtful comments on this fic week after week. Like trust me, if you've been around for a while I know who you are. So many of you I know your names and we interact across multiple social media platforms and ily, that's special to me. (also, if you've chatted with me and your ao3 is different or you have multiple different usernames across social media lmk so I can recognize you!)

Until next Friday!! (or much sooner, if you're reading my million WIPs because I updated like four different fics this week??)

(also edit: I'm not going to get into the topic of what a "favorite person" in BPD is because it's going to come up specifically in the next chapter, but you may be interested in looking it up!)

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Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Remus

Remus had been walking around with a sense of dread.

He didn't want to look at James differently, but he couldn't help it. Every time they interacted, Remus couldn't help but wonder what was a lie. How would Remus know? Apparently, James had been purposely manipulating them into thinking he was a bad liar, just so he could lie more easily. How could Remus trust he knew his friend at all? What if the person he'd known and loved half his life wasn't even real?

Remus could feel everything crumbling down around him. One domino hitting the next and he was the only one who noticed. Everyone else seemed oblivious or too caught up in their own problems, but Remus could feel it.

He was sitting at the table when Regulus and James walked in. There wasn't anyone around who'd ask them what they'd been doing at the lake alone together. Evan frowned slightly as they walked in but didn't say a word. Barty didn't look concerned in the least.

James headed to the counter to make himself a sandwich, and Regulus paused at the table, messing with his towel.

A moment later, James spoke. "Hey, angel?" he called absently.

And *then*, Regulus answered. As if it were natural. As if James Potter called him angel often enough that he responded on instinct. "Yeah?" Regulus asked. He looked up from the towel as if nothing was amiss.

“What do you want on your sandwich?”

“Oh, I don’t know, James, surprise me. I’m not picky.”

James said something else, but Remus didn’t really hear. Regulus turned back towards them. He froze as he realized Remus, Barty, and Evan were all staring at him.

What the fuck? Evan mouthed at Regulus, but neither he nor Barty seemed exactly surprised. They must have already known...

Regulus frowned, glancing at James’s back and then to his friends again. Remus saw the moment he registered what had happened. Regulus froze as Evan shook his head in disapproval.

Remus still didn’t understand. What were James and Regulus, how many people knew? He’d tried to watch them since he’d first caught them together, but most of the time they seemed the same as ever. It was hard to catch anything between them.

James turned around and seemed to realize there was a silent face-off going on, but Regulus quickly brushed him off. Oh, so Regulus was aware that Barty, Evan, and Remus all knew... but did James? Or did he believe them all to be in the dark?

It didn’t seem right. The entire relationship felt like a disaster waiting to happen.

Remus’s belief was solidified that night when he watched James go off with some girl. Regulus was in the crowd, watching the pair go with an expression that could only be described as anguish.

Remus wanted to tell Sirius. He wanted to beg for help, but he didn’t.

Sirius had been anxious lately. It wasn't the worst he'd ever been, but it was the worst in a long time, which wasn't a good sign. Remus was pretty sure it had something to do with everything changing so suddenly. Not to mention losing Effie the year before. And it definitely didn't help that for nearly four months before their holiday... Sirius and Remus had been fighting. As in screaming matches, slamming doors, sleeping-on-the-sofa fighting.

They'd agreed on a truce during the holiday, but Remus knew as soon as the topic was brought back up again they'd go back to the way it was before.

See, Sirius wanted to move. Not far, but to a bigger place, somewhere they could build their adult lives together... and Remus was broke. He couldn't afford to live anywhere else, he could barely pay rent for their little flat near school. Sirius thought the simple solution was that *he* just pay for it, but Remus hated that idea. So they'd fought, back and forth, talking in circles for months. They'd come up with no solutions or compromises.

Every time Remus would think they were getting close, Sirius would sigh and say, "*Fine, we'll just stay in this flat!*" which would send them into another round of screaming.

"But you don't want to stay!"

"You don't want to leave!"

"I can't afford to leave!"

"Remus, I told you a million times I'll pay for it—"

And round and round they went. It got even worse when Remus discovered that Sirius had been secretly paying part of Remus's rent. They'd only managed a truce by pretending the problem didn't exist.

So, Remus couldn't dump any of the things he'd learned on Sirius. Even though it was the only thing he wanted to do.

On the way home from the club, Sirius had sobered up fairly well. He only seemed a little out of it as they started to get ready for bed. He'd had some fight with Barty, but he wouldn't explain over what.

Sirius pulled on a pajama shirt, turning to Remus. He opened his mouth to say something but froze at a sound in the distance.

Remus turned his head, brow furrowing. "Is that..."

"Yelling," Sirius confirmed, his eyes wide.

The voices got louder. Remus couldn't make out what they were saying, but it was suddenly very clear who it was.

"Fuck, it's James and Reg," Sirius cursed. James and Regulus, the ticking time bomb, even to those who didn't know the details of their relationship.

Remus and Sirius quickly hurried out of the room and down the hall. The bedroom door was yanked open suddenly and James stepped out, looking behind him.

"...know you!" Regulus was saying. "I do, and I would give anything not to!"

"I would give it too! You should have learned to mind your business. I can't fucking stand you, Regulus!" James slammed the door in Regulus's face.

Remus and Sirius just stood there. James seemed to register they were there and he stopped. He looked furious and irritated. The only time Remus had ever seen him that mad was when he was talking to his dad.

The irritation didn't fade, rather, James's face went strangely blank. "Sorry, we just..." James trailed off, shrugging helplessly.

"Come on, Prongs," Sirius spoke suddenly.

"*Huh?*" James asked.

"You can sleep in my room tonight."

Remus looked to Sirius hesitantly. Last time, Sirius hadn't been happy with James for upsetting Regulus. This time he didn't seem angry exactly, just subdued. Remus slowly nodded his approval.

Once in Remus and Sirius's room, they sat in silence. Remus didn't know what to say, and it seemed Sirius didn't either.

When James finally spoke, he said the last combination of things Remus expected.

"I left my pillow." A beat. "Regulus thinks I'm gay."

Sirius bolted upright at the second part. "*What?*"

James didn't react, just continued blinking up at the ceiling.

"I- why would Regulus think you're gay?" Sirius tried again when James didn't respond.

"Cause he thinks he knows everything," James muttered bitterly. "Stupid fucking bastard."

“*Hey*,” Sirius said, his eyes narrowing. “That’s my brother.”

James winced. “I know... I don’t mean that,” he said, his tone suddenly soft. “I don’t mean it. He’s just so difficult. So... *Regulus*.”

“I know,” Sirius said quietly.

Remus didn’t know if he should stay. This felt like a conversation that belonged to James and Sirius, yet, Remus was the one who knew the truth.

He didn’t speak, but he didn’t move either.

“What if I was different?” James whispered. “I- I can’t be. I don’t want anything else to be wrong with me.”

Anything else?

Remus wasn’t sure if Sirius noticed that part.

“Being gay isn’t wrong,” Sirius said slowly.

“I- I know. That’s not what I mean,” James mumbled. “*I* don’t want to be wrong. But I must be... be *something*. I thought it was normal, to not feel anything with girls. No zing, no heat, *nothing*. Then I thought I was broken. Now, I think... I don’t know. I don’t know why he had to say that. Everything was fine, it was fine. Now it’s ruined.”

James seemed out of it. His voice was low and hurt, his words spilling out in a manner Remus had never heard before. He hadn’t realized how controlled James usually was until he

wasn't. Sirius seemed to be thinking something similar, because he was biting down hard on his lower lip.

“Nothing is ruined, you’re not broken.”

“You don’t know the things I’ve done.” James’s voice was hard, certain. There was a pause. “I need my pillow,” he mumbled.

Sirius glanced to Remus who stood quickly. “I’ll get it.”

He left them to it as Sirius began to speak, his voice low. Remus closed the door, hiding them away in the room. Even though Remus knew the truth about James and Regulus, James didn’t know that. It felt like a conversation that needed to happen between James and Sirius.

Remus headed down the hall, knocking gently on Regulus’s door. There was no answer and Remus knew there was a high chance of Regulus biting his head off, but still, he pushed it open anyway.

Regulus was sitting on the edge of his bed, head in his hands.

“Reg?” Remus asked quietly.

Regulus didn’t respond, but he didn’t tell Remus to leave either.

Slowly, Remus shut the door behind him, sitting down on the bed next to Regulus. There was no pillow on James’s bed. They were both on Regulus’s.

“Hey,” Remus said, his voice hesitant. He didn’t know if Regulus was about to lash out.

He sniffed.

No, *fuck*, he was crying. Remus had never seen Regulus cry before.

“It’s stupid,” Regulus choked out, his words muffled by his hands.

“I doubt that.”

Regulus lifted his head. His eyes were red and there were tear tracks on his cheek. He looked at Remus for a second before turning his head to stare at the wall. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Of course.”

“You can’t tell anyone,” Regulus stressed.

“Okay.”

Regulus swallowed. He didn’t look away from the wall. “I’ve been in love with James since I was a pre-teen. Not in the way kids fall in love. You know, where they think it’s love, but really, it’s just infatuation or obsession? It wasn’t like that. It never faded, even when I realized he wasn’t who I thought he was. Actually, I think really getting to know him made it *worse*. I can’t imagine there being anything or anyone else for me. This is it. He’s probably the love of my life, and the worst part is, logically I knew this would happen. I knew he’d never feel the same, I knew he’d never choose me, but I- Remus, I’m so stupid. I really thought that eventually, I could make him love me.”

Regulus wasn’t typically one to offer up his heart, so this was new ground. For a second, Remus felt overwhelmed. He had no idea Regulus felt that way, much less that he had for so long. As soon as the shock began to wear off... Remus just felt sad. God, Regulus had been in love with James, all this time? He’d had to watch girl after girl come parading through their lives.

“I’m sorry, Reg.”

“Me too,” Regulus whispered, and he was crying again.

Regulus was leery about touch, but not usually with Remus. He held out his hand in an offer and Regulus instantly grabbed at it. Remus wrapped an arm around his shoulder, tucking him close as he cried.

It reminded Remus of the first time he and Regulus had formed a tentative relationship. Remus had seen Sirius making out with some girl, and Remus had taken off in a heartbroken rage. Regulus had been the one to find him, sitting down by his side. He’d been so young and uncertain, but when he spoke his voice was steady.

“He’ll figure it out eventually.”

“Will he?” Remus sniffed, looking down at his feet.

“Yes, I know my brother. It may take some time, but he’ll get there.”

Remus wished he knew what to say now. He didn’t know if James would figure it out. If he felt the same. He’d never given any implication of it, but maybe Remus didn’t know James Potter at all.

“I—” Remus began carefully. “Do you want to tell me what happened?”

“Tonight or in general?”

“Either, both, neither,” Remus shrugged. “Whatever you want.”

Regulus sniffed. He didn't speak. Enough time passed that Remus figured his answer was neither. When he finally opened his mouth, it nearly startled Remus.

"I don't know what happened... He started looking," Regulus whispered into the silence. "He'd never spared me a second glance and suddenly, he wouldn't look away. It was stupid, but he kept getting closer and I kept letting him. I felt like... we understood each other," Regulus squeezed his eyes shut, letting out a shaky breath. "Then I slept with him. He said he was straight. He got incredibly mad if I implied otherwise. I tried to stand my ground and not let it happen again, but I failed miserably. We kept sleeping together, like *constantly*. I thought at first, I could get it out of my system, but he touches me like he cares, too. James, he—" Regulus broke off swallowing. "He thinks he's this person he isn't. He sees himself in all these shades of darkness, but it's not true. He's the warmest, brightest person I've ever known. No one has ever treated me like that. Like I deserve to be cherished. So, the sex made it worse, because now I know what it would feel like if he loved me. Because I'm just his fucking *sexuality crisis*."

"How long has this been going on?" Remus questioned softly.

"Just since the beginning of the holiday, not *even*. We- you know... actually hooked up a few weeks in."

That was it? When Remus had seen them on the porch together, they'd seemed so close and comfortable that Remus had been entertaining ideas of this relationship spanning months at the very least. A paranoid part of him had wondered if it'd been years.

"Barty and Evan know?"

"Yeah. I mean, they've always known how I feel about him... I told them when we first hooked up. I think Barty knows I didn't stop sleeping with James like I swore I would. Evan might suspect now with the whole..." he trailed off, voice going quiet, "*Angel* thing."

"He calls you that a lot?" Remus asked.

“More than he calls me my name,” Regulus said, his voice strangled. “Stupid fucker. Who the hell calls their fuck buddy *pretty angel*? Why does he do this to me?”

Remus didn't dare speak the tentative thought that was creeping at the edges of his mind. He didn't understand James, in fact, he suddenly felt like everything he knew had been flipped upside down. So, Remus wasn't going to make any assumptions, but he couldn't help but think that people *didn't* call their fuck buddies angel. Whatever James was feeling, it didn't seem like Regulus was nothing to him.

Rather than speaking, Remus just rubbed Regulus's shoulder in an attempt at comfort.

They sat together for a long time. Until Regulus's face was dry and his sniffles had ceased.

Regulus turned, grabbing one of the pillows. “This is James's,” he said quietly.

“Okay, I'll bring it to him.”

“Okay,” Regulus repeated softly. “Uh- can you ask Sirius not to come in here? I don't want him to know, I don't know how to explain this—”

“He won't be happy, but I'll tell him.”

“Thank you, Remus.”

Remus took a deep breath, standing and reaching out to squeeze Regulus's shoulder. “I'm going to come back and sleep in here tonight.”

“You don't have to—”

“I’m going to come back,” Remus repeated firmly, and Regulus didn’t argue any further. He just nodded silently.

Remus couldn’t shake the feeling that things were only going to get worse from there.

James

The light was wrong.

James knew that even before he opened his eyes. Normally it came through the windows on James's left. It was on the wrong side now.

No, no, no, no.

James bolted upright, panic rising in his throat.

He wasn’t in his room. He wasn’t in the hospital, either.

It was silent, no beep of machines, no squeak of shoes on tile. The light was on the wrong side, but it was coming from the window. Sirius was fast asleep next to him.

Carefully, so as not to wake Sirius, James crawled out of bed. It was still early. Considering how drunk everyone had been the night before, chances were people wouldn’t start getting up until noon. That was good. James needed to get out. He needed to do *something*. His blood was itching in his veins, a scream building at the back of his throat.

James wanted to tear out his hair, to cut the skin from his body—

“Potter.”

James stopped.

Barty was standing in the hallway, his hair was messy and his clothes crumpled. There were dark shadows under his eyes. They scrutinized each other for a moment before Barty let out a sigh.

“Come on.”

“Huh?”

“We’re going for a walk.”

“Why?” James whispered.

“Because I’m feeling vaguely homicidal, and based on the look on your face, I’m going to guess you’re either homicidal or suicidal. I could take a wild guess, but I’ll spare you. So, because I don’t fancy anyone dying in this house and ruining our holiday, we’re going for a walk.”

“A walk won’t fix anything.”

“It’s not about fixing things. It’s about making it past this moment.”

The words hit something delicate in James’s chest. Barty didn’t wait for him, just turned and headed down the stairs. James wasn’t sure why, but he followed.

Barty was waiting on the porch when James stepped outside. He didn't spare James a glance, but he knew Barty had been waiting for him.

James didn't know what to say as they fell into step, side by side. He probably should have kept his mouth shut because he and Barty were not the best of friends. He didn't.

"Are you and Evan fighting again? Is that why you're homicidal?"

Much to James's surprise, Barty let out an amused laugh. "Oh, among other things. Relationships are just..." he waved a hand in the air, "a lot. They're a lot for everyone, but it's even worse for me. I get stupid and possessive, and it doesn't help that Evan wouldn't know an emotion if it hit him over the head. But it could be worse."

"Could it?" James asked curiously.

"Oh yeah," Barty snorted. "My ex, he was also my favorite person and that was like, an absolute shit show. He was awful to me, and I was awful to him. Honestly, it's embarrassing to even think about it now. He controlled every aspect of my life, not even because he was abusive in some way, but because I let him. I wanted him to."

"Your *favorite person*?" James repeated in confusion. "What do you mean?"

Barty stopped suddenly and James almost ran into him as he spun around. "Potter..." he began incredulously. "Do you know *anything* about BPD?"

"Why should I?" James said, bristling.

Barty raised an eyebrow. He didn't say *I know what you are*. James heard it anyway. He wasn't sure how or when Barty had come to this conclusion exactly, but it was clear he had.

“I feel like most people agree that it’s important to be educated on these things. But whatever, I’m not going to bother opening your fucked up can of worms when you’re clearly going to rage at me. So, moving on,” he shook his head. “A favorite person is like, somebody you get incredibly attached to and obsessed with. I guess a lot of times it is a romantic partner, but not always. There’s this girl in my DBT group whose favorite person was like a co-worker that only thought of *her* casually, but she was obsessed with the guy. It’s like, that person is the most important, you want to spend all your time with them. A text can make your day, being left on read can send you into a rage. It’s generally a very unhealthy relationship, simply because all your self-worth rides on them giving you an amount of love they’ll never be able to offer. Because it’s never good enough, you know? You live and breathe for them, and they can’t do the same for you. Because the disorder amplified those feelings, unless you’re their favorite person too, it’s impossible to feel exactly the same. They’ll never deliver what you need. But you’re obsessed, infatuated, dizzy with the need to be around them.”

“I thought that was love.”

Barty stopped, mouth falling open in something akin to horror. They stared at each other for a long moment. “*Holy shit, Potter.*” He sounded almost *sad*. “No, it’s not. It’s BPD.”

“Oh.”

“Look,” Barty sighed, and despite his clear exasperation, James had never heard him sound so compassionate. “I’m not saying you can’t love your favorite person, but love isn’t supposed to be like that. It can be very difficult to build healthy relationships with BPD, but it’s possible. When you’re in love, it’s warmer, softer. It’s like you look at them and you could just look forever. Like every little thing, even the things you hate, you like anyway because it’s a part of them. When it’s real love, you’d feel that way unconditionally. Even if they didn’t love you, even if they don’t offer whatever it is you’re craving or seeking.”

Oh.

No, no, no.

James remembered that feeling in his chest, the intensity, the warmth when he looked at Regulus. He remembered his relationship with Lily. The way James’s sun set and rose for her. How her attention or lack thereof, could destroy or uplift his mental state. If that wasn’t

love... then what the fuck did that mean? He thought he'd been in love with her. Surely, he couldn't be gay if he'd been in love with Lily. What did it mean if he *hadn't* been?

"I'm going to tell you something," Barty began when James didn't respond. "I shouldn't, it's not my place. It's definitely wrong of me, but... but I see something in you. Can you believe that *I'm* the only one who wanted to give you a chance? Not sure how the hell I became team Potter."

"What are you talking about?" James choked out.

"Regulus," Barty said simply, and James stiffened. "He has feelings for you."

No.

No, no, no.

"What, no. *No*, he doesn't. Look, whatever you think—"

"No, I don't think, *I know*. He told me once, before I even met you, years ago."

"*Years?*"

Barty nodded. "He's in love with you, he has been since he was like twelve or something."

The world stopped turning.

That couldn't be true.

Because *feelings were* one thing. Regulus wasn't a robot, they were friends on some level and cared about each other. It would be easy for someone on the outside to misconstrue things. *That* plus the sex could be mistaken for romantic feelings.

But since Regulus *was twelve*? No, no that wasn't—it *couldn't* be true.

“No—“

“Listen to me Potter,” Barty swiftly cut him off. “I don't know what demons you're grappling with. I don't know or care about your sexuality, it doesn't matter to me. But you know what *does* matter? Regulus. Regulus Black means the world to me, and if you tell him I said that, I will kill you. He wasn't supposed to sleep with you again because he's in love with you and it's killing him, but he *did*. Evan thinks you're the bad guy, but you know what? I wager you care a lot for Regulus. More than you know what to do with.”

“But I'm not...”

“*What?*” Barty stepped forward. “Gay? Say it. It's not a bad word.”

“I'm not gay,” James whispered.

“Okay, maybe you aren't. But if you were, so what?”

“What do you mean?” James scoffed.

“I mean, *so what?* What happens? What changes? None of our friends will care, the only straight person in this house is Emmeline. I know your dad won't mind either. No one will judge you. The only one who cares is *you*.”

“You don't understand!” James said, his voice rising. He didn't try to stop it. There was no one around and Barty didn't even flinch. “Everything changes! I had this idea my entire life.

The stupid two-story house with a dog, two kids, and a wife, I can't just give up what I've always imagined for myself!"

"You could have that with a man, too," Barty shrugged. "But which is more important to you, the house and the wife, or Regulus Black?"

James opened his mouth and then promptly closed it. Barty watched him for a second before sighing tiredly. "Just think about it, Potter... c'mon let's go back. I was not made to give anyone relationship advice, and I may punch you if we keep talking."

They fell into silence, the only sound the crunch of their footsteps as they walked through the trees.

James thought of Regulus. The way his face scrunched as he was waking up in the morning. The way his lips twitched when he was trying not to smile at one of James's stupid jokes. He thought of the way Regulus touched and let himself *be* touched. The hand he was always holding out, the gap he tried to bridge. So unlike Regulus Black, who was never one to reach out first. But for James, he was always trying. He was sharp and jagged but sweet and warm when James caught him at the right moment. His brain was always spinning, even when he was quiet. So often, he'd suddenly speak. It would seem out of the blue, but James knew he'd been sitting on whatever it was for a while.

Regulus. With his dark eyes and freckles. The soft pink of his lips and the low timbre of his voice. The rasp of it on the occasions when James could make him beg. The way he didn't always know the right thing to say, but he tried anyway. How he was never afraid to push James, but always quick to apologize despite his stubbornness. He didn't let James bury himself in lies. He didn't even tolerate the mask James tried to put on. Regulus was the first person aside from James's parents to ever really see past it.

Regulus, who James always got the feeling he was hurting...

Regulus, Regulus, Regulus.

James was picturing the house and the kids now. He wasn't thinking of some faceless woman. There was no woman at all, just Regulus.

"I hope you're thinking about it," Barty said quietly when they got back to the house.

James didn't reply, but he was pretty sure the look on his face gave him away. Remus was downstairs already, but no one else was around. James knew what that meant.

He didn't even look at his friend as Remus opened his mouth to speak. Barty stopped him. James heard their voices conversing in whispers as he headed up the stairs, but he didn't catch what they were saying.

He threw open his bedroom door. Regulus sat upright on the bed, eyes going wide.

James shut the door behind him.

They stared at each other. A second passed, then another.

Neither of them breathed.

Finally, James exhaled. It came out shaky as he opened his mouth.

"Are you in love with me?"

Hehehe >:))))

On A SERIOUS NOTE. I feel so good today guys! Ty to everyone who was so beautiful and wonderful towards me in response and it seriously reminded me why and how much I love writing these fics. So I won't be too sappy, but I'm here to stick around.

I think I've caught up with everyone's asks, and messages. I'm sorry replying to comments was too overwhelming so I had to admit defeat, but I'll try to do better this week. ALSO if you really want my attention you can send me an ask on tumblr or message me literally anywhere, and I'm much better with replying that way <33

I'll tell you a secret... PPP is nearly done ;) (final chapter count will be up soon) and my next big fic is actually one of my fave, most exciting things I've ever done. I cannot wait to share! if you want to see me vague posting about it constantly, feel free to follow me on twitter ;) because I can't shut up about it. (don't be intimidated by the priv, I accept all requests!)

Xx
Mere

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Part II: you're losing me

Chapter Summary

“Are you in love with me?”

Chapter Notes

see end notes for the TWs

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dorcas

Dorcas had decided that she was personally going to hunt down every single straight woman who said, “*oh, it'd be so much easier if I liked girls.*” She was going to force them to spend a day with Marlene McKinnon as their girlfriend and see how they felt then.

See, because Marlene didn't really do communication. If there was something wrong, this meant she'd stew in silence until Dorcas finally got it out of her. So, Dorcas knew something was going on. Not just with Marlene actually, *with everyone*. Lily was definitely fighting with her sister, Sirius and Remus had been secretly having some spat before the summer. Evan and Barty had been on the edge of a breakup practically since they'd gotten together. Regulus had something going on, probably to do with his long-term crush on James, who in turn seemed to be going through something regarding school and his dad. Dorcas knew, she just didn't really care.

Maybe that made her a terrible person. It wasn't that she didn't care about her friends, she just didn't think it was her business. It was shit they needed to figure out, and honestly, Dorcas was tired of drama. She was just exhausted. That led to the Marlene thing. For *years* Dorcas had fought for their relationship. She'd always been the one getting Marlene to communicate, forcing her to admit when something was bothering her. Dorcas was tired. So,

when she'd first noticed Marlene acting strangely, she made a vow not to do anything until Marlene took the step this time.

Marlene didn't. She didn't say a word, and Dorcas felt the distance growing between them. And the more it did, the further they pulled apart, the more Dorcas realized she didn't need Marlene. She'd never lived her life without the other girl, they'd gotten comfortable that way. But suddenly, Dorcas was wondering if she'd been missing out. If there was something better out there.

That *definitely* made her a terrible person.

Now, Dorcas felt stuck. She'd never really considered life without Marlene. Now, she was beginning to wonder if maybe it was better.

Dorcas had dreams and ambitions. It wasn't like she didn't have goals, her dreams were simply different from Marlene's. That didn't mean they were any less important or valid. Just because Dorcas eventually wanted to move back to their hometown, didn't make her an enemy of feminism.

Sometimes, women wanted small things, soft things. And Dorcas wasn't soft in the slightest, but she wanted to move back home once she was done with school. She wanted to buy a house in the place she'd grown up and raise a child. Wanting those things didn't make her soft, but even if they did, Dorcas was okay with that. She didn't care what people thought of her.

Still, the surprise frustrated her. "*Oh, you're going to be a vet?*" People always asked. "*You don't strike me as an animal person.*"

Why? Dorcas wanted to grab them by the shoulders and shake them. *Why? Is it because I'm a Black woman? Because I don't smile enough? Because I'm not a hyper-feminine lesbian? Is it because I know what I want and that scares you?*

Why can't I be strong, ambitious, and take no shit? Why can't I love animals and want kids and a house with a white picket fence? Why are the two mutually exclusive?

Dorcas Meadows didn't care what people thought of her, because she knew who she was. But what she *did* care about was being put in a box. She hated being condensed into bite-sized pieces that made sense to the people around her. She could be a million different things at once. People weren't one-dimensional, but the world looked at her as if she could not possibly be more than one thing.

When Dorcas had come out, her mother had looked her up and down and shaken her head. "*Don't make this life harder on yourself.*" As if Dorcas didn't already know she was competing in the fucking minority Olympics. As if she didn't know the kind of danger her simple existence brought.

Let me exist! Let me be loud and flawed and quiet and soft. Let me be whoever the fuck I want to be.

And Dorcas loved Marlene. Her girlfriend had never tried to force Dorcas into a box. She never spoke over Dorcas or tried to act like she could understand Dorcas's experience. Marlene had always known Dorcas's dreams, and always supported her in going after them... Dorcas liked that, she liked that there were a few people in the world who let her be whatever she wanted. *But*, Marlene had never expressed whether she wanted to be a part of those dreams or not. Dorcas had never asked, because what happened when she finally asked Marlene if she wanted kids? What would happen if Marlene said no? Was that that? No more Marlene and Dorcas. Because how could they be compatible if they wanted different things out of life?

They were ending. Dorcas could feel it in her bones, and she loved Marlene, she didn't want to acknowledge the end yet. Because sometimes, love just wasn't enough. And at the end of the day, it wouldn't create a future for them.

"What?" Dorcas demanded when Barty walked in. No hello, no preamble. Barty was the last person who needed to be coddled.

"Nothing," Barty shrugged, sitting down on the sofa next to her.

“*Something*. You were trying to fight Sirius last night and now you’ve been out all morning. Where did you go?”

“For a walk.”

“A walk...” she repeated suspiciously.

“With Potter.”

“With *Potter*?”

“Are you going to repeat everything I say?” Barty rolled his eyes.

“I wouldn’t if you were saying sensible things.”

“Potter and I are friends now.”

“*Friends*?” Dorcas said, because Barty was still saying senseless bullshit, and the repetition was her right.

“Friend-*ly*. Friend-adjacent. We understand each other, I guess.”

“I don’t see how that’s the case,” Dorcas frowned, because she knew Barty and she knew James. They were nothing alike.

Yet, Barty didn’t dish up any details; he simply shrugged. *Oh shit*, they were actually friends. Otherwise, Barty wouldn’t be making some strange attempt at protecting James’s privacy.

“Okay,” Dorcas said, because she minded her business, thank you very much.

There was the sound of footsteps and Emmeline walked in. She was holding a cup of coffee and her long hair spilled silkily down her back. She didn’t look as if she’d just woken up. Her hair was untangled, and even her pajamas were cute—plaid pink shorts and a lacy tank top. Who was she trying to impress?

“Morning,” she greeted softly. Emmeline’s voice was soft and sweet, Dorcas wondered if it was an act, or if she actually spoke like that. Dorcas didn’t think she could talk like that even if she wanted to.

Marlene *loved* Emmeline. It was annoying. Always “*Em said...*” or “*Emmeline was telling me...*” Like she was some goddess that graced the earth. Dorcas didn’t see the appeal. Emmeline was too nice, too sweet, there was just something about her Dorcas didn’t like.

“Hey, Emmeline,” Barty greeted. Dorcas didn’t think they were friends, but clearly Barty didn’t mind her. You’d know if Barty didn’t like you.

Emmeline smiled before stepping through the room and up the stairs, probably to find Peter.

There was a moment of silence, and when she was out of earshot, Dorcas frowned. “What do you think of her?”

Barty’s brow furrowed. “Emmeline?” he questioned. “I dunno, she seems alright.”

“You don’t get a weird vibe?”

Barty shot Dorcas a look, that coming from Barty Crouch Jr., was nothing short of scolding. “No. She’s fine.”

“I just think she’s too perfect.”

“Really?” Barty seemed disappointed in Dorcas as he stood from the sofa suddenly. “You know what, you bring this up with Evan or Lily or something, I’m not going to be the one to give you this lecture. But Emmeline’s fine, she’d been nothing but nice. Maybe you should take a long hard look at yourself and consider why you *really* might not like her.”

Barty left her there, and Dorcas wondered at what point life had passed her by. When did Barty become someone who was scolding *her* rather than Dorcas knocking sense into him? And what the hell was he on about anyway?

Emmeline

She was pretty sure Dorcas had thought Emmeline was out of earshot. She wasn’t.

Emmeline had been convinced their entire trip that Dorcas didn’t particularly like her, and now it was obvious.

It was funny how quickly a person reverted back to being thirteen. In her soul, that’s probably who she always was. Thirteen-year-old Emmeline Vance, with her braces and glasses. The weird kid, the homeschooled kid.

She spent her entire life trying to figure out how to conform. How to not come across as weird or out of place. She learned to be pretty and put together. How to smile with just enough teeth, how to eat and work out and dress to be seen as attractive. Emmeline only wanted to be normal.

“I just think she’s too perfect.”

Was that how people saw her? Fake, shallow? A plastic doll with her hair done up and her soul non-existent.

“What’s wrong?” Peter asked when Emmeline shut the door to their bedroom.

She didn’t say anything at first. Just leaned against the closed door, a knot building in her throat.

“Uh- do—” she swallowed around the tears which threatened to spill out. “Do you think I come across as ‘too perfect’? Am I unlikable?”

“Absolutely not.” Peter’s answer was instant. “You’re kind and sweet, very likable and friendly. You come across as put together on first glance, but there’s nothing wrong with taking care of those sorts of things.”

Emmeline nodded numbly.

“Why?” Peter asked slowly.

Emmeline took a shaky breath. She straightened, setting her cup down and turning for the closet.

“Emmeline…”

Emmeline didn’t look up, pulling out a skirt. She paused. It was pretty nice, she liked nice things. She liked to dress up a little day-to-day. Now it felt a little pretentious. Should she just be wearing denim shorts like the others? Did she seem like a try-hard?

“I—” Emmeline turned from the closet, shrugging helplessly. “It’s fine, Pete.”

“Did someone say something?”

Emmeline didn't want to get Dorcas in trouble. "It's fine. It's not that serious." Even as she said it, the stupid tears were running down her face. Shit.

Peter scrambled out of bed, stopping in front of her and grabbing her wrist. "Hey, hey," he said gently, as Emmeline wiped quickly at her face.

"It's stupid," she muttered.

"It's not stupid if it upset you."

"It was just Dorcas," Emmeline sniffed. "She said she got a weird vibe from me and that I was too perfect. I- it really wasn't that bad."

Peter was silent for a long second. "Am I allowed to say something to her? Would you rather do it, or do you want to just keep quiet?"

"I mean," Emmeline began quietly. "I want to set the record straight, but I don't want to cause drama. I'm afraid... I- I dunno."

"If you really don't want me to say anything, I won't," Peter vowed. "But if you do..."

"Maybe," Emmeline admitted quietly. "Yes, okay. But be nice, and I don't need you fighting my battles, I just—"

"Don't want to rock the boat," Peter finished. "I know, that's why I'm offering. If I do it, it's like the boyfriend who has a savior complex. There's no fault back to you. Okay?"

"Be nice," she stressed.

“Of course.”

Regulus

Good childhood memories were scarce. Any that *did* exist had to do with Sirius.

Sirius, barely two years older, just a kid himself. Sirius, who had raised Regulus better than any adult had.

“Sometimes I think that I must be the problem. I always acted as if the world was the problem. The world was trying to kill me, trying to leave me rotting and alone... maybe I did that.”

“Maybe more than one thing can be true,” Regulus’s therapist told him, calmly. *“If you don’t try to improve your situation, you stay where you are. Yet at the same time, you were failed by the people who should have protected you.”*

“Not all of them,” Regulus said instantly. *“Not Sirius.”*

It was a lie. At the same time, it wasn’t.

Sirius had failed Regulus, and Regulus had failed him. It was an equal sort of failure. Brought on by two boys who were raised in the dark.

When someone finally opens a window, it stings.

That’s what looking at James Potter felt like.

Sometimes, Regulus liked to paint this as one of Sirius's failures. If he could blame Sirius for bringing James into his life, it was easier to swallow. Because Peter and Remus hadn't really cared for Regulus. Eventually, they would become friends, Remus and Regulus especially. But as kids, Regulus was the unwanted guest. He was the little boy trailing behind his brother and his older friends. James was always nice though. Even when Sirius scoffed and told Regulus to fuck off, James always smiled. He smiled when Regulus was mean, when he'd cross his arms and glare, or when he was standing there silently. James always had a grin and warm eyes.

Developing a crush on him was a classic case. An event that was probably doomed to happen to a million more people. What a cliché, to fall for your brother's best friend. It should have ended at that.

Regulus should have found someone else and forgotten all about it. He never did. The feelings never went away.

Then came Sirius's *big* failure. The one that had snapped something between them. A chasm splitting them right down the middle. No more Sirius and Regulus.

Sirius left. He asked Regulus to come. That was Regulus's failure—he was terrified. He didn't even have the guts to say no, he just shook his head and turned his back. He thought, if he just did everything he was supposed to, he could make his parents love him. Sirius was different, Sirius would never fit the mold. But Regulus? He could be quiet, complacent, perfect.

"Like a lamb going willingly to the slaughter," Bellatrix had said in reference to Regulus one night. Narcissa's eyes had caught Regulus's, unreadable. She didn't look sad, but there was a tinge of mourning in her eyes. As if she was looking at Regulus but seeing a ghost.

That night she'd leaned in, whispering in his ear, *"You can have more."*

More; what a vague word. More than what? More than the Blacks? More than the pain? More than his stiff unforgiving future, or maybe more than whatever Narcissa had.

Regulus didn't know. He'd never gotten the chance to ask, because he'd never seen her again. Sometimes he remembered her eyes that night, the intensity. She couldn't have possibly known what would happen. But it'd felt like a goodbye.

Often, when the hour was late and his breath caught on the jagged rungs of his lungs, he wished he could ask. Regulus would consider calling his cousin and demand she explain what she had meant by "more." Was he doing it right?

Regulus Black had spent his entire life afraid, but he never thought to fear what happened outside his house.

It wasn't as if he'd fallen in with the wrong sort. Rather, they were exactly right. Rich, powerful, the sons of the most respectable families. None of them more so than Regulus, of course, but he did have the weakness of being smaller and quieter than most of the other boys. He had an attitude though, and a resting bitch face that kept him safe through most of his years at school.

His last year, they were getting antsy. Headed on by Mulciber who'd become increasingly violent and antagonistic, the boys went out and caused chaos. They bullied other students, terrorized the streets, and ran wild. They even had some stupid name for themselves—*Death Eaters*. As if they were a gang and not a bunch of rich teenagers.

Regulus went along with it because his parents wanted him to keep close to those boys. *Connections*, reputations... whatever the fuck his parents wanted. Regulus, who wanted to be perfect, who wanted to earn his mother's love, did whatever she wanted. Even when he hated it. Regulus became filled with such an overwhelming sense of anxiety and dread that he was barely functioning. He'd have panic attacks before school every morning. Hold his breath, choke on his own tongue. He never spoke, he never protested. Maybe that was what Narcissa saw. It wasn't that she was clairvoyant, but rather, Regulus was ripping at the seams and his cousin could see it.

Two days later, there was some party and the "Death Eaters" had gathered.

"Let's go to Riddle's Bridge," someone had suggested.

“Whoever jumps gets to cheat off whoever they want for the rest of the year.”

The boys had all laughed. Regulus nodded silently. Riddle’s Bridge was famously known for its danger. High enough to give a thrill, but low enough that as long as you hit the water right, you’d probably be okay.

Only three people had ever actually died there. One of them was a car accident, another was because the guy was drunk, and the last was simply plain shitty luck. The girl had jumped into an area that was too shallow and she’d hit her head and drowned.

“Who’s jumping?”

Mulciber turned on Snape first. He was always an outlier, a scholarship kid who had to fight for his position at the school. He was mostly kept around for a laugh. “What about you, Severus? Fancy a swim?”

“I jumped last time,” Snape pointed out, crossing his arms.

Mulciber’s eyes darted around the group. He paused. “Baby Black…”

Regulus’s heart sank. All eyes were on him. “It’s freezing, I don’t fancy getting soaked, thanks,” Regulus said carelessly.

It used to work, the coldness, the uncaring demeanor. The thing was, worse than being looked down upon like Snape was being envied. Envy turned violent, raging, and bitter. Regulus was more of somebody than any of the other boys would ever be. He was at the top of the food chain, and they hated him for it.

“Don’t be all prissy. Grow some balls.” Mulciber stepped forward, Regulus resisted the urge to step back.

He wasn't afraid of water. Regulus loved swimming, he could spend ages in the water. What he didn't like was heights.

"Yeah, come on, Black!" someone jeered.

"Your turn!"

"Jump, jump, jump!"

Regulus was being dragged towards the ledge. "Come on, hop the railing," Mulciber said in a challenge.

Slowly, trying to hide the shake of his fingers, Regulus swung his leg over the railing. There was nothing between him and the water now. The metal was slick from the rain earlier than night, and it didn't give much stability as Regulus reached back for it.

"Jump!"

"Go on, Black," Mulciber grinned, his eyes glinting in the dark.

Regulus looked down.

It was a long way. He could barely see the bottom in the darkness.

He dreamed of falling. It was a recurring nightmare he'd had his entire life. *Falling, falling, falling.* Hands gripping his lungs, dragging him into the abyss. Fingers closing over his throat.

He was always losing control, losing his grip. Reaching out for someone who was just out of reach.

“Is he ever going to fucking jump?”

“Coward!”

“Grow a pair!”

The memory of what happened next was hazy. One minute he was gripping the rail, blood roaring in his ears, the next he was falling.

Regulus never jumped.

If he had, he might have gained a little air. He wouldn't have been so close to the bridge.

But he didn't jump, he was pushed, and his face was far too close to the bridge, and fuck, fuck, fuck—

Crack.

You can have more.

Do you ever think about death?

“I’ll never forgive you.”

“I don’t need you to forgive me, I need you to live.”

“I’m not sure I ever have.”

“That’s okay, the hardest thing you can do is learn to let yourself exist.”

Regulus died. Heart stopped, lips blue. They said it was a miracle; his parents didn’t look like they thought so.

He received a lecture. Not about staying safe, not about guarding his life, but rather about the importance of protecting the Black family line. Regulus sat there in the hospital, numb, his head pounding. The doctors thought he’d tried to kill himself, probably because that’s what

whoever had called for help had said. That's the story Regulus corroborated when his parents weaved a long story about his mental health struggles and past suicide threats.

Funnily enough, Regulus had never wanted to die *less*.

He didn't remember the dying part. It was just cold and empty. But he remembered something. The moment when he realized he was about to hit his head. When he realized he wasn't the kind of person he wanted to die as.

Regulus remembered the moment before he woke up. When his heart was beating again, when consciousness was bleeding through. He remembered a conversation.

He couldn't place who he was talking to, or when it was, but it filled him with a sense of familiarity. He felt known, not exactly happy, but alive. Alive was a feeling he'd never really considered before, but Regulus felt it now.

Each woosh of his breath, the way his chest rose and his heart beat. Regulus was alive.

Alive, alive, alive, but he'd never felt worse.

His parents left him in the hospital. No doubt to be locked up, put on suicide watch or something. Regulus went home anyway, he went home and he begged for his parents to see him. But they didn't. They still didn't care.

So, when his mother told him to leave, she said it in an offhand way because she expected him to come crawling back... but Regulus decided to be brave for the first time in his life. There wasn't anyone who loved him or cared. No one except for Sirius.

Sirius, who had always treated Regulus with a soft hand. The one to wipe his tears and tuck him into bed. Sirius taught Regulus how to tie his shoes, how to do his hair and sign his name. Sirius, even when he hated Regulus, had loved him, too.

They failed each other. But when Sirius opened the door that night, he'd let Regulus in without question. It was at that moment, as Sirius stepped back to let him in, that Regulus vowed to never fail his brother again.

Had he broken that promise?

--

Regulus was beginning to feel guilty.

What was he doing? Not only was he breaking his own heart by letting James own him, but wasn't he betraying his brother? It wasn't right to lie, to keep it a secret. And as much as Regulus wished otherwise, it was only a matter of time until everyone found out.

Obviously, Barty and Evan knew, Regulus had told them. Now, Remus had figured it out, and surely it was only a matter of time before more people did. The entire "angel" slip-up at lunch was bad enough.

But it felt worth it when Regulus had James's eyes on him. His gaze burned. It scalded Regulus's insides. It felt like he'd never been seen before and never would be again.

Every time James looked, Regulus felt like he was flying.

Every time James looked, Regulus was a teenager again. He was on his knees, bending over backward. Begging, *love me, love me, love me.*

It hadn't worked with his parents. The only person who loved Regulus Black was the one person he'd never asked. Sirius had always been willing to offer it all, even when they hated each other. That, at the very least, didn't feel like a failure.

Regulus needed to forget the way he could taste the shards of his heart on his tongue.

“Reg?” Barty whispered on the way to the club.

“Yeah?”

“I know it’s hurting you.”

“Barty—”

“No, *no*,” Barty said, and he was uncharacteristically serious. “I take it back, telling you to give him a chance or whatever. I think something needs to give. Either end things or tell him how you feel.”

“I can’t.”

“You have to do *something*, Regulus.”

“Look, can we talk about this tomorrow?” Regulus asked in a whisper. “Tonight, let’s get fucked up.”

Barty let it go, though he looked unhappy with the conclusion to the conversation. When they got to the club, he immediately pulled Regulus through to the dancefloor, and for once, Regulus didn’t protest.

He *did* get drunk and danced until his makeup was practically running down his face. It was nice, freeing. It helped that James was watching hungrily from the other side of the room. Yes, he was definitely getting dicked down *hard* when they got home, consequences be damned.

And then, Regulus looked. James was gone, and Regulus searched the place for his form.

He froze, and Barty followed his gaze. There, at the bar, James was standing. A woman had her hand on him, they were leaning close together. Regulus watched as she took him by the hand, and they disappeared together.

Regulus couldn't breathe. There was bile rising in his throat.

He wasn't different. Regulus wasn't special, he'd never been special. He was just another fuck, a convenient one. Maybe James had lied to make Regulus feel special. Maybe he let everyone touch him. Maybe Regulus was just like every other hopeful nobody that James Potter had fucked and discarded.

What, just because James opened up sometimes, that meant Regulus had a chance? How stupid.

And *shit*, he'd been trying so hard not to delude himself, but James treated Regulus as if he loved him. James looked, and he touched in reverence. James called him "angel", and maybe, Regulus and his delusions weren't even to blame. Maybe James Potter was a cruel, sick, twisted bastard and Regulus wasn't different.

Barty pulled Regulus out of the crowd. Everything was blurry, he was too hot, too fuzzy.

"What the fuck happened to him?" Regulus heard someone say. Regulus couldn't breathe, he sank down to the ground, his hands were shaking.

Why was he so hard to love? What would it take?

"Hey, hey," Barty's voice was soft, his hands gentle.

“I’ve never learned to touch things without breaking them,” Regulus remembered Barty saying once. It was an excuse not to pursue Evan. *“I’ll hurt him, I’ll ruin things. He’s better off.”*

Now, he touched Regulus with care. If Regulus could speak through the ringing in his ears, he would have told Barty he’d been wrong. But he couldn’t speak, couldn’t catch his breath.

James will never love me. What was I doing? What did I do?”

“What’s going on?”

Sirius. Neither Barty nor Regulus responded.

“Crouch—”

“It’s fine,” Barty said tightly. Because Sirius didn’t know, *couldn’t* know what had happened. Regulus couldn’t handle the shame. Barty knew this as he held Sirius off.

“*No.* Regulus? What’s going on?”

Regulus shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut. He couldn’t speak, not around the shame and embarrassment that was pressing down behind his eyes. What was wrong with him? What had Regulus done? Why did he let it get this far? It was supposed to be worth it, but it didn’t feel worth it.

Now, Regulus knew what it was like to have James. Now, he knew, and he could never forget, but he could never have anything more.

“Reg—”

“Back off,” Barty said, squeezing Regulus’s shoulder.

“He’s my brother! You don’t get to tell me to back off!”

Barty rose, spinning around.

Shit. Where was Remus? Remus could handle this. Regulus didn’t know where he was.

“Stop,” Regulus pleaded, but neither man seemed to hear him. The escalation was clear. This was going to end in a fistfight.

“*Hey!*”

Peter. He was pushing Sirius and Barty apart, eyes flashing in the dim light. “What the hell is wrong with you two?”

They started talking at once, and Regulus heard his own name thrown into the jumble of words. Peter turned to Regulus, who was still on the ground against the wall.

“Alright?” Peter asked gently, turning away from Sirius and Barty.

Regulus nodded numbly, taking the hand Peter offered and standing up unsteadily. “Too much to drink,” he muttered. Peter eyed him for a second, and Regulus didn’t know if Peter believed that, but he nodded.

“I think we should go, come on.” Peter’s voice was unarguable.

The ride home was quiet.

“Regulus?” Sirius whispered when they were nearly back to the house.

Regulus didn't respond. Peter was there, too, but Regulus watched as he purposefully turned towards the window as if he weren't listening.

“I'm missing something,” Sirius said. It wasn't a question, his voice was almost toneless, but he couldn't hide the slight shake. “There's something going on with you. With- with *everyone* and no one ever tells me anything. I know Remus knows something; I know James has been keeping things from me with the school stuff. I- I don't understand why. Why am I always in the dark? Why won't you tell me things, Regulus?”

“Because you're insufferable!” Regulus snapped, straightening suddenly. “You don't know how to let me handle things. You'll freak the fuck out and worry over nothing! It's fine, we're fine, just leave me the fuck alone.”

The car had barely rolled to a stop before Regulus was throwing himself out. He slammed the door behind him, cutting off the beginning of Sirius's protests.

Regulus was the first person in the house. He shut himself in the bathroom, turning the sink on.

The person in the mirror looked pathetic. His hair was frizzy, his makeup was smudged. Regulus didn't carry the same burning, overwhelming hatred for himself that he used to. Under his parent's thumb, he hadn't been able to look in the mirror. Now he looked, he looked until it burned.

This is me. I am pathetic and stupid, but I don't deserve this. I will not look away, I will not pretend I'm someone I'm not. I'm not perfect, but haven't I paid enough?

Aren't I allowed to exist?

I'm done punishing myself. Either he loves me, or we're done.

We're done, we're done, we're done.

Regulus scrubbed the makeup from his face until his skin was raw.

We're done.

--

“Are you in love with me?”

“No.”

James blinked. His face was emotionless. Regulus felt his heartbeat quickening.

“I thought you weren't a liar.”

Regulus wasn't before James Potter. As a teenager, every point of his life had been a lie. He'd vowed to never live like that again, but here he was. James had turned him into a liar and split his life in two halves.

Regulus thought he contained the flinch, the crack at James's words.

“You're in love with me.” James wasn't asking this time.

Regulus protested anyway with a stiff shake of his head. *No, no, no.* James couldn't know. He couldn't see through Regulus like that. They'd been sleeping together for weeks, and Regulus had been in love with him the entire time. For *years*, for half his life at this point.

"You are," James whispered in disbelief like this notion was impossible to comprehend. As if Regulus's heart wasn't shaped, the pieces scraped together just to love James Potter. As if he were ever capable of anything else.

"I'm sorry," Regulus choked out. "I-I didn't want to make you uncomfortable. And—"

"Regulus."

"—you're the one who kissed *me*, so I know I should have said something. I know I shouldn't have let this go on—"

"I didn't say I was mad."

Regulus stopped.

James didn't look mad; Regulus couldn't exactly describe his expression. Partly confused, a little pained and conflicted, but not angry.

Not twenty-four hours earlier, they'd been screaming at each other. Regulus would have thought this conversation impossible, but now, neither of their voices were raised. What did this mean? If James wasn't mad, then what?

"I- okay?" Regulus said weakly. "We...this—" Regulus swallowed. His tongue felt heavy as he tried to get the words out. "I shouldn't have pushed you last night. Whatever your sexuality is or isn't, is your business. But I can't do this. I should have told you how I felt... It shouldn't have gone this far—"

“Wait, what?” James asked blankly.

“I...” Regulus didn’t understand his reaction. “What?”

“What are you saying?”

Regulus still couldn’t get a proper read on James. It was off-putting, and he shifted uneasily. “I- I have to take care of myself,” Regulus said, wincing as his voice cracked. He powered forward. “You’re hurting me. It’s not entirely your fault, I shouldn’t have slept with you. But I can’t anymore, it’s— *James*, it’s killing me.”

“You’re saying we’re done?” James’s fists clenched, it was practically the first reaction Regulus had gotten out of him.

“There’s no *we*,” Regulus snapped. “Okay? We’re not anything. You’re free to fuck who you want, and it’s not my business because we’re nothing. We had sex, and that is it. It didn’t mean anything.”

“It means something to you.”

Regulus felt the way his mouth twisted into a scowl, words sharpening. “Oh, shut the fuck up! You got me, okay? I’m in love with you! Is that what you want me to say? Does that stroke your ego, Potter? I’ve been in love with you since I was a child, and I let you fuck me anyway. I pretended it meant something when it doesn’t! You hurt me, you won! Congrats! I know it meant something to me, I- *I know*.” God, Regulus was stupid. He swore he didn’t used to cry this much, but suddenly his vision was blurry with tears.

Then, James finally cracked. His brow furrowed like he was in pain. James stepped forward like he wanted to reach out for Regulus, but he stopped himself. “But you’re ending things?” he said, voice strained.

“*Yes*, I can’t do this. What part of that don’t you get?”

“I didn’t want to hurt you,” James choked on the words. He sounded horrified as Regulus stood from the bed.

There were tears on his face and he didn’t bother to wipe them away. Fuck it, there was nothing left to hide. It was all out now.

“But you *did*.”

“I *know*,” James said, face twisted. “I get that, okay? I did, I wish I hadn’t. I- but why end things? If it meant something, why throw it all away?”

“Because I don’t want to be friends with benefits!” Regulus said angrily. “I want you to love me, I want you to want me. I want to be your fucking boyfriend or something, *anything*. Anything other than this!”

“Then why end it?”

“Because we don’t want the same thing!”

“I do!”

What?

No, no, no.

“Stop,” Regulus said hoarsely, barely a whisper. It was a contrast to only a second before.

“Why—”

“Don’t be mean, James. That was the deal, you’re not supposed to be mean to me. Right now, you-you’re being mean.”

“Regulus...” James whispered. He stepped closer.

“Don’t touch me.”

“I won’t touch you,” James said instantly, drawing back. “Just listen to me, I’m begging you to let me talk.”

“I—”

“*Regulus.*” James said his name like it mattered. Like it was a prayer whispered between them. “I didn’t sleep with that girl.”

Regulus sat back down on the bed. He threaded his fingers tightly together, and after a second, James continued.

“I was going to. I kissed her, and it was just... it was the same as it’d always been. I used to wonder why everyone liked kissing so much because it didn’t feel very special to me. Then there was you, and...” James swallowed, his eyes searching Regulus’s face. “Then I got it, because kissing you feels like you’re reaching into my chest and setting my soul on fire. And I thought maybe things had changed, but I kissed her, and it was like... *nothing*. So, I didn’t have sex with her. I left because she wasn’t you. No one could ever be you, and nothing has ever felt that way. I thought that I could make myself into what I was supposed to be. But I don’t want any girl, I don’t want anyone but you.”

Regulus let out a bitter laugh. “But you’re straight.”

“I—” James bit the inside of his cheek so hard Regulus thought he might draw blood. “I don’t know what I am,” he whispered. Carefully, painfully, as if the words were being scraped violently from his throat.

It was the most James had ever given.

“But I know that it meant something to me, too,” James said when Regulus didn’t speak. “And I don’t care if we never have sex again, I’d want you anyway. I’d keep you, and I’d make sure you knew every single second of every day that you mean everything to me. I’ve had this idea in my head my entire life, and I couldn’t let go of it. My mum, she’d talk about how one day I’d have a wife and kids, and that’s what I wanted. Even though I know she wouldn’t mind if it wasn’t a woman. Still I- I wanted to keep that, live out that life as she pictured it. Maybe that’s fucking stupid—”

“It’s not stupid, James,” Regulus said quietly.

“I didn’t want to be different. More *other* than I already am. *That’s stupid.*”

“That’s human,” Regulus whispered. “Everyone wants to be normal, whether they admit it or not.”

James was silent for a long moment. Regulus didn’t push him, even though he felt like he was going to be sick. James couldn’t be saying what Regulus thought... he couldn’t want Regulus like that. *Right?*

“I had this specific idea of how my life was going to go, but it’s all fucked now anyway. And I don’t want it, I don’t want any of it—the wife, the kids, the house—more than I want you. I certainly don’t want any of it *without* you.”

No.

James was confused. He was newly figuring out his sexuality, and he didn't want to lose the sex with Regulus. That was it.

“So, if I said we could never have sex again? You'd be fine with that.”

“I'd miss it, but I'd miss you more.”

Regulus cracked, the fissures running along his skin. He'd been crumbling at every point James had touched him. The contact scarred—Regulus would have to look at the marks for the rest of his life.

Regulus stood. James's eyes widened as Regulus stalked forward, grabbing him by the collar.

“I love you, James. *I love you*. Do you understand that? Do you get it? I've been in love with you half my fucking life. This is not a game to me. I am not going to change my mind. Okay? If you want me, then this is it. You're going to fucking marry me, or at least *try to* because I have never loved anyone else. I don't want anything less than *everything*. Are you willing to give me everything?”

“Yes.” His answer was immediate.

“No, no, no. Too fast. *Think about it*,” Regulus said tightly. “Think about it, and then tell me.”

“I have thought about it,” James said, his eyes wide and open as he looked down at Regulus. “*I have*. That's why I came in here. I didn't want to. I didn't want to talk about this, I didn't want to tell you all these twisted things I don't understand or know how to make peace with, but I've thought about it. *Yes*. My answer is yes. I will marry you right now if you don't believe me.”

“Okay, slow the fuck down—”

“Regulus, I’m not even kidding about that. I should be, I sound insane, but I’m not. I’m not, okay? I feel it in my chest, I’ve felt it for so long and I didn’t know what it was. Then we kept getting closer and the feeling kept getting stronger. I haven’t loved you for half my life, but I could. If you let me, I will.”

This was big. This was... it couldn’t be real.

“Let me get this straight,” Regulus said slowly. “To be sure we’re on the same page. I want a relationship with you. I want to date you. That’s what you’re agreeing to?”

“Yes.”

“And the gay or not gay thing?”

“I’ll figure it out. I’ll- I don’t know what it is. I’m not ready to call it something, but I have feelings for you. I can’t deny that, I... it’s too big to deny.”

“You don’t need to label yourself. I don’t care what you are, as long as you look me in the eye and answer one thing.”

“Okay...”

“Are you straight?”

James hesitated. It took him a long moment to force the words out, but eventually, he shook his head. “No.”

“Okay?”

“Okay,” James breathed. “So... you’ll be my boyfriend?”

“That sounds juvenile—”

“Regulus—”

“—like some kid asking another kid if they can be boyfriend and girlfriend, it’s a stupid term ___”

James shut Regulus up by grabbing him by the face and kissing him hard enough to see stars. Regulus let go of James’s collar. He threw his arms around James’s neck, clinging on for dear life. Regulus didn’t realize he was crying again until James was kissing the tears from his face. “Mine, mine, mine,” he whispered against Regulus’s skin. “I’m going to do better, I’m going to keep you so close, spoil you fucking rotten.” When James pulled back to look at Regulus, his eyes were glassy with tears.

“We’re not having sex,” Regulus sniffed. “I mean it this time. I’m proving a point.”

“Okay. I mean it when I say that’s okay.”

Maybe Regulus was stupid. He probably was, but fuck it, he believed James. He believed every word. Because it’d always meant something, from the first time James had looked a little too long.

Maybe everything was going to be alright.

TW// suicidal ideation, hospitals, near death experiences, and talk of medical and death shit.

So before anyone gets pissed at me over this depiction of Dorcas pls take a long hard look at her character and take a moment to think about intersectionality and how I chose to represent her. I know this is a very different characterization than we're used to. But the thing about me is I actually HATE how most of the female characters and sapphic ships are thrown in to check some "inclusivity box" and we make them all so one-dimensional Tbh I'd rather them not be included than cardboard cut-outs of a lesbian couple. I'm also super open to any critique because I really really hope that I was writing Dorcas as not only a black woman but a lesbian in a way that's realistic and not harmful. But anyway, end of the day, not every girl is always a girl's girl, and women should be allowed to fuck up.

Now that that's out of the way... how are you guys feeling? Only took 80k words but... we're going somewhere ;) Hope this was a satisfying way to make up for last week's cliffhanger.

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Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

I wouldn't marry me either

Chapter Notes

Massive, MASSIVE trigger warning for suicidal ideation in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sirius

James was gone when Sirius woke up. He was pulled from sleep when Remus entered the room.

“Sorry,” he whispered as Sirius roused. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“It’s alright,” Sirius murmured, rubbing at his eyes.

Remus hovered for a second at the foot of the bed. He seemed unsure. Sirius missed the days when it didn’t feel like he was trying to bridge a gap every single day.

“Can you come here?” Sirius asked hesitantly.

Remus softened instantly. He crawled onto the bed and Sirius rolled over, pressing his forehead to Remus’s chest.

With a shaky exhale, Remus pulled Sirius in. One of his hands came to rest on the back of Sirius's neck, and he wrapped his arms tightly around Remus's waist. Once, when he was in his pining years, he tried to explain to James what Remus smelled like.

"Pads, I have no idea what you're on about. I mean, yeah, he doesn't smell bad. But I'm not sure why you turn into an idiot every time he gets near you. Well, aside from the massive embarrassing crush thing," James had said with a shrug.

Sirius hadn't been able to explain it. Remus just smelled like home. Sirius pressed his nose into his partner now, breathing deeply. Remus's fingers traced soft patterns on the back of Sirius's neck. They simply stayed there together.

"Moony?"

"Hm?"

"I love you."

"Yeah," Remus breathed, his free hand coming up to tilt Sirius's head back to catch his eye. "I love you too." Remus looked down, his eyes filled with more things than Sirius could name. He could pick out a few. Love, adoration, sadness, fear. Everyone assured Sirius everything would be fine. The change wouldn't rip them apart, that was just life, it wasn't the end.

He swore it wasn't just worrying or anxiety. He wasn't crazy. Sirius could feel things crumbling around him. He felt like a child kept in the dark because they couldn't handle the truth. Sirius *could*, whatever it was. He'd survived half of his life in the Black household, nothing could be worse than that. But nobody wanted to worry him, so Sirius was left feeling alienated.

"Moony, I know you're keeping something from me."

Remus's eyes flicked over his face, his thumb brushing over Sirius's cheekbone. "Yeah," he admitted quietly. "Did... Did James tell you anything last night?"

“I think he’s gay,” Sirius said quietly.

That had been a shock. It left Sirius reeling. Not, of course, because Sirius thought there was anything wrong with it, but because the thought had never even crossed his mind. James had never given an inkling that he was anything but straight. It made Sirius feel shitty, even though he knew it definitely wasn’t about him. James must have been going through his own sexuality crisis, but still, Sirius felt a little hurt that his best friend never mentioned it to him before. Sirius told James everything. Every fear and anxiety and—actually, no. He hadn’t told James about the issues with Remus recently, but that was different. Sirius hadn’t wanted to burden James after the year he’d had. Plus, he didn’t really want to talk about or acknowledge it. It was easier to just try and pretend it didn’t exist.

“Yeah, I think he is,” Remus replied quietly. He dropped his hand, looking almost guilty.

“You knew? Before last night?”

“I suspected.”

“*How?* Is that what you’re keeping from me, then?”

“No, not exactly... it’s—” Remus swallowed, before taking a deep breath. “I overheard some things that weren’t my business. It was clear James wasn’t ready for anyone to know. I’m keeping it from you because it’s not my place to tell, not because I want to.”

“And it has to do with the gay thing?”

“I can’t say... and James doesn’t know that I know,” Remus said, his voice quiet.

Sirius swallowed. “Okay,” he accepted after a second. He wasn’t going to try to force Remus to spill James’s secrets. “Um, so you talked to Reg last night?”

“I did.”

“How was he?”

“He’s really upset.” Remus didn’t say what about. Once again, Sirius didn’t ask. He felt a little stupid, being so in the dark.

“I think he’s mad at me. He said some shit in the car,” Sirius mumbled. “I think I’ve been a bad brother; my own stupid anxiety is getting in the way of him trusting me.”

“No,” Remus said instantly. “No, you’re an amazing brother. I don’t know what Reg said but he knows it too. He loves you to death. I think he’s just hurting, and he feels ashamed of it.”

“I- I should talk to him. I’m a bit pissed, though. Even if he’s hurting and something is going on, I’m so tired of him shutting me out. I don’t understand what I have to do, and I can’t stop worrying. I want to stop. I know it drives people crazy, I know my stupid fucking anxiety is inconvenient and gets in the way—”

“Sirius, no,” Remus cut him off. “Nobody thinks it’s inconvenient. Regulus loves you and hates to worry you, and I understand why he feels that way. I *also* understand why you worry. But Pads, you don’t give yourself enough credit. You handle it so well. Don’t forget how far you’ve come and how bad it used to be. And it wasn’t an inconvenience or a problem to anyone, we just didn’t want to see you suffering. You haven’t had a panic attack in a very long time. You’ve become so good at breaking the cycles. Yes, you worry, but I don’t think it’s *you* that Regulus is mad at for worrying. I think he’s mad at himself, and mad that these things do worry you. He doesn’t want to hurt you.”

Sirius didn’t know how to take in any of Remus’s words at the moment, and he nodded, tongue heavy. “Should I talk to him?”

“Probably. Whenever you feel ready.”

“Okay...” Sirius trailed off, tucking his head back down so he didn’t have to look Remus in the eye. “Do we need to talk about us?”

“Right now?”

“Now, soon? I dunno. I know we said to wait until the holiday is over, but— I feel like I’m losing you.” Sirius’s voice cracked at the end of the sentence, and he heard the pained noise Remus let out.

“Sirius Black,” Remus was grabbing Sirius by the jaw again, forcing him to look Remus in the eye. “You’re not losing me. Do you hear me? Do you understand? Yes, this has been difficult, yes, we want different things. Yes, our future is up in the air. But no matter what happens or how we end up dealing with this, you and I are forever.”

“Promise?”

“I fucking swear it,” Remus said passionately. “I’m not saying this hasn’t and won’t be hard, but I will never allow it to end us. I can work through anything at the end of the day as long as it means keeping you.”

“We’re a sure thing?” Sirius whispered.

“The surest. I can’t get rid of you now.”

Sirius scoffed but melted anyway when Remus kissed him softly.

Sirius pressed in closer, deepening the kiss. Remus pulled at Sirius’s arms, tugging him further on top and—

“Oh, sorry, shit,” Mary apologized quickly as the door burst open. “Sorry to interrupt your make-out session, but we have a problem.”

Sirius was about to ask when through the open door, the sound of raised voices suddenly became very clear.

“What the fuck is it now?” Remus muttered, and Sirius scrubbed his hand over his face with a sigh.

“Uh, Dorcas and Peter and...” she sighed. “You should probably just come down.”

They both scrambled out of bed, following Mary quickly down the stairs.

“...no because you have some fucking audacity talking about my girlfriend like that!”

“It’s not my fault if she took it that way!” Dorcas was yelling at Peter. “I’m sorry I don’t fall at her feet.”

“Dorcas, what the fuck?” Marlene cut in, her eyes wide. “Emmeline has never done *anything* to you.”

“Oh yeah, defend Emmeline,” Dorcas scoffed. “Exactly what I’d expect, Marls.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

There was the sound of another door opening, and a moment later, Regulus and James were there too, stopping right behind Remus and Sirius.

“What the hell?” Regulus muttered, and Remus grimaced.

“It means,” Dorcas continued heatedly, “that of course, I couldn’t expect my girlfriend to ever be on my side.”

“Just because I’m your girlfriend doesn’t mean I’m made to blindly support everything you do. I’m not going to follow you everywhere!”

“Oh, trust me, I know. So, you can rip off the bandage, if you want, Marlene. Just get it over with, huh?”

Marlene froze, eyes widening and her face going white. Then, James was pushing past the group gathered in the doorway.

“That’s enough.”

And there he was, James Potter. The person Sirius had always known, the one Sirius had almost felt like he was missing these days. James was there, he was fine.

“Dorcas, Marlene, take this outside or upstairs, I don’t care. Have a talk, but not here.”

There was a second of silence before Dorcas turned and stormed outside. Marlene hesitated, eyes wide, and James nudged her gently. “Go on. Better now than to let it simmer between you,” James told her quietly.

“I’m scared.”

“I know. But you’ve got this. Just make sure you’re certain. Okay?”

“Okay,” Marlene whispered before following Dorcas outside.

There was a moment of stillness before James turned on Peter and Emmeline. “What was going on?”

“Dorcas said some shitty stuff about Emmeline,” Peter crossed his arms unhappily. “Then when I tried to talk to her about it, she just got pissed off and wouldn’t even listen.”

“You alright, Em?” James frowned, looking at the girl who was standing behind Peter uncertainly.

“Yeah,” she whispered, but she looked close to tears. “I didn’t mean to cause any trouble. I just want everyone to like me. I don’t know if I did something to Dorcas or—”

“No, Emmeline. Trust me when I say whatever Dorcas has going on, it’s got nothing to do with you. You two should have a talk, but…” he trailed off looking to the door. “Uh– maybe not now.”

“Okay, sorry,” Emmeline whispered.

“No, no. We love having you here, Em. Don’t get it twisted just because Dorcas is going through something.”

“I- thank you, James.”

“I’m only telling the truth,” James smiled softly.

Remus stepped forward hesitantly, looking at the entire group that had gathered in the living room. “Well,” he said tiredly. “Anyone else have any screaming matches to start? We might as well get it out of the way. Any burning secrets?”

There was a pause. “Not me,” Peter shrugged. “Sorry no more fights, but I’ve got nothing to hide.”

Next to Sirius, Regulus shifted. It was barely noticeable, but Sirius saw it. He noticed the tension in Regulus’s form... What was he hiding?

James’s eyes flicked over to Regulus. Sirius frowned—

“Lily and I are getting married.”

“What?” Peter shrieked. There was a commotion as suddenly the room erupted into noise. They were all yelling over each other, laughing and asking questions.

Sirius looked at James, wondering how he’d react to his ex getting married. He was only smiling gently, looking entirely happy about the news.

Maybe Sirius had been freaked out over nothing.

A sexuality crisis and fear of his future—that was normal. Sirius thought he probably held James to too high of a standard. He sometimes expected James to be perfectly fine all the time, because he always had been. But his mother had died. Of course, he wasn’t fine.

It’d destroyed Sirius; he hadn’t slept or eaten for weeks after, but James had been catatonic.

“Sorry, kid,” Monty had told Sirius gently. *“I want you to come home with us, you’re part of this family. But James isn’t in his right mind, and I don’t want you to have to come face-to-face with that when you’re processing your own grief, okay? Stick close to Regulus and Remus, and call me every day.”*

“Okay,” Sirius had agreed, and he didn’t feel bad or excluded like Monty seemed to worry. Sirius had practice dealing with the world ending. James didn’t. It made sense.

So, if James was struggling with his future a little, that was expected. Sirius suddenly felt like a bad friend for not realizing it sooner. James was human, he had to have fears and insecurities too.

Sirius took a deep breath. He *did* worry too much.

Marlene

Dorcas wasn't looking at Marlene. Her eyes were fixed on the tree line, face blank.

“So. You know?” Marlene asked as the front door swung shut behind her.

There was a pause. “If I didn't before, I do now.”

“Dorcas—”

“You're breaking up with me.”

Dorcas still wasn't looking at Marlene.

“I- I think we're going in different directions...” Marlene whispered, her voice small. She was surprised she even managed to voice the words.

“What were you planning on doing, huh?” Dorcas asked hollowly. “Just wait until I'd had enough and decided to break up with you?”

“No,” Marlene protested quickly. “I- I just. I didn't want to ruin the holiday—”

“And that worked out so well,” Dorcas scoffed, mouth twisting.”

“Dorcas—”

“No, I’m not stupid Marlene. I knew you were tired of me, I knew something was going on. I was hoping that maybe, just *once*, you’d come to me. I thought I wouldn’t have to be the one to solve the problem. But *nothing*. You’re checked out, I’m checked out. This has been over long before now, so don’t make excuses.”

Marlene was silent. She swallowed, trying to figure out how to speak. She remembered her conversation with James. He’d been supportive. If it was right for her, it was what needed to happen, right? No avoiding it now. It wouldn’t be right to try and put off this conversation.

“I got offered a job,” she began, her voice small. “I accepted it.”

“Not in London, I assume?”

“No, Scotland.”

Silence. Stretching, eating away at Marlene’s beating heart.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” Marlene asked. “That’s it.”

“We’re breaking up. You’ll go to Scotland, I won’t. The end.”

“See,” Marlene said, her voice rising. “This is *exactly* the problem. You don’t even care. I didn’t want to do this, I wanted to make it work! But you don’t even look at me anymore, and I won’t sacrifice my dreams for someone who doesn’t give a shit!”

“Because you’re impossible, Marlene!” Dorcas yelled, throwing a hand in the air. “Because I am so fucking tired of always dealing with everything! Yeah, I don’t look at you, I don’t care, because caring about you is exhausting! I’m tired!”

Marlene felt it, the second her heart cracked in her chest. She was pretty sure it was audible, but Dorcas didn’t seem to notice. Dorcas never noticed.

The silence was pressing down into her skull, but Marlene didn’t cry. She straightened, squaring her shoulders. “I’m glad to know what you really think of me.”

“Yeah, and you think I’m a cold bitch. I love you, Marlene, and I know you love me, but we don’t *like* each other.”

Suddenly, the anger, the fury swirling in her chest, fizzled out.

Oh.

“I don’t think you’re a bitch.” Flat, quiet.

“Okay,” Dorcas said slowly. She swallowed. “I- I do think highly of you,” Dorcas whispered. “I didn’t really mean that. I think the world of you.”

“Okay. I think well of you, too.”

“I’m sorry.”

“...me too.”

“You deserve someone who likes you, Marlene.”

“So do you.”

And that was it.

Really... that was it?

Suddenly, it all felt very anticlimactic.

“Uh—” Dorcas swallowed. “We should probably switch rooms or something. Split up. I guess James and Regulus can finally get away from each other. You can room with James, and I’ll move in with Reg.”

“Yeah, that sounds good. Kill two birds with one stone.”

Another bout of silence followed. Dorcas shifted, her dark eyes searching Marlene’s face before looking away again. She didn’t look back to the tree line, instead, she glanced down at her feet.

Marlene took a step back. She took another. She turned her back and left Dorcas there.

It wasn’t as hard as it should have been.

James

I wouldn't marry me either

At some point, death had become an abstract sort of thing.

Even if James didn't actively want to die, he didn't really want to live. The thought had been in his head for so long, planted at such a young age. He'd never really planned to live very long. It's not like he was writing his suicide note, but dying young just seemed inevitable.

He never imagined making it this far, and frankly, he wasn't supposed to. He wasn't sure what to do with it now.

"Writing anything new?" Peter asked one afternoon.

"Not really," James shrugged.

He'd stopped writing again. He didn't know what he was supposed to say. None of the words came out right. They were weighing him down, buried in his skull. He could feel them sitting there, each one like a loose marble rattling around. Stuck, lodged, itching.

James didn't write.

He was suffocating. Thorns crept up his throat.

Dorcas was awake. James saw her at the kitchen table. Marlene was still nowhere to be found, and James quickly hurried up the stairs. He didn't bother knocking, simply opening

the door.

Regulus lifted his head. James shut the door behind him, leaning back on it for a second. He took a moment to simply watch. Drinking in the messiness of Regulus's curls and the furrow of his brow.

"Alright?" Regulus asked, his voice thick with sleep.

"I have a problem," James said. He crossed the room in a few quick strides, pushing himself into Regulus's space. Regulus, of course, did not protest. He instantly moved to let James onto the bed. It was warm and comfortable and it'd only been two days and James felt like he'd been missing Regulus his entire life. Maybe he had. Maybe his soul had been shaped for Regulus Black, and it was waiting for this since the day he was born.

"What's the problem?" Regulus murmured. He instantly tucked himself into James, his hands slipping under James's shirt. It wasn't sexual, rather, just the need to be close, to touch and feel skin. Once, James would balk at anyone so much as looking at his torso. Now, Regulus's hand rested right underneath where James's scar was. He didn't feel panic or shame, instead, he just felt the warmth of Regulus.

James breathed; the air that filled his lungs felt fresh. The thorns retreated for a second.

"I've become codependent," James said quietly. "I miss you. We're in the same house, and I miss you."

Regulus chuckled, low and raspy. James wanted to eat him. He wanted to kiss him hard enough that it burned. He didn't, not yet. He knew if he started, he'd never be able to stop.

Fuck.

Yeah, this was love. James didn't know how he hadn't realized that before. He was burning, his soul was alight, and his heart was beating for Regulus Black.

“I know, I miss you, too.” A pause. “I miss the sex, too. How are we supposed to have sex if Dorcas is sleeping in our room now?”

Our room.

James nudged his nose into Regulus’s curls, letting out a soft sigh. “I thought we weren’t having sex right now,” he murmured, pushing Regulus’s hair back to kiss him on the forehead.

Regulus’s face scrunched at the kiss and James smiled, planting another to the crease between his eyebrows.

“Not *at first*. I was proving a point. It’s been a few days,” Regulus huffed. He was attempting to give James a disapproving look, but the way he was looking up through his lashes made it ineffective.

James hummed, pressing one last kiss to Regulus’s cheek before pulling back to look at him properly. “Let’s keep taking it slow,” he said softly. “The sex... it was hurting you. I’m tired of hurting you. Even if you feel better about it now that you know I’m all in, I still think we should wait. I don’t want you to doubt me. It was never about the sex, Reg, it’s always been about you.”

Regulus flushed slightly at that, swallowing as he looked away. He was almost bashful, and James felt his chest warming.

Love, love, love.

This is love. I’m in love with him.

He’s in love with me. Holy shit.

Regulus lifted onto his elbow, glaring down at James. “Call me angel,” he demanded suddenly. “You never call me Reg.”

“Do you not like Reg?”

“No, I like it fine, but...”

“You like angel *a lot*,” James finished, a grin making its way onto his face. “Oh, you silly, beautiful, little thing. I fucking knew it.” James grabbed Regulus's hand, which was still under his shirt, maneuvering himself carefully so he didn't hurt him as James clambered on top of him.

“Stop it,” Regulus murmured, blushing harder as James hovered over him.

“Hm, can't. Sorry, angel.”

Regulus turned even redder. Oh, fucking hell, he was perfect.

James decided to kiss him before he could even begin complaining in typical Regulus fashion.

It was the right move. Regulus was warm and pliant, one of his hands going to James's hip, trying to pull him down. James did not oblige, because they were not having sex, and he knew how quickly their resolve crumbled on that front.

He ignored Regulus's attempt to deepen the kiss, letting it fizzle out instead to something warm and easy. Regulus kissed him like they had all the time in the world. The sun was filtering through the windows and the day wasn't *too* warm yet. James thought he could live in this moment forever.

“We should go out,” James whispered into Regulus’s skin, his lips dragging down the other man’s jaw.

“Hm?” Regulus asked, distractedly. He let out a sharp little breath, and James reveled in it. He *loved* it.

“Go out, you and me,” James said, pulling back.

“What do you mean?” Regulus asked, looking up in confusion.

“A date.”

“I- a date?”

“Yeah, because we’re dating.”

Regulus didn’t react for a long minute, staring up at James blank-faced. He seemed shocked, as if this were brand new news.

“Regulus?”

Regulus blinked in surprise for another moment, before suddenly, something changed and he was breaking into giggles. James had no idea what had just happened, but he smiled too because Regulus was laughing, and if he was happy, James was happy.

“Oh my god? We’re dating,” Regulus choked out in between his laughter. “This is fucking crazy. You’re like, my boyfriend? We can go on dates. You’re *mine*.”

“I’m yours,” James said instantly. No question about it.

“Good. Mine, mine, mine.”

The way Regulus said the words in a breathless little chant reminded James scarily of his own thoughts. The words that looped in his head every time Regulus was close—or even when he wasn’t.

“Yours,” James agreed. He decided the only other response was to press a series of kisses all over Regulus’s face. Regulus was still laughing, and then James was laughing, too.

It was breathless and cathartic, the two of them tangled up in each other.

James decided to kiss the giggles out of Regulus’s mouth because he needed to swallow that sound and keep it safe within his ribs forever. Neither of them heard the door open.

There was a cough.

James had déjà vu to what somehow felt like a lifetime ago. Before they’d ever slept together, before any of this. When all James knew was that he was drawn to Regulus, the urge to touch so strong it nearly keeled him over.

James did not fall off the bed this time, thank you very much (though it was a near thing).

Remus was standing in the doorway. He didn’t look shocked, exactly, but there was something in the lines of his face.

“Uh, Reg,” he began as if he hadn’t walked in on James kissing Regulus within an inch of his life. “Sirius is looking for you.” He shook his head, sighing deeply. “Fuck,” he muttered more to himself. “I should have knocked, whatever.”

Regulus sat up, his eyes wide and nervous as he looked at James. *Oh*, Regulus was *scared*. So far, James had balked at most attempts Regulus had made to bring up his sexuality, their relationship, or anything of importance. He must have been terrified now that James was going to freak out.

A part of James was. His heart was beating out of his chest, his skin itching with the sensation of being seen. But Regulus's eyes were wide, and he was scared. James swallowed around the panic rising in his throat.

"It's okay," James reached out, resting a hand on the back of Regulus's neck. He leaned forward, kissing him softly on the cheek. "Go on, love." It didn't matter that Remus was there—or no, it did. But what mattered more was the fear in Regulus's eyes, the tension in his shoulders

Regulus looked surprised. He stayed there, frozen. "Okay," he said after a second, looking up at James with wide eyes. "I'm not finding Sirius, though. He's annoying. He can come find me," he said stubbornly.

James let go, and Regulus clambered off the bed. Remus stepped back to let Regulus through the doorway. As the younger man headed down the hall, Remus stayed there.

"James..." he said quietly. James stiffened, but whatever he was expecting Remus to say, it wasn't the words that came out of his mouth. "Regulus loves you." Why the fuck did everyone know that before James did? "Just, do you know that—"

"I love him." It was the first time James had ever said it so plainly. The words came out more easily than he expected. Maybe a part of James had known this for a lot longer than his brain had been able to accept it.

"Oh." Remus seemed taken aback. He swallowed, nodding. "Okay, I- good. Just, be careful. You're both so important to me. I love you, Prongs, I really, really do. I know I've probably been distant, I know there's a lot going on, but... I just love you."

James didn't know what was going on. He didn't know why every piece of his life was always slipping through his fingers. He didn't know why he felt it all crumbling day by day.

He stood instantly. Remus seemed surprised by his sudden movement, but then James was pulling him into a tight hug and Remus returned it immediately.

"I love you too, Moony. I'm so glad you're my friend, I'm so glad you're in my life."

A tension that James hadn't even realized was there bled out of Remus's shoulder. "Me too. I don't think you know how you changed my life," Remus murmured into James's shoulder. "I don't know why you and Sirius and Pete decided to give me the time of day. I don't know what you saw in me, but I'm so glad."

"It's just *you*, Rem. It's not as if our friendship was something to be earned, or something magical. You're just ours. We were waiting for the missing piece until you came to school with us. End of story. The four of us were made for each other, in this life and every other one," James said fiercely.

Remus sniffed, and as James pulled back, he realized his friend looked close to tears.

"Rem..."

"I know, I know," Remus said quickly. "I'm sorry, I- I just... sometimes I feel like... I dunno. Childhood insecurities... they linger, you know?"

"Yeah," James said softly. "But we adore you, we always have. No question about it."

"Thanks, James," Remus whispered.

"Always," James promised.

They were quiet for a moment. James didn't really understand where the sudden emotion had come from.

"I'm sorry," James said suddenly.

Remus frowned. "What for?"

"I'm just sorry."

"I- okay..." Remus said slowly. "You don't have anything to be sorry for."

Not yet.

--

James woke up *wrong*.

It happened a lot, but for a week or so, he'd actually felt okay.

And then, he woke up and Marlene was in the bed across from him and James wanted to fucking *die*.

Not in an abstract way, not in a passing thought. No, he woke up with a black vortex in his chest and he thought *I need to kill myself*.

Nothing was wrong. Well, no—everything was wrong. Everything was always wrong, but no more so than it'd been most of the summer.

But this one particular morning, James woke up and he just wished he was dead. He wished it more than he ever had in his life. Even after his mum died. It was in his lungs, pushing its way up his throat.

“Have you been sleeping alright?” Regulus had asked the night before, in one of the rare moments they found time for each other now that they no longer shared a room.

“Yeah.” *No.* “I’m fine.” He wasn’t.

“Okay, because I- no...” Regulus trailed off swallowing. “Never mind.”

“What?” James questioned.

“No, it’s stupid. I was just thinking maybe if they knew, then we could room together again, but it wouldn’t matter. Dorcas and Marlene shouldn’t be together anyway, and I don’t want to break anyone else up.”

Regulus didn’t say *and you don’t want them to know*. James still felt the words between them.

And really, it wasn’t shame. Because at this point, James had to accept that he was madly in love with Regulus Black. Though the only person he’d admitted it to was Remus, he needed to say it to Regulus’s face.

Every time James tried, he choked. It wasn’t even the sexuality part; it was the love. What a sick, sick curse to be loved by James Potter.

So, James froze, and Regulus immediately went quiet. He changed the topic, and James let him.

I'm still hurting you. I'm always going to hurt you.

Suddenly, James saw the future so clearly. Even if Regulus loved him, even if James loved Regulus, it'd never work. James was too much, too fuzzy, too twisted. He couldn't break up with Regulus, he was too selfish to do that.

But... maybe if James just removed himself from the equation.

He'd been thinking about it. He'd been thinking about it for a long time.

James went to bed. He woke up. He wanted to die.

He couldn't really explain it to anyone. He was pretty sure the rest of the world didn't feel like this. Surely not. It was just James. James, who couldn't be normal, who couldn't just exist like every other person. Everything was hard, and it didn't need to be. It'd always felt like this, even when by all means, James's life should have been perfect.

Then, he just got worse. His mum died and he got worse and worse and worse.

James was a poor excuse for a human being. Everyone in his life would be better off. *Fuck*, his dad would probably be relieved. No more fucked up son to worry about.

James got out of bed. He got in the shower. Marlene was in the closest one, so he went to his—no, Regulus and Dorcas's bathroom instead.

“Gonna use the shower,” he told Regulus who was sitting on the bed, scrolling through his phone. He'd clearly just woken up and he only nodded.

James turned the water on, he stepped under the—

Regulus looked... scared. His lip was caught between his teeth, his eyes wide.

“Nothing’s wrong.” Everything was wrong.

James had no degree, no prospects... no fucking job.

“You didn’t even call out, James,” Molly told him. “Just didn’t show up for your shift. That’s not acceptable behavior. Normally, I’d fire someone for that, but you’ve never had an incident like this before and overall, you get great reviews from customers and you’re a good worker. I know you’ve had a rough year so I’m going to cut you some slack—”

“I don’t need pity.”

“I’m not giving you pity, I’m giving you a chance. If you want to retain this job when you return at the end of August, then I recommend you take it.”

“I don’t.”

“I- excuse me?”

“I don’t want the job, Molly. Just fucking fire me.”

James hadn’t told anyone. He had until the end of summer to figure it out. Except... summer was nearly over, and nothing had been figured out.

“James—”

“You know it’s my fault my mum died?” James didn’t know what possessed him to say it. A part of him wondered if Regulus would flinch.

Regulus didn't flinch, but his frown deepened. He didn't speak, and James knew he was probably scared to say the wrong thing. Terrified to make it worse.

“She shouldn't have been on the road,” James said, his voice hollow. Why was he saying this? *Shut up, shut, up, shut up*— “I called her. She came because of me. I was going to kill myself.”

This time Regulus did flinch. It didn't feel good, it made James feel worse.

What was James doing? He was hurting Regulus. This was bad. This was very bad. He needed to get the fuck out, he needed to breathe. Fuck, why couldn't he breathe?

“James, James, James.” He didn't know when he'd sunk to the floor, but Regulus was hovering over him, his voice a whisper. “Hey, can I touch you?”

James tried to speak, but fuck, he couldn't breathe.

“Just nod, or shake your head. Yes or no?”

Gasping, James managed to nod. Then, Regulus's hands were on him. They were warm, real, pulling him close. James was freezing. There was a blackness rising up his throat, eating up his organs. He was rotting, rotting, *rotting*. Sick from the inside out. He was sure if you cut open his veins, he'd spill out black sludge.

Regulus was warm. James pressed his face into Regulus's chest, and he sobbed. It didn't even feel right. It wasn't cathartic, James was just aching. His head was spinning. He couldn't breathe.

Regulus was warm.

A whisper. "If I ever ask you to marry me, say no."

Regulus stiffened, his hand on James's neck. If he hadn't, James wouldn't have been sure his words were loud enough to be heard.

"I don't want to say no."

"You'd be better off. You should have someone better."

Regulus dropped his head, resting his cheek on top of James's head. "I just want you. I've only ever wanted you."

You shouldn't. Stop, stop, stop. I'll ruin you. I'll hurt you. I destroy everything I touch.

"I'm awful, Regulus. I lost my job. I didn't tell anyone. I dropped out of uni. I won't be able to afford to stay in London. I don't have anywhere to go. I'm fucked."

"That's okay," Regulus whispered, his voice weak. "We can figure it out."

James didn't want Regulus to figure it out. James wanted to set him free.

Regulus

a pathological people pleaser

Regulus remembered the day he'd *really* fallen in love with James. He'd had a crush—a huge all-consuming crush—for many years. But still, that's what it was: a crush. The day he'd fallen in love, he was seventeen.

He'd been in therapy, and Sirius had called in a panic. Remus was feeling particularly ill, and they'd decided to go to the hospital.

“It's probably fine, he insists he's not that bad off. But I'm scared, and with how rough last month was—”

“That's fine,” Regulus insisted. “Take him, I'll find my way home.”

“No, James is already on his way. Is that okay?”

“I- yeah, Sirius. That's fine.”

He'd had to hide the shake of his voice. Sirius was preoccupied enough that he didn't notice. James, however, did. It was hard to hide the redness of his eyes, a telltale sign that Regulus had been crying.

Everyone asked Regulus if he was okay.

He'd learned to expect it in the months since his accident. James didn't ask; maybe it was clear that Regulus wasn't. Therapy was hard, living was hard. Regulus had decided he was going to continue to exist. Mostly, it was because he knew it'd piss at least a few people off. Still, it was hard, learning to live was hard. So, fuck it, he *had* cried in therapy and now James knew that he'd been crying.

It was freezing as they stepped outside. Even in the heat of James's still-warm car, Regulus shivered, sniffing.

James didn't put the car in drive, instead, he glanced at Regulus before wordlessly pulling off his jumper.

Regulus blinked in shock as James handed it over. "So you're not cold," he'd explained, as if maybe that were the part confusing Regulus.

James never really looked at Regulus. Even when he did, Regulus was being seen right through. The gesture was simply polite, and he was only there as a favor to Sirius. That didn't stop Regulus's teenage heart.

From that day on, it beat for James Potter.

"I'm sorry about the other night," Regulus said, as soon as he shut the door to Sirius and Remus's room. "I'm sorry I didn't come talk to you yesterday when Remus said you were looking for me. I just wasn't ready."

"Regulus—"

"No, I'm sorry, Sirius. I-I was upset about something else, and I lashed out at you."

Sirius was silent, blinking at Regulus, his mouth in a thin line. "Sit," he said finally, patting the bed next to him.

Regulus felt strangely like a scolded child. Or what he imagined a scolding would feel like if you had parents who never raised a hand to you. Now, Regulus just felt ashamed, he felt as if he'd disappointed his brother.

Regulus didn't move, and Sirius sighed, reaching out a hand. "C'mere, Reggie," he said softly. "I'm not mad anymore, I just want you to sit."

Slowly, Regulus obeyed, sitting down on the bed next to Sirius. Instantly, Sirius put an arm around Regulus's shoulders, pulling him close. It was a little rougher than necessary and so *brotherly* that Regulus felt strangely young.

Regulus let his head drop onto his brother's shoulder, and Sirius turned his head so they were leaning into each other.

"The day I realized you'd almost died, and I wasn't there I promised myself I'd never let anything happen to you ever again," Sirius spoke quietly, murmuring into Regulus's hair. "I realize now that was incredibly stupid. Because I can't shelter you, it's too late to anyway. All I do is worry, and it makes things worse."

"I don't mind the worrying," Regulus said quickly. "I'd rather you worry than not care at all. I'm sorry for lashing out."

"It's okay. I told you, Reggie, I'm not mad. I'm just confused. I- you know you can tell me things?"

Silence. Regulus could hear his heart beating in his ears.

"I was going to kill myself."

Regulus had thought of James's words every second since the day before. It looped in his head. He couldn't sleep, he couldn't fight the indescribable fear.

In fact, he'd spent half the night sitting outside James and Marlene's room in terror. Was James going to do something? Was Regulus overreacting? Because Regulus had wanted to die once, but he didn't now. If someone started treating him like he was going to break because of something he'd felt years ago, he would snap. So, he didn't say anything because

James didn't say anything about *now*. Maybe it was an old thing. Maybe he didn't think that anymore either.

James talked about the future. People who were suicidal didn't do that, right?

Right?

But he'd quit his job and dropped out of school. He didn't have any plans for after summer. That was a bad sign. That was probably bad.

What was Regulus supposed to do? Should he tell Sirius? But that would mean explaining everything, and James wasn't ready. Honestly, Regulus was a little worried about that, too. He didn't think they'd get it. Sirius certainly wouldn't. Regulus didn't think he'd be *angry*, exactly. But he'd be upset that they'd kept it from him, he wouldn't understand the two of them.

"I know. If there was something urgent, I'd tell you."

Lies.

How had this happened?

Regulus had known the entire time. He'd known from the first phone call he overheard that James was struggling. He'd seen all the little bits. He hadn't meant to take it on as a burden of his own, and he didn't think James wanted that either. In fact, he'd spent more time pulling back than opening up. Regulus didn't know what had happened with James's mum. He still didn't know where James had gotten the scar or what exactly he was struggling with.

Something was deeply, seriously wrong. James wouldn't want Regulus to handle it, but a part of him felt like he needed to.

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure,” Regulus lied.

Chapter End Notes

So... um.

I decided to post early because I got it finished fast and my beta got it finished fast (girlbossing) and it's Rosh Hashanah this weekend, so probably better earlier anyway! Anyway, pls don't send me your therapy bills, I'm a college student and they will bounce back. I have no money for u guys. If I did, I'd give it freely.

Also, you may notice that Regulus was the one who got the "pathological people pleaser" line? I was extremely clever for that and I've been planning it the entire time... SEE James isn't the pathological people pleaser IT'S REGULUS! Regulus, who has kept James's secrets and sacrificed what he really wants time and time again to please James... 🤔 and ofc the peak of this fic revolves around this concept (as you'll see next chapter...)

Also the final chapter count is up btw! So we only have like four more weeks (if I remember correctly) of ppp and I'll miss it dearly.

See you next week!! <333

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Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

No one, it turns out, really knows one another.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Marlene

“It’s really over,” Marlene said, her gaze fixed on the bedroom wall.

She felt the bed dip next to her, a soft hand on her shoulder. “Do you think it was the right thing to do?”

“I think the idea of it being *right* doesn’t even apply anymore,” Marlene mumbled. “It hurts.”

James put an arm around her shoulder, pulling her close. “Of course, it does.”

“But I-I don’t *regret* it, James. I’d been thinking about it for a long time. Neither of us were really tuned into the relationship anymore, I feel firm in the belief that it wouldn’t have worked out. So, I don’t regret it. Doesn’t that mean it shouldn’t hurt?”

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” James said softly. “You still ended a relationship, whether you regret it or not. Maybe it was the right thing for both of you. That doesn’t mean it can’t hurt.”

Marlene sniffed, letting her head rest on James's shoulder. "Have you ever been in love?" she asked suddenly.

James didn't respond instantly. She listened to the sound of his breath. Just as she was beginning to find it strange how long he'd been silent, he spoke. "Yeah," he murmured. "I have."

Marlene lifted her head at that, pulling back to look him in the eye. He looked tired. She was beginning to suspect he hadn't been sleeping well. In the days they'd been sharing a room, she often heard him shifting or getting up in the night.

"Really?" Marlene asked in surprise. "Do you mean Lily—"

"No," James said instantly. "Not Lily. Someone else."

Marlene blinked. "What? *When?*" James was one of her best friends, she couldn't imagine how she didn't know about it.

"I- it's recent. It's careful and not going to last." He said the words with a strange finality; Marlene couldn't explain the chill it sent up her spine.

"You sound sure of that?" she said questioningly. She wanted to pry, but James so rarely kept secrets, it felt delicate.

James hummed in agreement. "I am. It's okay. I'm glad I got to be in love. I don't know if everyone gets that chance."

"Oh," Marlene said, sudden clarity hitting her. "I'm glad, too, with Dorcas... Even though it hurt and it didn't work, it was worth it. All of it."

James smiled gently. “I know. You loved Dorcas, and for a long time, you were good together. That doesn’t stop mattering. Life is complicated, and you’re both wonderful people. Not every story has a happy ending, that doesn’t stop it from meaning something.”

It *did* mean something.

Dorcas had grown up with Marlene. They’d grown with each other, loved each other. They’d made something together. Even though Marlene *was* sure she’d made the right decision, even though not every relationship was going to last... she was still grateful for everything they’d had. There was something sacred. Fifteen-year-old Marlene McKinnon would always be in love with Dorcas Meadowes, and Marlene liked it that way. She liked to think that somewhere out there, she was forever fifteen. Running through the fields, Dorcas’s hand on her wrist, flowers in their hair. There was something so beautifully special about being a teenager and in love.

“Marls?”

Marlene tilted her head, meeting James’s warm eyes. “Yeah?”

He paused. A second passed, and then another. “Nothing. I just love you.”

Smiling, Marlene flicked him on the cheek. “I love you too. Not sure why we’re being sappy, let’s stop.”

James returned her smile, a little fainter. “Never fear,” he told her. “I won’t do it again.”

James

James Potter was deeply and severely unhappy. Maybe he had always been that way, he couldn't remember a time when it was different. A time without the gaping black hole in his chest.

Regulus

Regulus felt like he was walking on eggshells. It's not like he was scared *of* James, but he was scared of *something*. Regulus felt like everything was slipping through his fingers.

He finally had James, something he'd been dreaming of since he was a kid. And it was perfect. James was always looking for Regulus in every room. James cared, he noticed. They shared secret smiles and stolen kisses. It was even better than before because they didn't have to pretend that sex was always the end goal. They could exist together, closely and intimately.

James was perfect, to Regulus. He was also falling apart at the seams. Regulus wasn't sure what had triggered it. Maybe it was nothing in particular and he'd just hit his breaking point. Either way, Regulus could tell he wasn't sleeping, wasn't eating enough, and seemed spaced out constantly. His breakdown the day earlier was proof enough.

Remus and Regulus were at the kitchen table, as they often liked to start their morning. Remus was reading, and Regulus was looking over a piece he needed to finish learning. He only practiced when there was no one around. Obviously, he was no stranger to performing, but Regulus never wanted his friends and family to hear him at anything less than perfection (except for Barty, but as a fellow musician, that was different). Regulus knew they were all planning on going to lunch later, and he figured he'd stay home and practice. Playing on his keyboard with headphones was okay, but it wasn't the same as playing the actual piano in the living room.

It was already pretty late in the day, the afternoon well underway. Sirius and some of the others were in the pool and Regulus could hear them splashing around.

“Hey boys,” Marlene greeted, coming down the stairs. She was freshly showered and smelled of flowers as she plopped down next to Regulus.

“Have you seen James?” Remus asked her. “I’m not sure if he wants to come to lunch.”

“Hm, he’s still asleep.”

Regulus’s head jerked up, looking at the clock. It was late, it was way too late for James to be asleep. He always woke early.

“Regulus?” Marlene questioned as he pushed his chair back with enough urgency that he almost tipped it over.

“Let him go,” Remus said softly, but he sounded anxious. Regulus didn’t look back to see her confused expression. He hurried up the stairs and into the room James now shared with Marlene.

As he slowly pushed the door open, he peered inside. The drapes were pulled shut and the room was dark. Regulus could see James's form tucked in bed.

Regulus shut the door, creeping across the room. He climbed into James’s bed. The other man didn’t come out from under the blankets, but he shifted enough that Regulus knew it was an invitation.

“Hi,” Regulus whispered, climbing under the blankets despite the heat. James didn’t make more than a small noise of acknowledgment and Regulus reached for him. At the hand on his back, James slowly rolled over. He scooted to press his face into Regulus’s chest. Normally, they slept with James holding Regulus, so it was a change but not an unwelcome one. Regulus instantly wrapped his arms protectively around James’s shoulders.

“Hi,” James mumbled weakly into Regulus’s chest. The response was delayed, but Regulus let him know that it was appreciated by dropping kisses on his forehead.

They were silent for a long time, James breathing deeply. After an hour or so, there was a small knock on the door and Remus poked his head in. He paused as he saw them wrapped up in each other. “We were going to lunch...”

“Okay, James and I are going to stay,” Regulus said, barely a whisper.

Remus looked concerned, but he just nodded. “I- okay. Yeah, I’ll let everyone know.” Remus backed out of the room, shutting the door, and James shifted. He wasn’t asleep and Regulus knew it, but he figured James didn’t want Remus to know that.

“Regulus?”

“Yeah, Jamie?” Regulus asked, one hand moving to thread through James’s hair.

“When you died... you woke up, and you wanted to live?”

“Yeah.”

“You were scared?”

“I was. I had more to do. I didn’t want to live the way I had been, but I wanted to live *somehow*. In a different way. I had more to give, I guess,” Regulus said softly.

It took James a long time to speak again, but Regulus knew he’d asked for a reason. He waited, holding James close. Hoping he could somehow project just how inexplicably, irrefutably in love he was.

“I was angry,” James murmured, his voice muffled. “I was, I am. I’ve always been angry. I think there’s something wrong with me, but you... Regulus, you light up something else

inside of me. Something soft and warm..." James trailed off. A pause, his voice lowering even more. "I love you."

It was the first time James had actually said it. Regulus should have been happy.

It wasn't that Regulus didn't believe him. It'd been pretty obvious after Regulus's confession, but something had held James back. So, what had changed? Why was it urgent enough for James to say it now?

Regulus was scared.

The fear was comparable to only two times in his life—the day Sirius had left, nearly not making it out alive, and the day Regulus had died.

They all had the same feeling. The falling, falling, falling. The fear creeping up his throat, spinning in his vision.

"I love you too."

They lay together for a long time. Regulus had never put much stock in any god, but he sent a prayer up anyway. He hoped that somehow, he was doing something, that this was enough.

It didn't feel like enough.

Eventually, James managed to convince himself to get up. He looked like every movement pained him. As if simply existing was too much. "Gonna shower," he muttered, and Regulus only let him go after grabbing him by the face and kissing him with every bit of love and appreciation.

Maybe it worked, because when they broke apart, James managed a half smile.

He left Regulus sitting there in the bedroom, heading for the bathroom.

Regulus just stood there, a sinking feeling eating away at his gut. He jumped so hard he nearly fell over when suddenly, a phone began to ring. It wasn't his own and he looked around, finding James's phone sitting on the bedside table.

There was a picture of James and his dad on the screen as the contact picture. Regulus paused.

I should just let it ring.

He didn't. He grabbed it, frozen, heart pounding.

It wasn't his business. It wasn't. Fuck—

Regulus answered the phone.

“Hello?”

A silence. *“You're not James.”*

“No, uh- this is Regulus.”

“Regulus,” Monty said slowly. *“Is James okay? Is something wrong?”*

“No, no, he's fine. I mean, he's in the shower. I- sorry, I saw his phone was ringing. I shouldn't have answered—”

“Is something wrong, Regulus?”

“I- I don’t know. Maybe...” The last word came out weak. “Yes,” he whispered hoarsely.

He wasn’t sure Monty heard him at first. He didn’t reply for a beat.

“What’s going on?” Monty spoke calmly, but Regulus could hear fear under his words.

“I’m scared,” Regulus whispered, and he didn’t mean for his voice to break but it did, *fuck*.

“It’s okay, son,” Monty said gently. *“Just tell me what’s going on.”*

Regulus swallowed, finding the words with a shaky breath. “He’s been acting strange. I mean, I know he’s been struggling for a while but the past week or so has been really bad. He doesn’t sleep or he sleeps all day. And he’s said things, about how he quit his job and isn’t going to school and has no future. I know maybe I’m overreacting, but based on some of the things I know, I’m afraid he’s going to do something. It’s felt like he’s saying goodbye,” Regulus said, his words becoming more frantic the more he talked.

“Okay, okay, Regulus,” Monty said, sounding a little shaky. *“Has he told you things? About himself? About the accident?”*

Monty was quick to react and efficient in his words, but his voice was kind. Regulus had heard James speak of his father, heard bits of their arguments. It didn’t match up with what he thought he knew. How was this the man the same one James seemed to fight so hard against?

“I know that he nearly died. I’ve seen the scar.” Monty thankfully didn’t question the details of that. “He told me he thought it was his fault his mum died, that it was because he was trying to kill himself.”

Monty sucked in a sharp breath. “*Okay, he trusts you.*” Monty spoke quickly. Effie Potter had always seemed to be the softer gentler of the two. Regulus could tell Monty was the kind of person who took action, forming a plan and working the situation out in his mind quickly.

“*That’s good. I- I’ll just tell you the rest. Maybe I shouldn’t but... he trusts you, and considering the situation....*” Regulus could hear James’s father standing on the other side of the line. “*It’s not James’s fault, fuck I can’t believe he thinks that—well, no. I can believe it. Oh god. I- okay...*” Monty tried to steady himself, pausing a moment. “*He wanted to kill himself, yes. Then after the funeral, I made him come home because I knew he was a danger to himself.*” Regulus remembered that, the months when James had been absent. “*In that time... he drove his car into a tree. He tried to say it wasn’t on purpose, but he was dead sober, it was broad daylight and there was no one on the road. It shouldn’t have happened. Eventually, he did admit to it being purposeful. James was put in treatment after that. He was diagnosed with BPD, but he wouldn’t keep up treatment or take his meds. He’s been a ticking timebomb, and all I’ve been able to do is watch.*”

“Okay...” Regulus said slowly, his head spinning. This wasn’t exactly surprising information, but still, the sudden factual and concrete explanations were hard to wrap his head around. It all felt so abrupt, too much information piled on at once. This whole time, Regulus had been grasping at puzzle pieces and bits of James Potter. Now, it was all being dropped on his lap.

There was a moment of quiet. Then: “*You and James, right?*”

“Huh?”

“*You have a relationship?*”

“I- yeah...” Regulus admitted. “H-how did you know that?”

“*I heard the way he listened to you, and the way you talk... It’s clear.*”

“I thought everyone thought James was straight.”

“Well,” Monty began, and he sounded sad but somehow still fond. “James thought he was straight. The worst part of having kids is that sometimes you have to let them figure out the hard shit on their own. It wasn’t my place to put that revelation on him, but I guess he figured it out.”

“Yeah,” Regulus said, unsure of what else to say.

“Okay,” Monty took a deep breath. “Can you copy down my number and text me from your own phone? Send me the address of the villa?”

“You’re coming here?”

“Yeah, I know the signs, Regulus. I’m worried, you’re worried. I know you can tell James is in a dangerous place, otherwise, you wouldn’t have answered the phone. So, I’m coming there, and I’m taking him home before he tries to kill himself.”

Regulus nodded even though Monty couldn’t see him. He could feel tears pressing at the backs of his eyes, but he held them off. “Okay... I-I love him.”

“Oh, kid,” Monty said softly. “I know. It’s going to be alright. I’ll book the first flight, see if I can be there by tonight. Just keep an eye on him.”

“Okay,” Regulus said softly.

“I don’t need to tell James that you spoke to me,” Monty said gently. “If you’d rather him not know why I’ll be there..”

“He’s going to be really mad,” Regulus said. “I know. He might never forgive me, but I don’t want to lie to him. Even if he fucking breaks up with me... I’d rather be broken up and James be okay and alive. I’ll accept whatever happens.”

There was a pause. *“I’m glad it’s you Regulus,”* Monty told him. *“I’m glad you’re the person James has fallen in love with. I hope you’re together for a very long time.”*

“How do *you* know that James loves me?” Regulus questioned.

“Because he listened to you. James never listens to anyone, and I heard you over the phone. That’s why I haven’t called as much as I usually do. I knew it wasn’t working, and well... I thought and hoped that maybe you were helping each other out.”

“Oh...” Regulus said dumbly. “I- okay?”

Monty chuckled softly. *“Just text me the address. I’ll see you soon, okay?”*

“Okay. I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” Monty said firmly.

When the line went dead after goodbyes had been exchanged, Regulus was left feeling a swirl of emotions he didn’t know how to explain. He felt like he was betraying James, but at the same time, he knew it was the right thing to do. He’d meant what he said to Monty: he’d take whatever came, just as long as James was okay.

James

James is eleven.

He’s standing outside his house.

He can see his parents through the window.

They're dancing, the lights are on, spilling out across the yard, painting the lawn a dim yellow color. His mum laughs as Monty spins her around.

He's been struggling in school. He can't pay attention; he can't do his work. He's not failing his exams, but he's not doing as well as he used to. His parents don't yell, but his dad is disappointed. There's a crease in his mother's forehead. He's doing this. It's his fault.

The light is painting the lawn, illuminating each blade of grass. His parents exist without him. He thinks about what would happen if he just turned around. Just spun and walked away, never to be seen again.

He's itching. The itching never goes away. It turns into something else, stinging, aching, screaming.

James wants to turn, he wants to leave.

His mum opens the door.

"Are you coming, sweetheart?"

Silence. Quiet.

She waits.

All James ever wanted was to be loved.

He was beginning to think maybe that was a lie. Because plenty of people loved James. More than he deserved. But it was never enough.

James needed something that didn't exist. Something to fill the void in his chest. Whatever he was looking for, it wasn't out there.

Plenty of people loved him.

Surely, they did.

Right?

“Are you coming, sweetheart?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

Sirius

The day started normal. Even though Remus seemed preoccupied through lunch, and neither James nor Regulus came, everything else was fine. Even Dorcas and Marlene got on well enough. They kind of just existed since their apparent breakup. The entire situation was confusing to Sirius, but they both seemed to be handling it surprisingly well. He always thought you were supposed to hate your exes.

So, they went to lunch, and they came home. Regulus was shifty. That wasn't new, still, Sirius frowned. He watched him; he watched Remus who was watching both Regulus and James. He saw all these little pieces, but he wasn't privy to how they fit together. It was frustrating, but just your average fucking day.

Then, at some point after nightfall, James went outside and Regulus followed. The door shut, enclosing them into the darkness outside. *That* was confusing. Sirius couldn't figure out what they might be talking about as they stepped out into the yard. In fact, Sirius didn't really get it at all. He knew they never liked each other; Sirius wasn't an idiot. He knew living together was hard, but they didn't even need to interact now that they weren't in the same room. So what were they talking about?

Sirius watched them for a while, craning his neck to see through the window. Eventually, Lily said something about her upcoming wedding and Sirius turned away to give his input. She was in the process of describing the color scheme options when suddenly the door burst open, and Lily instantly fell quiet.

“What the fuck is wrong with you? What the fuck, Regulus?”

Regulus was stepping into the house, and he was clearly upset. James was right there next to him. He was yelling. Truly, fully yelling.

Sirius didn't realize until that moment that he'd never really seen James angry, not like that. The worst Sirius had ever heard was snippets when James was on the phone with his dad, and that had been shocking. James didn't snap, he didn't lose his cool. Sure, he *could* be mean, honestly, the two of them had been pretty awful at times in school, but they'd matured since then. Even so, Sirius was far more likely to lose his shit. James would often toe the line, but when it was too far, he stepped back, pulling Sirius with him.

Now, he was angry. It practically came off of him in waves; it took Sirius a shocked moment to even register what was being said.

“How could you do this to me? After *everything*? I trusted you!”

“James, please just hear me out!” Regulus came to a sudden stop in the living room. He was reaching out, James was pulling back. Regulus's voice was raised too, but he didn't seem angry. No, Regulus was *crying*. His eyes were wide and there were tears streaked down his face. Whatever argument was going on, it was clearly well underway at this point.

What the *fuck* was going on?

“No, no, I don't want to fucking hear you out. You absolute piece of shit! What is wrong with you? I don't want to see you, I don't want to talk to you. I can't even fucking look at you.”

“James—”

“This is done. We are done. You’re trying to get me fucking locked up! You think I’m crazy! I’m not crazy, Regulus. But you’re just like everyone else. Just like my dad. Has this been your plan the entire time? To go behind my back? Get me to open up and tell you the truth just so you could get me put away? Have you been talking to my dad the entire time?”

“No, no! I talked to him once, that was it! Just today. He was calling, and I was scared.”

“Oh, you’re *scared*,” James mocked, his mouth twisting cruelly. “Scared, hm? Bullshit.”

“Do you hear yourself?” Regulus asked, his voice rising. He wiped angrily at his face, but the tears just kept coming. “You sound paranoid! I never planned any of this. I wasn’t out to get you, I care about you—”

“Bullshit! No, you don’t.”

“You can’t tell me what I feel! How are you conveniently forgetting *everything* that has happened? Have I not made myself clear?”

“You manipulated me,” James snarled. “You’ve been playing me this entire time haven’t you, maybe the sex was just an added bonus. Look at you, a nice little achievement, to get me to fuck you, huh? You don’t love me, you never loved me! I don’t love you!”

“That’s not true,” Regulus whispered, his face white in horror. “It’s not like that. I was the one who didn’t want to have sex. What are you even talking about?”

“Oh, that’s what you said,” James scoffed. “But it was all a manipulation tactic. Because you always ‘gave in’ anyway,” James said, making air quotes around the words.

“I gave in because I’ve been in love with you half my fucking life!”

“I don’t believe you!”

Holy fucking shit.

Sirius couldn't think, he couldn't do anything. The words barely made their way through his head, rattling around in circles. Sex, love? *What?*

“Then I don't know what to tell you, James.” Regulus sounded so painfully desperate, his voice cracking. “I *do* love you, James. I love you enough that I knew you'd hate me for this, and I still decided to do it anyway. I love you enough that I'd lose you if it means you're okay.”

“I am okay!”

“You're not! Do you think I don't see it? I know something is wrong and your dad agrees, and he told me everything, Jamie. He told me about how you tried to kill yourself—”

“That was an accident! He's lying. He's *lying*, Regulus. Don't you see? He's manipulating you! He's trying to turn you against me!”

Regulus was silent.

“Regulus,” James said pleadingly when he didn't respond.

“Oh, Jamie...” Regulus choked out. “He's not manipulating me. I'm not manipulating you. We care about you. I wish you could hear yourself.”

“You think I'm crazy,” James said angrily. “He told you I'm sick!”

“I don't think you're crazy, I'm just afraid you'll hurt yourself.”

“No, he told you I have BPD, right? I don’t. I don’t, okay? The doctors were wrong. I’m fine, I’m normal. The car crash was an accident.”

“Don’t lie to me,” Regulus said, his voice strangled.

“I’m not!” James threw a hand in the air. “Don’t let him take me! This is all your fucking fault! I hate you!”

James stepped forward in a rage, and Regulus flinched back. The room froze.

The silence was palpable, pressing down heavily from every corner. James stopped in his tracks, eyes wide, breathing heavily.

“You flinched.”

James spoke numbly, the anger mixed with something else. Part rage and part horror.

“It’s okay.” But it wasn’t. Regulus was nearly sobbing now and he took another step back, turning away so no one could see his face. He paused in the doorway and suddenly he was sliding to the ground using his hand to hold him up as he broke down. James moved, but *someone* seemed to remember how to act because Barty was up, stopping James in his tracks. He put a hand on James’s chest, preventing him from getting to Regulus.

“Get out of my fucking way,” James hissed.

“No.” Barty spoke firm, unshakable.

“I- I’m not going to hurt him. Do you think I’m going to hurt him? Does he think—”

“You *are* hurting him,” Barty pushed at James just enough to force him to step backward, putting more distance between him and Regulus. “Do you get that? You are, and you’ll continue to. Haven’t I been clear? I told you Regulus was in love with you. You were supposed to do better. I trusted you because I *knew* you felt the same. I knew it, even when you didn’t. I *defended* you, Potter. Defended!”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about—”

“I do! Back the fuck up.”

“You don’t get to tell me what to do! Maybe you were in on it the whole time! What is this?”

“This is you having a breakdown. This is an episode, James. I *know*, I know better than fucking anyone. The paranoia, that feeling you’re having? You loved Regulus not forty minutes ago, didn’t you? Then you found out exactly whatever it was he did and suddenly you’re disgusted, you’re angry, you hate him? You’re splitting, okay? You were triggered, and I know that because I *do* know what I’m talking about. Because I’ve been there, but you’ve never really listened to me every time I try to talk about it because you’re so fucking ashamed!”

“I’m not like you! I’m not like that. I don’t have BPD! It was a mistake, it was just- just grief.”

“Really? So this is grief?”

“It’s betrayal! He went behind my back! Don’t you get that? He *should* cry! Regulus should be upset because I would never have done this to him!”

“You would! I really hope you would!” Barty snapped. “Because if Reg was on his last straw, if you thought he was going to kill himself, I’d hope you’d do *anything* to stop him. Even betray him or whatever the fuck you want to call it.”

“No, no, no, no! It’s not like that! So what if I kill myself? Who actually cares? None of you need me! You’d all be better off. You don’t know me! You don’t like me! If I die, so what? The world is a better place and I set you all free.”

“Oh my god,” Lily whispered, her voice cracking next to Sirius. She grabbed for his hand. Sirius just held onto her tightly. Frozen. For the first time in his life, Sirius Black truly *choked*.

He didn’t do that; he’d spent his entire life learning to survive traumatizing situations. He was the one who reacted, who took control. But this time, Sirius couldn’t move.

He was so stupid. God, he needed to get up and do something. Go to Regulus or go to James. Just act in some way, *any* way. He couldn’t.

Something was going on. He’d known that, but whatever he thought it might have been. It sure as hell wasn’t *this*. *How?* How could Sirius have missed this?

All of the times James seemed weird. Even when Sirius had known he wasn’t okay. He thought it was school or an uncertain future... but not this, never this.

How long had James felt this way? How could Sirius never have noticed? They were supposed to be best friends. Did Sirius even really know James? How could he? He’d failed to pick up on any of it. He hadn’t realized whatever James was going through. Not to mention what was going on with James and Regulus.

James and Regulus? Who hated each other? When had that changed, and how did Sirius miss it?

“James...” Barty said, but despite his resolve a second ago, he didn’t seem to know what to do now.

The door opened. James flinched.

“No,” was the only word James said when his father stepped through the front door, pausing as he surveyed the scene.

Monty looked to James and Barty in the middle of the room, and then to Regulus who was still in the doorway.

“Oh, kid,” he said gently, kneeling down next to Regulus. “Come on, it’s okay, it’s going to be okay.” Monty put a hand on Regulus’s shoulder, glancing to James. “James,” he said. Just that, nothing more.

“Please, Dad.” James wasn’t yelling anymore. Somehow in a split second, everything had shifted. “Please, Dad, don’t make me go back. I don’t want to go to the hospital.” His voice was ragged, tears forming in the corner of his eyes.

“James, look at this. Look at yourself. Is this what you want?”

“I’m fine. I’m okay, it’s okay, I swear.” For the first time ever, not a single person believed him.

Silence.

Something snapped.

James was sliding to the ground, an anguished sound torn from his throat. “What did I do? What did I do? I’m sorry, I’m sorry I ruin everything. Oh my god.”

Monty was still crouched down next to Regulus, watching his son with an anguished gaze. “You’re not well, James. You haven’t been for a long time, and I love you so much. I just want you to be able to be happy. I want you to live. I know you think me the villain, I know

you think I'm plotting to lock you up. I never wanted that," Monty said fiercely. "I tried to avoid the hospital. I tried to help you handle it, and you hurt yourself. You keep spiraling time and time again, and you shouldn't have to live like that. You *don't* have to."

"I- no, I dunno..." James said hoarsely, his fingers were shaking. When his father stood, James scooted back, shrinking into himself.

Monty paused in his tracks; it was Barty who knelt down next to James, moving so they were knee-to-knee. Much to Sirius's surprise, Barty reached out, gently taking James's hand. It was strange and weird, and Sirius never thought they were friends. He never thought of Barty as being so gentle, but there was some understanding between them in that moment.

Barty leaned in, whispering to James.

"It's about making it past this moment."

James shook his head. "I don't want to make it past this. I'm so tired, oh god I- I'm so tired. There's something wrong with me, it's in my bones. I don't want to."

"You won't always feel that way."

"I always have."

"Doesn't mean you always will."

James shook his head again, jerkily, furiously. Barty turned, nodding at Regulus. "C'mere, Reg."

Stiffening, James's eyes widened. "No—"

“Yes, it’s okay, you’re not going to hurt him. He doesn’t think you’re going to, either. Right?”

Regulus scrambled to his feet, taking one hesitant step and then another. He shook his head jerkily at the question. Barty rocked back onto his heels, rising to his feet as Regulus took his place.

“I- Jamie?” Regulus whispered hoarsely. His cheeks were still wet with tears and James looked up, gaze flicking over his face.

“I’m scaring you.”

“Yeah,” Regulus choked out.

“I made you cry.”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not. I’m not supposed to be mean to you. I was supposed to stop hurting you.”

This time, Regulus didn’t say it was okay. A tense moment stretched between them. Regulus swallowed, letting out a pained exhale.

“I think I hate you,” James whispered. An admission, sharp and tinged with sorrow. “I don’t want to. But I do, I’m so angry. I can’t believe you’d do this to me.”

“I hope you get it one day. If not, that’s okay. I don’t care, I don’t give a fuck as long as it means you’re safe.”

“I hate you,” James said again, but he didn’t move as Regulus reached out, catching James’s face in his hands.

“I love you.”

“Stop.”

“Can’t make me,” Regulus said with a weak smile. It fell flat and hollow in the thick, suffocating air of the living room.

“I hate you,” James said, but he caught Regulus’s wrist in his hand. “I’m pretty sure I loved you earlier.”

“It’ll come back.”

“You think?”

“I hope.”

Silence. *One, two, three, four...*

No one moved, no one breathed.

“Let’s go, James,” Monty spoke, low and gentle.

James began to shake his head, but over Regulus’s shoulder, Barty shook his own. “No, Potter. Go.”

And it was somehow Barty Crouch Jr., of all the people in the world, that James finally listened to.

Sirius could help but feel he was standing in a room of strangers. *James* felt like a stranger.

Maybe, Sirius thought, no one really knew one another.

Chapter End Notes

Writing this chapter was like fighting a fucking WAR. It still isn't up to the standards I want it to be, but my beta helped me do a lot of the things I wanted to, so as always all my love, respect and admiration for her. You guys have NO IDEA how much labor of love is put into this fic, not just from me and my beta, but from my friends too who help me work through all my little concerns. ANYWAY, it's not perfect but I don't think there is a perfect, and I'll never be 100% satisfied. This is the scene I've had in mind since I started this fic in May (it's inspired by call your mom by noah kahan btw), so I can't possibly make it live up to what I built it up to in my head.

I definitely recommend you guys look up the term "splitting" in BPD because it's super relevant to this chapter and James's behavior. If you do any have questions, feel free to send me an ask, I've answered a couple bpd questions related to ppp on tumblr. As long as it isn't invasive (and can't be answered by a simple google search) I don't mind them. I really hope this fic is something that can bring to light and educate people a little on things on BPD.

Also, I have in-depth, detailed reasons behind every single one of the character's actions in this chapter, so if you're wondering, why didn't Sirius do anything, why James did xy&z, etc. feel free to bring it up. I'm happy to talk about it, I know my characters and I busted my ass worrying about their actions in this chapter.

Until, next week <33

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Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Regulus knew how to swim; he wished everyone would stop waiting for him to drown.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sirius

Regulus was driving.

Sirius didn't know why. He'd instantly grabbed the keys from Barty and gotten in the driver's seat.

No one protested because Regulus hadn't said a single word since they'd left Italy. After James and Monty had departed, Barty had pulled Regulus into a hug, and they'd stayed like that for a long time. No one had spoken, no one asked questions.

Dorcas had tried after Regulus had disappeared upstairs and the quiet was beginning to suffocate Sirius.

“Barty, what the hell is going on—”

“Don't,” Barty had responded sharply, and that was that. No one dared to say anything more.

The next morning, Remus said he thought that Regulus needed to go home. Regulus hadn't agreed, but he hadn't disagreed either. No one really felt like a holiday anymore. So, they

packed up the house and booked the first tickets home.

Now, Regulus was driving. Barty and Evan were in the back along with Remus and Sirius, the rest had gone their separate ways—filing into cabs. Barty was the only one careless enough with money to leave his own car in the long-stay carpark while they were gone. Honestly, Sirius had barely paid attention to the plans or why they were driving with Barty and Evan this time. Remus said something about the route being more straightforward. It didn't matter, that was something Remus had handled. Sirius didn't have the mental capacity to worry about car arrangements.

Sirius's head was still reeling, sickness roiling in his gut. *How did I not know? How did I not know? How did I not know?*

Silence, silence, silence. Sirius couldn't remember the last time anyone had properly spoken. It felt like they were in mourning.

James wasn't dead, but it felt like *something* had died.

Regulus's eyes were fixed on the road; the radio was playing softly, just a low hum.

Sirius didn't know what happened, but one moment his brother was staring blankly out the windshield, and the next he was taking a shaky breath, covering his hand with his mouth so a sob wouldn't escape.

“Pull over,” Sirius said instantly.

Regulus didn't. There were tears in his eyes, there was no way he could see properly.

“Regulus,” Sirius said in warning. “Pull over *right now*.”

It took a second before he obeyed, driving the car to the side of the road and putting it in park. Regulus instantly broke into violent tears, leaning forward and letting his head hit the steering wheel.

Sirius unhooked, leaning across the middle to grab his brother and hug him tightly. He wasn't sure he'd ever seen Regulus cry this much. At least, not since he'd come back into Sirius's life so many years ago.

Regulus buried his face into Sirius's shoulder. "I'm sorry, I- *god*, I'm so sorry," he said in between sobs, his voice muffled by Sirius's shirt.

"It's not your fault," Sirius whispered, rubbing soothing circles on Regulus's back.

"It is, Sirius, it is! I knew! I had the chance to tell you, tell anyone. I knew something was wrong and I didn't say a word. I waited until the very last moment. I think James was saying his *goodbyes*, Sirius, and I waited! I knew all the signs, but I was so fucking stupid because sometimes he'd talk about the future. And I thought: suicidal people don't make plans for the future, *right?* But then he said that I'd be better off, and I knew, I knew, *I knew!* I knew I—"

"And then you did the right thing," Sirius said fiercely. "You called Monty, right? You saw things no one else did, and you helped him."

"He hates me!"

"Maybe, but I don't think he'll feel that way forever."

Regulus pulled back suddenly, eyes red. "Sirius, I fucked your best friend."

"I—" Sirius faltered. "Yeah, I'm a little fucking confused about that," he admitted. "But I figured there were probably better moments to ask..."

Regulus blinked, wiping at his face. “I fucked him a lot, or he fucked me—”

“Regulus, *please*,” Sirius choked out. “Yeah, I get it. Jesus.”

“I’m just making sure you understand.”

“I *don’t*.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“No,” Sirius swallowed. He felt like he should have been, but he couldn’t scrounge up the feeling at the moment. Really, he just felt stupid. “I just... I really thought you hated each other. Like James pretended to play nice, but I knew he found you unlikable. And it was always obvious you had a vendetta.”

“I was in love with him,” Regulus muttered. “Since we were kids, for a long time.”

“Oh...” Sirius choked out. “I-I had no idea.”

“I know, I didn’t want you to.”

Sirius swallowed. “Okay... and James? Did he feel that way too?”

“No, not then. It was just me and my stupid fucking crush. I was a dick to him, so I never had to think about the fact that he’d never see me. Then we were rooming together, and I started seeing him. For real, all these things he was hiding. He wasn’t who I thought he was, and it just made it worse. I just loved him more. But the more of him I saw, the more he saw me. Then we started sleeping together, and it was awful because I loved him. And it was just sex, but I don’t know... somewhere along the lines he figured out that maybe he loved me too.”

“The fight after the club...” Sirius said slowly, so many pieces falling into place. “His sexuality shit, that was because of you.”

“Yeah. I tried to end things after that, but he wouldn’t let me. He said he wanted a relationship and fuck—” Regulus broke off, his voice becoming choked. “I really thought that maybe everything would be okay.”

“Oh, Reggie...” Sirius said softly, reaching out to brush his little brother’s curls from his face. Regulus wasn’t a child anymore. As much as he believed Sirius didn’t understand that, he did. He wasn’t an idiot. He knew Regulus kept things from him, that he hooked up with people on nights out and went wild when he thought Sirius didn’t know. He knew Regulus was a full-grown adult and truly, he respected that. But Regulus was still *his*. Always Sirius’s baby brother, no matter how old he got. Sirius always wished he could explain that instinct, the protectiveness. It didn’t mean he didn’t respect or trust his brother, it just meant Sirius loved him.

“I’m sorry,” Regulus said quietly.

“I’m not mad. I’d like James as my brother-in-law.”

Regulus hit Sirius lightly on the shoulder, letting out a sound that was a half-sob, half-laugh. “Okay,” he said, shaking his head. “Okay...”

--

“Moony, are you asleep?”

“Yes,” Remus muttered, sleeping.

Sirius scoffed, turning over to face his partner. “I’ve been thinking.”

It was two a.m. and Remus was clearly tired after the week they'd had. "Okay," he said anyway, blinking tiredly before reaching out to rub his thumb along Sirius's cheekbone.

"You and me, we're forever, right?"

"Of course," Remus replied instantly. No hesitation, no question.

"So..." Sirius swallowed, feeling nervous to speak the idea that had been chasing its way around his head. "So maybe there's no compromise. You don't want a new place, and I need to move for work. We've talked around in circles for ages. We can't both just stay, but we can't just get another place and you can't stay here on your own... so, maybe..."

"Maybe?" Remus prompted when Sirius trailed off.

"Maybe we don't live together."

There was a silence and Sirius bit at his lip anxiously.

"So, you're saying..."

"Just the living situation," Sirius hurried to clarify. "We're the same as ever, and I sleep over when I can, and you stay with me when you can. We see each other all the time and we stay together, but we just live separately. I know, it's weird, right? Because we've been living together for ages, but isn't that normal at this age? To *not* live with your significant other? We've had it in our heads that we have to stay in the same place, but it just isn't going to work right now. I respect you and I get that you want to save your own money and pay for a place equally, but you can't right now, so..."

"So, we live separately," Remus finished. Sirius couldn't read his tone and he shifted onto his elbows.

“Is that okay?”

“Sirius fucking Black,” Remus surged forward, grabbing Sirius by the face and kissing him hard. “How did we not think of that?” he muttered, pulling back to press a gentler kiss to his face. “What the fuck?”

“I dunno,” Sirius said softly, nudging his nose into Remus’s cheek and breathing deeply. “We were caught up in the thought that we *had* to live together right now but... it’s just not going to work. And we have forever, right? So, one day we’ll get a house and get married and all of that, but it doesn’t need to happen right this instant. I love you, and we’ll be okay?”

“We will,” Remus said hoarsely. “Yeah... we will.”

Sirius leaned forward wrapping his arms around Remus’s waist and pushing him backward onto the bed.

“I love you,” Sirius mumbled into Remus’s shoulder.

“I love you too... I- are you okay?”

“I am, I will be.”

“We see James tomorrow,” Remus said quietly.

“I know. I’m scared but... I need to see him. Regulus needs to see him, I think.”

“I agree.”

Sirius paused for a beat. “Remus?”

“Hm?”

“You knew, didn’t you?”

Remus let out a quiet breath. “I- I knew about James and Regulus,” he admitted.

“I assumed.”

“I- I didn’t know the other stuff. I mean, I realized that James was a really good liar, and that scared me. But I didn’t think—” Remus made a frustrated sound as he seemed to lose the words. “I- I just didn’t think it was anything like what it was.”

“I- do you think James is going to be okay?” Sirius asked, his voice small.

“Oh, Pads... I don’t know. I really don’t know. I hope so.”

Sirius tried to respond but the emotions of the past week were catching up to him. Instead, he just let out a sob and Remus held him as this time, Sirius cried.

Regulus

“Regulus?”

His head jerked up. “Hm?”

“We’re leaving soon. Are you ready?”

Regulus blinked at Remus for a second before nodding slowly. “Yeah.”

Remus just watched him for a moment before turning around and checking over his shoulder. Sirius was in the bedroom getting ready. Seeing they were alone, Remus sat down on the sofa next to Regulus.

“You’re sure you want to see James?”

Regulus felt a deep frown tugging at his lips. “Of course I do,” he said in confusion. “Why?”

“It’s just... he wasn’t kind to you, Regulus. I know he probably didn’t mean it, but he said some pretty awful shit.”

“Yeah, but he didn’t mean it,” Regulus said stiffly.

“Right, but he still said it. Just because James didn’t mean it, doesn’t make it okay.”

“No, no,” Regulus said quickly. “That’s not what I mean, you don’t get it.”

Remus looked at him, eyes searching. After a second, he reached out squeezing Regulus’s shoulder. “Okay, then... you can explain, if you want?” Remus suggested tentatively.

Regulus bit at the inside of his cheek, thinking for a long moment. It took a few breaths to find the right words. “For over a decade, I have treated James Potter like absolute shit. You know it, Sirius knows it, *everyone* knows it. I was in love with him, and I did it to hide it, but I was still absolutely awful to him... and you know what he did? *Nothing*. For years, he never snapped, never fought back, never rose to the bait. In fact, he *took care of me*, Remus. And I

know it was for Sirius, but he did it anyway. He kept freaks from putting their hands on me, he spent nights out watching my back. When I needed to be picked up at three a.m., who did I call? It was fucking James. And every time, he'd come. He might scoff and we would fight the entire ride, but he always came. For Sirius or not, he was there. He took everything I threw at him and still showed up for me when I needed it. I had no idea it hurt him, because I didn't realize he cared. But it did. Every comment, every bit of sarcasm. Every time I treated James badly, I was hurting him. For over a *decade*, Remus. But one day, at the beginning of the holiday, he found out that I didn't mean it, and that was that. He didn't blame me, he wasn't mad even though I'd still been hurting him for years, whether I actually hated him or not. When he found out I didn't mean it, he forgave me instantly."

"Oh..." Remus said slowly. "So you think because he forgave you, you have to do the same?"

"No," Regulus said, instantly, his words fierce. "I don't *have to*, I just do. Because I love him, and I know he loves me. And that's not a be-all-end-all, it doesn't make everything okay, but it's *something*. I won't let him treat me like that again, but I don't think he's going to. I *know* he's not going to," Regulus shook his head. "I don't want you to act as if he's somehow *bad* for me, because he's not. He's at rock bottom and he reacted terribly. I know that. I'm sure James knows that. I'm sure the guilt is eating him alive. The bad was bad, and it hurt me, but I forgive him. He's not bad for me. I've never been known or loved like this. He saw all of my ugly first. I was a bitch for *years* and he still fell in love with me anyway. So, it's not a transaction; I don't think I owe him anything, and James doesn't owe me. Life doesn't fucking work like that. It's not like I'm in the right and James is in the wrong. It's not like he gets off scot-free just because he's mentally ill. This isn't something I can just tie off with a pretty bow. It's messy and ugly and I can't explain half of it. But I love him, and I forgive him, just like I know eventually—if he hasn't already—he'll forgive me. I- it's not simple, Remus... Alphard once told me to stop trying to fit things in boxes. Maybe you should try that as well."

Remus let out a small laugh at that. "Oh Reg, how far we've come. You're giving *me* advice..." he smiled gently, letting out a sigh. "But you're right. I know I have a tendency to do that, putting things in piles of good and bad, or right and wrong."

"I know, it makes the world easier to deal with. But it makes people harder to understand," Regulus murmured. "Sometimes, two people are seeing the same thing very differently. You don't know the full story, and everything that happened between James and me. Fuck, I don't think *James* does either. Sometimes I get the feeling he doesn't experience things how they actually happen. I- it's... it's complicated. People are complicated, relationships are complicated. There are a million different layers and a world of blame to be tossed around,

and I have no interest in any of it. We could talk it around in circles for eternity, but all I want is to see my boyfriend, Remus.”

“Okay... okay. I- I love James, I truly do, but don't you dare let him treat you like that again. I know you don't think it'll be a problem but if he does, you don't deserve that. I don't think James would want you to allow it to happen.”

“I know, I wouldn't take it again. But... I truly don't think I'll have to worry about it. It won't happen again.”

“You think?” Remus questioned. “You sound uncharacteristically optimistic.”

Regulus shrugged. “Let me tell you a secret, Lupin. I am a dirty, dirty liar. But I am not lying now. I *do* think.”

--

Regulus knew how to swim.

He was a strong swimmer as a child, you couldn't pull him out of the pool. Now people winced when his toe hit the edge of the lake.

Everyone watched with bated breath. Everyone but James.

James, who kissed him there. Who licked the water off his skin and whispered words Regulus couldn't quite recall.

Regulus knew how to swim; he wished everyone would stop waiting for him to drown.

Sirius kept turning to look at him. Regulus kept his gaze straight ahead.

He hadn't stepped foot in a hospital since his accident. He tried not to wince at the sharp sterile smell as they took the elevator, leaving some of the bustle and noise behind. Regulus felt numb, he didn't hear what anyone said. Sirius spoke, but Regulus couldn't process the words.

When they got to James's room, he was sitting on his bed. He looked fine, normal. He had a hospital bracelet on, and his hair was even messier than usual, but he was wearing normal clothes—sweats, along with the stupid hospital socks.

Sirius immediately crossed the room, hugging James tightly. Remus was next, and the three of them held onto each other for a long time.

Regulus stayed in the doorway. He couldn't move, couldn't breathe.

What if James had really meant it? What if they were over? Regulus could accept it, he didn't regret what he'd done... That didn't mean it wouldn't destroy him.

James's eyes found Regulus's. He paused. Sirius looked back, following James's gaze before moving. He tugged Remus along with him.

Regulus stayed in the doorway, his heart hammering in his chest.

“Regulus?”

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

He couldn't move, couldn't breathe. Regulus was frozen, shoulders stiff.

“Angel?” James’s voice was low, pleading. He looked scared at Regulus’s lack of response.

Oh.

He thinks he’s lost you. He’s scared of how you feel now that you saw everything. Move, go. Show him.

Regulus cracked. He took one step and then he was hurrying across the room. He threw himself onto James with enough force that they fell backward onto the bed. James didn’t seem to mind, he just wrapped his arms tightly around Regulus’s waist.

“I’m sorry,” Regulus whispered, and James pulled Regulus fully onto the bed with him. Regulus was wearing shoes, and he was definitely getting James’s sheets dirty. James didn’t seem to care, holding Regulus to his chest just like he always had. They fell together easily, just like it always was when they curled up together. Easy, natural, tangling with each other like they were made to be one person.

“No, no,” James choked out. *“I’m sorry.”*

“Do you hate me?”

“No, it passed.”

“Do you think you’ll hate me again?”

“I hope not.”

Regulus took a shaky breath into James’s chest. “Me too. I- I did what I thought I had to. I was scared, Jamie, I was so fucking scared and—”

“I know. Fuck, I’m sorry, Regulus. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I’m so tired of hurting you. And don’t tell me it’s okay, it’s not. The fucking personality disorder or whatever, it’s not an excuse.”

That was the first time Regulus had ever heard James even slightly admit to having BPD. Even so, he didn’t say ‘*I have BPD*’. Maybe he was just too tired to deny it at the moment. But it felt like something. A sign maybe that it *was* possible that James might get better.

“It’s not okay,” Regulus whispered. “But I’m just glad you’re here, and I love you. Everything else we can figure out.”

James pulled back so he could look down at Regulus. “You still love me?”

“Course, you can’t stop me.”

“Even after everything? Regulus... I remember. I know the shit I was saying. I was fucking insane, I don’t know why I said any of that. But I meant it. I really thought you were trying to manipulate me and use me, and that’s not true. I know that right now, but I didn’t then, and it scares me.”

“Do you still love me?”

“Yes,” James said instantly.

“Then we’re okay,” Regulus said firmly.

James blinked down at Regulus who lifted onto his elbow, so they were face to face. They just stared at each other for a long time. James’s brow was furrowed, eyes searching Regulus’s face. Sirius and Remus were still in the corner, but Regulus didn’t even care. No more secrets.

Regulus leaned in and James's fingers instantly went to the back of his neck, pulling Regulus down into a kiss. It was soft and gentle, tinged with a little bit of sadness. But it was real and warm and James was there. He smelled the same, tasted the same. He was just *James*.

James was warm, burning soft and familiar under Regulus's lips. Regulus kissed him a little harder, desperately needing to sear the moment into his brain. James's free hand landed on Regulus's waist, finding the spot where his shirt had ridden up and pressing his thumb into Regulus's skin.

There was a cough. "Oi, hands above the waist."

James jumped, pushing Regulus away suddenly as he flushed in embarrassment.

Regulus frowned, sitting up and glaring at his brother who had just interrupted an incredibly good kiss. "You know we've fucked, right? Numerous times. In the room right down the hall from you, at the lake, in the kitchen—"

"Regulus!" James hissed in horror.

"Fucking hell," Sirius complained. "I don't need to know that!"

Remus just rolled his eyes at the scene, but he seemed quietly amused.

"And really, Prongs? My brother?"

"I- fuck," James croaked out. "I'm sorry. I—"

"This is serious, right?" Sirius asked, gesturing between them. "You're not about to sleep with my brother and then ditch him?"

“No, of course not,” James said quickly. “We’re going to get married.”

“Excuse me?” Sirius asked, his eyebrows shooting up.

“Some day!” Regulus hurried to clarify, swatting at James. “Not now, not anytime soon. Don’t fucking say it like that, James.”

“You’re the one who decided to tell him the details of our sex life!” James protested.

“Oh god,” Sirius made a disgusted noise, glancing to Remus. “They have a sex life. I’m going to be sick.”

“As long as they’re safe,” Remus shrugged.

Sirius glared at that before turning back to James. “You be gentle with Regulus,” Sirius warned, shooting James a stern look.

Regulus instantly thought of all the times James had left bruises or fucked him so hard he couldn’t walk after, and he snorted aloud.

The horrified noise Sirius made as he seemed to realize what exactly that meant was enough to send Regulus into a fit of laughter, and then James was laughing as well, catching Regulus who was doubled over, close to tears.

Sirius crossed his arms like he was offended, but Regulus was pretty sure he did catch the hint of a smile on Sirius’s face.

Regulus seemed... well, he seemed as okay as possible, in Evan's opinion.

Though maybe Evan's opinion didn't mean shit, considering he'd been kept in the dark for weeks. Barty had known, and he hadn't said a word.

Now, he and Reg were on the sofa talking softly. Barty said something, squeezing Regulus's arm. Evan's stomach flipped. Regulus had been his friend first; somewhere along the lines, he was afraid some sort of distance had grown.

A second later, the kettle clicked off in the kitchen and Barty stood. He stepped past Evan in the doorway, barely pausing to brush his fingers over Evan's wrist.

It was a casual gesture, something natural. Just Barty reaching out to touch, trust Evan with the contact.

Barty headed to the kitchen to fix their tea and Evan simply stood there, reeling. His head was spinning, the air sucked out of his lungs.

"Evan?" Regulus questioned from the sofa.

Evan took a step and then another, sitting down quickly next to Regulus. "Reg," Evan said urgently.

"Yes?"

"He loves me."

"I-who, *Barty*?" Regulus asked incredulously.

“Yeah.”

“Well, *no fucking shit.*”

“I- well—”

“Shut up, Evan,” Regulus said, putting a hand up. “What do you mean? Of course he loves you, you’ve been dating for *how long?* Hasn’t he told you this?”

“Yeah, but Regulus. *He loves me.* Like he actually does.”

“Yeah! We know! Everyone knows!”

“But...” Evan didn’t know how to explain it, because yes, Barty had said it once or twice. In a careful way, like he had to force it out. He still said it. Evan hadn’t believed it because Barty was smart and hot. He was charming and wild in a way that was far out of Evans league... but he was *here*. He was living with Evan, touching his wrist when he walked by. He was choosing to wake up in the same bed every morning and spend their nights together. Barty came home to Evan every night. He didn’t need to, but he did. Barty loved him. “Oh,” Evan said dumbly.

Regulus scoffed. “God, I can’t believe I got James Potter to agree to marry me before you realized your long-term boyfriend likes you.”

“Oh, come on—” Evan blinked. “Sorry, you did *what?*”

Regulus shrugged. “It’s not like we’re engaged,” Regulus rolled his eyes. “But I needed him to be all in, so being willing to get married was a prerequisite to dating me.”

“Damn... you bagged James Potter.”

“I did,” Regulus crossed his arms, and he sounded a little too smug considering the circumstances. “And Jesus Christ, I am never doing it again. He better stay put.”

“I—” Evan frowned. “I’m sorry,” he blurted out.

Regulus cocked his head, brow furrowing. “What for?”

“Just... for not supporting you. For getting on you about James. I just didn’t want you to get hurt, but I didn’t consider any options. And the fact that you felt like you had to hide it from me... shit, Reg.”

“Hey, it’s okay. I think it hurt so much because you were right. I’m not angry with you for telling me the truth. It was going to hurt me, and it did, it was just... worth it.”

“Was it?”

Regulus nodded, a distant look coming over his face. “Yeah...”

“Okay,” Evan said softly, his voice low. “I’m glad it worked out. I’m glad James is okay. He’s a good person. Really, if he feels the same about you, then I can’t think of literally anyone better. I just feel awful that Barty was there for you, and I wasn’t.”

“I think that Barty gets James. In a way you can’t, and I can’t. He can empathize, he has a soft spot. He was more willing to see it than you. There’s nothing wrong with that, you were being protective.”

Evan was silent for a beat too long. He opened his mouth to speak before shutting it again.

“What?” Regulus prompted.

Evan shot Regulus a small smile. “I’m just not sure when you became so mature.”

“Dunno, my brain started developing,” Regulus shrugged.

Evan laughed, nudging his friend. “Yeah, yeah. I guess that probably helps.”

When Regulus left later in the night, Evan braced himself before cornering Barty.

“Barty?”

“Hm?”

He was in the middle of folding laundry, barely looking up as he bobbed his head to the music that was playing.

“Are you okay?”

Barty dropped the shirt he was folding, head jerking up at that. “I’m fine,” he said suspiciously. “Why?” He sounded fine, only a little confused by Evan’s question.

“Just... all the stuff with James, I didn’t know it’d bring up... bad stuff,” Evan finished weakly, unsure of how to voice what he meant.

Barty, much to Evan's surprise, softened. He didn’t do it often, so when he did, it was special. He stepped forward, abandoning the laundry to stop in front of Evan. They didn’t touch, they didn’t speak at first.

For months, they'd been arguing. It was usually over stupid things. Small things that were probably insignificant. The issue was that Evan didn't find them insignificant, but Barty did. The times Evan had tried to even touch on any of it, Barty balked. They would argue, Evan would get pissed, Barty would get worked up. It would come to head, spilling over, and then —

Then, nothing. They would ignore each other for a while and pretend it never happened.

It was small things, little things. Barty flirting when they were out, casually, easily. Evan hated that it seemed easy. He hated that they never managed to talk about anything that mattered.

"I don't like when you flirt with other people," Evan said suddenly. The thing he'd been dying to say for months. He couldn't remember why he'd never said it before. It came out easier than he expected.

Evan supposed he'd been afraid that if he tried to ask anything of Barty, the other man might realize there was something better out there for him. Someone who was nothing like Evan. Someone who was fun and wild and never asked Barty to be anything but who he was in his heart. Evan never considered if maybe he was allowed to ask things of Barty. Just like he wouldn't mind if Barty asked things of him. Because they were in a relationship, and that took compromise. Whatever they'd intended in the beginning—just sex, a causal relationship... it wasn't that anymore. It hadn't been that for a long time. Not when they were exclusive and lived together. Not when they did holidays and birthdays and every little life moment together. They were serious, and Evan didn't want the love of his life flirting with other people.

Barty blinked. "What do you mean?"

"You get flirty with people sometimes," Evan said in a rush. He wanted to capture the words and get them out before the sudden bravery evaded him. "Like we go out to clubs, and you dance with strangers or let them touch you. And I don't want to seem crazy or possessive. I don't control what you do, and I don't want to. But I don't like it when you're dancing really close to them, or they flirt and you joke back. It makes me uncomfortable.

“Oh,” was all Barty said in reply.

Evan thought maybe they’d fight. Maybe Barty was about to blow up. He didn’t. He just stood there within arm’s reach. They were quiet, silence stretching out between them.

Had Evan said the wrong thing? Should he have kept his mouth shut?

“I never realized it bothered you that much. I didn’t mean it. I don’t want them. I don’t want anyone except for you.” Barty’s words were sudden, raw, *honest*.

“Oh.” It was Evan’s turn to stand there dumbly. “Okay...”

“I’ll stop. If it makes you uncomfortable, I’ll stop. I- I guess I never considered it because in my mind I knew I didn’t care about them. I didn’t care about anyone but you, Evan.”

“I didn’t know that,” Evan said quietly.

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too. I’m sorry.”

Barty swallowed. “I have no idea what we’re doing,” he admitted. “You know it’s so funny, I told James all these things. We talked a lot, about Regulus, and coping and love. I told him Regulus was in love with him because I knew James needed the push... and all the while I’m thinking, I’m one big fucking hypocrite. Because the whole time I was wondering: *is this the way I’ll have to live forever, making it from one moment to the next? Is this all there is?* But it’s not, because there’s you. I have to try so hard not to be someone I don’t like. You make me so angry. I didn’t realize that you were jealous or uncomfortable or whatever,” Barty admitted. “I thought that you wished I was different. Because I know I’m a lot, I know I’m too much and you could do better—”

“No, Barty, *you* could do better.” Barty froze, words dying on his tongue. Evan hurried to continue. “That’s what I’ve been thinking this whole time,” he said. “That you deserve someone who’s more fun, who can keep up with you better. I don’t want to be holding you back. I don’t want to be dragging you down—”

“You’re not,” Barty said firmly. “Evan, you make me feel real, you make me feel human.”

“Oh... I- you make me feel human, too,” Evan whispered.

“Right,” Barty swallowed. There was a silence following their revelation, and Evan wasn’t sure what to say.

“So, you’re okay with me being boring?”

“I don’t think you’re boring. But I’ll take you however you are, as long as you’re okay with me being a mess.”

“You’re not a mess.”

“Oh, Evan,” Barty said, clicking his tongue. “Now *that one* I am.”

Evan paused. “Well, maybe sometimes, but I like you all the ways, too. Even the hard, messy ones.”

“Well, you’re still here.” It was a strange little statement. Almost a question, but Barty’s voice didn’t *quite* raise enough at the end. Rather a tentative testing of the waters, putting it out into the universe.

“I am.” And that was it.

Barty stepped back, clearing his throat awkwardly. “Okay, no more feelings, this was gross. I’m not about to start kissing you and crying or whatever.”

“Good, I don’t want you to do that.”

“Good...” Barty cocked his head, considering something. “We could have sex?”

Evan nodded. “Yeah, that works.”

Barty let out a small laugh at that, but Evan was too busy grabbing at Barty’s shirt and pulling it over his head.

Evan did kiss Barty, but he didn’t cry. And if a part of him wanted to, that was nobody’s business.

Chapter End Notes

Hi, hello. Crazy week, I was travelling, it was Yom Kippur. Idk a lot has been going on it feels like it's been a million years since I posted last chapter?

But I'm here, I'm back, I survived the week.

SO ABOUT PPP IN GENERAL, I feel like maybe I haven't properly stressed the unreliable narrator part. I realized I thought I had it tagged but I did not. That's my bad! But it'll start to become pretty clear. And I tried to add a little nuance and hints at it, like the difference of how we saw Monty through James' eyes vs someone else's but maybe I didn't make it clear enough. Anyway, always good to remember that.

I'm making a vow to reply to every comment possible today, I'm so sorry about last week. I didn't really get around to it because I was traveling on Friday and I posted it before I left and then forgot to reply to anything. SO I'm sorry. I saw and appreciated all your comments <33

Can't believe there are only two more updates after today, I'm so sad. I'm also excited! I can't stop thinking about the handful of people who followed me to Friday updates here from anti-hero and have stuck with me. It makes me smile, and trust me, I know who you guys are and appreciate it <33

My beta is already signed on for the next main WIP, and I have chapters prewritten, so I'm excited about what's next!!

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Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Shame.

Chapter Notes

uh, expect a triple update ;)

James

Shame.

It was creeping up his throat, pushing down, pressing. *Sickening.*

“I want to leave.”

“I know, James.”

“I’m okay now, really.”

His dad didn’t bother answering that, simply shooting James a sad look. James had already been told he wasn’t allowed to leave. He was still considered ‘*a danger to himself.*’ Fuck them.

Days passed and he hated them. James hated every second of it.

“So, from what you’ve said,” James’s doctor began, “everyone around you knows what you’ve been going through. It’s not a secret anymore?”

“No,” James said quietly. The shame was swirling. Sickening, sickening, sick. “It’s not.”

“So, they know you’re not okay, I know you’re not okay, and so do you. Why continue to deny it?”

“I—” James couldn’t explain. It wasn’t a secret anymore. Everyone knew. *Everyone.*

Everyone he loved had seen James at his literal worst. They’d seen him have a full-on mental breakdown. There was nothing to hide. But still, he didn’t know how to admit it. “Maybe I just don’t think there needs to be something wrong with me. People have rough spots.”

“That’s not a rough spot. You have borderline personality disorder. That’s not a bad word, it’s not something to be ashamed of. Tell me something, do you know any other people with BPD, or a mental illness in general?” the doctor asked kindly.

“Yeah, of course.”

“And what do you think of them?”

James frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, do you think badly or less of them? Do you think it defines them?”

“No... I mean I-I guess not.”

“Then does BPD define you? Does the label change anything? You feel and deal with these things anyway, with or without the diagnosis. Don’t you think this may even be a good thing in some respects, knowing that you have Borderline Personality Disorder?”

“How can it be good?” James scoffed, crossing his arms.

“Well,” the doctor said simply, “You have a chance to understand what exactly it is. I’m sure you’ve struggled with the symptoms of your disorder for a long time. At this point in time, you can begin to learn more, if you want. You can figure out how it affects you and how to live with it.”

“B-but I just don’t want anything to be wrong!” James protested.

The doctor leaned forward, suddenly serious. “But it is, James.”

There was silence. James felt it ringing in his ears.

But there is.

James was a fucked-up ball of emotions and overwhelming darkness. He’d never been anything else—not that he could remember, at least. A sick, twisted part of James didn’t want anything else.

He knew how to be wrong. He now how to be broken and hurt. There was a sort of comfort in rock bottom, in the familiarity of it all. He’d never tried to be anything else.

James didn’t think he was allowed to say that. He wasn’t allowed to truly express what it was like in his head. Sure, they’d encouraged honesty in his time in the hospital, but James felt like an animal in a cage. He knew everyone was waiting for him to either get better or kill himself. At that moment, James didn’t know how to do either.

In a bout of courage, he said as much. Voicing the state of limbo he felt stuck in.

“Isn’t that good? Maybe you’re not better yet, you’re not expected to be. But you’re here, and right now, that’s our goal. To keep you living, to help you find a reason you want to try and work towards a better place. In fact, why don’t we make that your homework tonight?”

With that, he was sent back to his room and given instructions to write down reasons he might want to get better.

He wasn’t allowed the luxury of a pen, and he had to scribble down his answers with a felt tip marker. James wasn’t about to kill himself with a pen. He tried to tell the nurses that because the markers were old and dragged along the page, but they paid him no mind. *Of course.*

So, James started his list, writing messily with the dry markers. He had to go over some of the letters until the page tore. The entire thing was ugly, and the list was short.

Sirius

My dad.

Regulus.

Remus, Marlene, Peter, and my other friends.

James was pretty sure he was supposed to say something about all the kinds of tea he hadn’t tried, the chapstick he hadn’t finished, or the things he hadn’t gotten to see. But James didn’t really want anything. He didn’t have dreams of traveling the world. There wasn’t anything he was *burning* for. Or no—he burned for Regulus. But he also felt shame.

Shame at the things he’d said and the way he’d acted. Horror, remembering how Regulus had *sobbed*, right there in front of James and he hadn’t said anything. James had just hurt him *worse*. Made him flinch.

He wanted Regulus now. His bed was cold, and the hospital felt sterile and uncomfortable. James hated it here, he wanted to go home.

“Can I leave?” he asked in therapy the next day.

“Let’s see your list,” the doctor said.

He did group, but he didn’t talk to any of the other patients. They all had stories. Some of them were violent, and some of them were like James. They all had it rough. There was a girl who’d been in foster care her entire life, who’d never had a home or been loved. There were people who’d lived on the streets, been beaten or abused. Not like James.

Except one day he said something.

“My mum died because of me. Sometimes I wish it’d been me instead. I feel like it was supposed to be me.”

The girl next to him had suddenly sat up straight. “Oh,” she’d said with a little gasp. And it turned out James wasn’t the only one. Her brother had died, she’d said. She always felt like she had to repent. Like she owed him her life too. And James got it, he completely understood her.

The day James found out he was being discharged, it was a shock.

“Wait, what?” he asked, unsure if he’d heard it correctly.

“Well, we’ve talked in depth about an outpatient program near your father’s house. They have an open spot now, and it’s yours. I think a DBT program is going to be very beneficial for you.”

They'd told him that DBT meant dialectical behavior therapy, but James still wasn't sure he understood exactly what it entailed. They'd tried to explain, but all James's brain had been able to comprehend was that this was a treatment because he was *wrong*.

"So, you don't think I'm going to kill myself?"

"Are you?"

"I mean... not right now."

"Look, James. We've discussed your history and treatment. You've been ready to leave for weeks. Do you feel like you're ready? Do you think you'll hurt yourself if you leave?"

"I- I'm not really sure. It comes on suddenly. Like I'm not *good*, but I'm here, and then suddenly I feel like even breathing hurts. I don't know when or why it happens."

"I know, it comes on suddenly. As long as you think you'll be able to reach out if you do begin feeling like you might want to hurt yourself again... Well, you're on your new meds and we've been monitoring you closely. So far, things are on the right track. You've been cleared to move to outpatient. You're still on suicide watch and can't be left unsupervised. Of course, your father is coming in later so we can discuss what the plans are."

James just nodded numbly. He didn't want to disrupt his dad's life and pull him away from work to watch James 24/7. He felt the prickle of embarrassment creeping up his neck, but the doctor just kept talking.

The first thing James did as soon as he stepped outside was breathe the fresh *non-hospital* air. He'd been allowed outside a little, but being confined and watched by doctors, the air tasted bitter. Now, as his dad led him to the car, freedom was sweet.

"You're sure you feel okay, you're ready for this?" his dad asked quietly on the way home.

“Yeah,” James said softly, pressing his forehead against the glass of the passenger window.

He felt strange. Not quite present or sharp... but real somehow. Like everything that'd happened in the hospital had been some strange fuzzy dream. It was all painted in shades of white and grey. Altered by the fluorescent lights and the bustle of the hospital. James hadn't really been sure any of it had happened.

He felt strange and out of place. Like he didn't belong. He was physically fine. The kid in the room across the hall from James had slit their wrists. They kept trying to rip out the stitches and James heard the doctors coming down every so often to prevent it. They started restraining them.

James wasn't like that. He was fine. He was healthy. It was just that his beating heart was rotten in his chest.

Sometimes James imagined that one day they'd cut open his chest to find it blackened and rotten. Forget the smoker's lungs, the ash went straight to his heart. James could feel it, sitting heavy in his chest, coating his throat. He pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth trying not to cough.

“James...”

“Can we not talk about it right now?” James asked, refusing to look at his dad. “I- I'll take the meds and do the DBT thing, whatever the fuck it is. But I don't want to talk about it right now.”

“Okay...” A long period of silence. Only the hum of the car, the countryside passing by outside the window.

"Hey, James?" His dad asked. James's heart flipped.

“Hm?”

“I love you.”

A pause. “I love you too, Dad.”

Monty reached out, taking a hand off the steering wheel to squeeze James’s shoulder quickly. “I love you so, so much. Everything you do, anything you want in life. I’ll support you, I’ll be there. I know I haven’t always been the best at expressing that. I know your mother was better with those things... Communicating doesn’t come easy to me, but I’m going to do better. I know how I came off. I know I was just nagging and pushing you, and that didn’t help. I’m sorry, and I love you.”

“I’m sorry I hurt you,” James whispered. “I’m sorry I yelled so much. I- I just...” James didn’t know how to voice it and he trailed off. He hadn’t figured out the words yet. He didn’t know how to apologize for the things he’d felt so strongly.

James exhaled slowly, the words burned in his throat. “I wish you didn’t blame me.”

There was a silence.

“*What?*”

James couldn’t look at this father. “You- you blame me for Mum’s death. You said so.”

Suddenly, Monty was pulling onto the shoulder, throwing the car in park to stare at his son in shock. “No, James, I absolutely have *never ever* said that.”

“I- no...” James said weakly. “I remember.”

He remembered.

It was some weeks after the funeral. James was still stuck at home, under his father's watchful eye. James was volatile, angry, itching out of his skin. They were fighting.

His dad was pushing him, trying to convince him to see a therapist or something. Trying to get James locked away so he didn't have to deal with his fucked-up son.

They were yelling.

“Mum wouldn't do this to me! She wouldn't try to force me!”

“Well, your mother isn't here, James! I am. And whose fault is that? You did that! You killed her!”

James immediately turned, left the house, and drove his car into a tree.

He really meant it when he said he hadn't intended to kill himself. One minute he was sobbing, barely able to see the road; the next, a sudden impulse overtook him and he jerked the wheel.

“You said it,” James said hoarsely. “Right before I left, before the accident. You said Mum wasn't there because of me, that I killed her.”

“No,” Monty said, his eyes wide in horror. “I never said that, James.” He seemed serious, like he genuinely meant it. Like he couldn't believe James thought otherwise.

“No, you said—”

“I remember exactly what I said,” Monty cut him off. “I know because it looped around my head as soon as you left. You said your mum wouldn’t try to force you, and I said it didn’t matter because *I* was the one that was there. I had to take off from work and put my life on hold to watch you, and I said *that* was your fault. And I regretted it as soon as I said it because your life is more important to me than any of those things. *You are* my life. You’re my son and you come above all of those things. I- I understand how you misunderstood me, but I never said your mother’s death was your fault. It isn’t.”

“No, no, no,” James said, the words tumbling frantically out of his mouth. “You said that, ‘*you killed her.*’ That’s exactly what you said.”

Monty’s face twisted in distress. “*James,*” he said in a helpless whisper, “I assure you, those words have never, ever, *ever* left my mouth.”

“B-but *no.* No, Dad, I remember. I remember you saying that. Are you lying to me?”

“I’m not lying.”

“Maybe your memory is bad.”

“Or maybe it never happened,” his dad said quietly.

James shook his head, his voice choked as he spoke. “But that would mean I’m crazy! That means I remember things that aren’t real.”

“No, no,” Monty reached out, grabbing James’s face in his hands. “You’re not crazy. Your mind just took a very intense high-emotion moment, the things you were feeling, and muddled them up. You perceived it to be real when it was just how you were feeling. That doesn’t make you crazy, you’ve just been so unable to escape what goes on in your head that it changes how you see things. Your doctor talked about this, James, the way you perceive situations versus how they actually are.”

“But this isn’t perceiving, Dad! It’s full-on *delusions*. I remember things that didn’t happen! How can I know what’s real? What else have I gotten wrong?”

“I- I don’t know. But... I don’t blame you, okay? I’d never blame you, the thought has never even crossed my mind. I love your mother more than I have words for. Living in a world without her is unimaginable. It’s been hard, all of this has been hard. I haven’t known what to do or how to help you and I think I’ve gotten a lot of it wrong, but... I could never blame you. I don’t.”

“Okay,” James managed to force out around the knot in his throat. His dad waited, but when nothing else was said, he let go of James, leaving him with a gentle pat on the cheek.

He took a deep breath before putting the car back in drive and pulling back onto the road. James closed his eyes.

He had never learned how to speak. His feelings, the endless black hole in his chest, it was there, it’d always been there. Just sitting, sucking in everything around him. He thought of it constantly, he felt it every day. He’d looked for things to fill it. Girls, sex, drinking. Anything to ease the gnawing emptiness. Nothing worked. It just kept consuming him from the inside out. James had never tried to explain it to anyone, and he wasn’t sure he could. Wouldn’t he sound crazy? Wouldn’t he sound like he was broken?

James never wanted to be a burden to the people around him. He’d spent years lying and manipulating to keep everyone out. He wore a mask. He never felt like anyone had truly seen through it until Regulus. Then look what had happened. James had hurt Regulus. He’d stood there and screamed while Regulus cried.

Yet, Regulus had come back. He’d crawled right into James’s arms. Curling up and tucking himself close like nothing had changed.

Maybe James had been put on Earth with a hole in his chest. Regulus Black wasn’t made to fill that hole. James wasn’t a complete idiot. He knew that he couldn’t simply fall in love and live happily ever after. In fact, the doctors had said that sometimes being in a relationship worsened the symptoms of BPD. James was terrified.

He remembered being with Lily. He'd been so jealous and possessive. He worked hard to keep those feelings from her, but he felt them anyway. He was always fighting back against every tendril of hurt and anger. Fists clenched, breath caught in his throat.

James thought he was a bad person, a bad boyfriend. He'd loved Lily—at least in some way. Now, he'd learned it wasn't exactly the way he'd thought it to be at the time, but he still loved her. He found himself fighting such strong, toxic emotions that he hated himself for it. He didn't want to be one of those men. The ones who tried to control their girlfriends. Who got angry when they went out or talked to other guys.

James had cared so deeply for her, but when she'd broken up with him, as angry as he was... James was relieved, too. He was glad because he was afraid of himself. Afraid he'd be a person he couldn't live with. He couldn't imagine ever hurting her, he'd never lay a hand on Lily Evans, but there were other ways to hurt a person. James was afraid he was doing them. He let her go.

It felt like he was dying. Everyone knew he was a little broken up over it. That was an understatement. James hadn't been able to get out of bed for days, but he didn't tell anyone that. He went home instead and let his parents shoulder that burden. Let his mother stand outside his door, her voice soft.

“Don't you think things should be different?” she'd asked. James had ignored her.

Because yes, he *didn't* think he was supposed to feel the way he did. He didn't think normal people lived like that, but he didn't think he deserved anything different.

If James could go back, he'd get out of bed. He'd throw open the door. He would hug his mother and never let go. He'd let her take him wherever she wanted. To the hospital, to therapy—*whatever*. Just as long as she never had to make that drive. Just as long as James never lured her to her death.

“It's not your fault,” the doctor had said. “You didn't kill your mother.”

James didn't believe that. He didn't believe his father. He wasn't sure he'd ever believe it.

The shame was inescapable. Heavy, pressing, suffocating. James closed his eyes, and his dad didn't speak again.

He thought of Lily; he should call her. He should apologize for being a shitty boyfriend. He should call Marlene, too, see how she was doing with the breakup and the move. He should have a proper conversation with Sirius and explain why he'd never trusted his best friend with the truth.

Mostly, he just wanted Regulus. Regulus couldn't ever fill a hole or *fix* James, but still, Regulus had most certainly been placed on Earth to be the other half of James's beating heart. How had James lived so many years without having him? How had he ever believed anything else existed?

James was aching, hurting. He was so ashamed, he didn't know how he'd ever face the people he loved again. But he loved Regulus anyway.

He went home. He ignored the fact that it felt like the last time he went home. The last time when he'd driven his car into a tree. It wasn't planned. He hadn't meant it like that... He thought he hadn't, but James was beginning to wonder if he'd had it wrong.

Because he hadn't gotten in the car with the intention of killing himself. He'd gotten in the car. James was driving, and then he was thinking: *I could crash the car right now*. Then he did.

All he remembered was the noise. The earsplitting sound of the metal crumpling. One moment he was hitting a tree at full speed, the next he was on the ground, blinking up at the sky.

He couldn't stop thinking about what Regulus had told him. How he'd nearly died and realized he wanted to live.

James remembered blinking up at the sky; he couldn't breathe, he was choking on his own blood. He only had one thought. *Let me die, let me die, let me die.*

He didn't. He woke up and it felt like a cruel punishment. He woke up and instantly, all he could feel was the shame. It tasted like blood, building at the back of his throat. Hot and metallic and *stinging*.

He tried to imagine the feeling that Regulus felt. The determination, the sudden choice to change his life. Regulus was strong, he was so fucking strong and James didn't think he even knew it.

Regulus had saved his life.

James had been furious on the way home from Italy, his dad didn't let James out of his sight. *"We're going to the hospital near home, or we're going to the one here,"* he'd said. No choice, no say in the matter. James would have rather been somewhere familiar, so he agreed to go back with his father.

On the journey home, James had still been frantic, raging. Crying, begging. He didn't want this; he tried to change his dad's mind. He said something about Regulus. His dad hadn't said a word. Not until later, when James was checked into his new prison, stripped of his freedom.

"He saved your life, James. I hope eventually you realize that. You can curse him out and blame him, but Regulus did something very brave."

James didn't listen at the time, but it had hit him now.

Regulus was so, so strong, and James didn't know how he was supposed to be deserving of that.

When they got to the house, James wished he could tuck himself into his bedroom, shut the door and never come out. Except he wasn't allowed to shut the fucking door. He still wasn't

allowed privacy in case he decided to use that privacy to kill himself, but it was better than the nurses and doctors.

“Will you have dinner with me?” his dad asked once James's things were put away. Monty sounded almost hesitant, *nervous*.

James remembered the anger, the intense hatred he'd had for his father. For forcing him into the hospital, for knowing all the things he did. For pressing the treatment and meds. It was in that, too—the shame. It was in every nook and cranny of James's life. He didn't think he'd ever outrun it.

--

The first day of outpatient treatment was... not exactly what he'd been expecting. DBT was a lot, he'd been given *homework*. Homework because he was mentally ill? That seemed a bit like a punishment.

Maybe James never truly tried to get better. He didn't think he could be entirely faulted for that, apparently, it was a lot of work. As awful as it was, there was something comfortable and familiar about rock bottom. James knew it well.

He knew it and he'd been staring at the ground for so long, his neck was stiff and aching, fixed on his feet. Looking up hurt. Maybe it was supposed to, James didn't know. He couldn't spout inspirational quotes about choosing to get better or finding his inner peace. He was pretty sure *peace* was not something that existed within his chest.

But he did DBT, as strange as he found it, and he did the fucking homework.

“Dad? Have you talked to Sirius?”

“I have. How come?”

James paused. “You should tell him to come around. Have dinner or something?”

He had his own phone back now, but James couldn't bring himself to turn it on. He didn't want to know if anyone had said anything. He'd only spoken to Sirius, Remus, and Regulus. Even then, it'd only been one time. Everyone else, he'd been isolated from. He was terrified to know what they might think of him.

“That sounds like a good idea,” Monty agreed.

James wasn't sure why he was so nervous about Sirius coming over. This was his best friend. Sirius had seen James in some very unflattering positions, and now, while he was having a mental breakdown in front of everyone they knew.

Sirius was probably part of James, intertwined with him as if they shared blood. James was still nervous. He was pacing back and forth in the entryway. Waiting, waiting, waiting—

The door opened. “Hey, Prongs.” Sirius smiled like nothing had changed. Maybe this hadn't. Was that even possible?

They had dinner, Sirius laughed and joked, and everything was normal and natural between them. The same as it'd ever been.

It didn't feel right.

“Sirius,” James said suddenly, once the dishes had been done and Sirius was laying across the foot of James's bed. It was like they were teenagers again, after a school night, lounging around James's room.

“Hm?”

“I—” James didn’t continue. He wasn’t sure what he meant to say. *Are we okay? Is it different? Should it be different? I’m sorry. Should we talk? Are you angry with me?* “You know I was going to kill myself?” was what came out instead.

Silence.

James watched Sirius’s throat as he swallowed before sitting up slowly. He fixed his eyes on James, expression suddenly serious. “I know.”

“Right... so you know I’m different, right? I’m not who you thought I was. Aren’t you mad that I was lying? I was keeping things from you, pretending to be someone else.”

“I’m not *mad*,” Sirius said softly. “It didn’t make me angry.”

“Then what?” James asked, because it was *something*. Even if Sirius talked and smiled at James the same as always, there was something thick and heavy in the spaces in between. A gaze that lingered too long, a silence that stretched.

“*James*,” Sirius said. He scrambled over from the foot of the bed to sit next to James at the headboard. “I was scared. I- I had no idea, you know? About...” Sirius didn’t seem to know how to voice the actual topic. “Any of it,” he said finally. “Honestly, Prongs... I also feel a bit ashamed.”

“Ashamed?” James choked out. He knew the feeling.

“Yeah... I was completely in the dark. I never noticed anything was wrong. And, I mean, none of this was that recent, right? You’ve been struggling with it for years?”

James nodded. Sirius was watching him; he didn’t immediately speak, and James realized he was giving James room to continue if he wanted. To say something more. James didn’t know how to speak about it. The most open he’d ever been was with Regulus, and even then, he was always pulling back, turning away.

“Maybe always,” James whispered. He paused. “Or maybe not, but I don’t remember being anything else. It’s like…” James paused, trying to figure out how to put it into words. He took a deep breath. “Like everyone else around me is existing, you know? But I’m here. I’m standing in the shadows, and it’s all just this massive ball of darkness sitting in my chest, eating me whole. I can feel it everywhere, in every breath, everything I touch. And it’s always reaching out, hurting. I can’t think, I can’t breathe, I can’t exist. It comes and it goes. But I’m always just… *wrong*. Like, I knew. I always knew something wasn’t right with me. I-I just thought… I-I don’t know…” he trailed off. “I don’t know.”

James couldn’t look at Sirius. He was staring straight ahead, unable to see whatever expression his best friend might be wearing. James took a sharp breath, squeezing his eyes shut when Sirius dropped his head on James’s shoulder. The presence was warm and comforting. James didn’t feel like he deserved that.

“And you felt like this all these years, right next to us?” Sirius asked quietly. “Right there, and we had no idea.”

“I didn’t want you to know, Sirius. I lied and lied and *lied*. That’s why you should be mad. I manipulated you and pretended to be someone else. You don’t even know me.”

“I’m gonna say something, James,” Sirius said quietly. “I know you. I don’t think *you* know yourself.”

“What—”

“No, no, listen to me, Prongs. Yes, you kept secrets. Yes, I wish I’d known. I’m upset I didn’t. I felt a bit stupid and like a bad friend for not knowing. But you’re not an entirely different person, Prongs. I still know you. I’ve *always* known you. You’re the same person you’ve always been, just with more shit going on than I realized. The same kid I used to sit on this bed with every night and talk about everything and nothing at all. The same person who let me sob on your shoulder every day when Reggie and I fell out. The same person that has always been there for me. You saved my fucking life, James, you know that? You got me out of my house, and you gave me something to live for. And that person, that’s *you*. You have the biggest heart, and you care so deeply and hugely for everyone around you. I love you, James. I loved you then and I love you now, and nothing can ever change that.”

“*Sirius...*” was the only thing James could force out, his voice thick with the tears he was trying to hold back.

“You’re not a different person,” Sirius said, in a whisper. “You’re the same James as ever. Now, I just know now, that sometimes you’re hurting and struggling. There’s nothing wrong with that, I don’t think of you differently.”

“You don’t?” James asked hoarsely. He blinked, and he couldn’t stop a tear from escaping. He quickly reached out to wipe it away. Sirius caught James’s hand on the way down, warming it between his own. James exhaled, the shame feeling a little more distant. There was a slight prickle of it at the back of his neck, but Sirius was a warm and steady presence at his side. He didn’t flinch or seem put off by James’s pain.

“Never,” Sirius swore. He swallowed, still holding James’s hand. All James could think was *love, love, love, love. This is my brother, this is my family. This is the best man I have ever known, and I don’t think I can ever live with a barrier between us again. Soulmate, best friend, brother.*

They breathed. In and out, in the quiet of James’s childhood room.

James didn’t feel okay. He didn’t feel better, but breathing didn’t hurt quite as much as it usually did.

Sirius broke the quiet suddenly. “That first night,” he began, “when you left with your dad, all I could think was: *maybe we don’t really know one another.* I kept thinking it and thinking it, and then I saw you again, and James, *I knew.* I realized how wrong I was. It’s not that we don’t know each other. Even if I didn’t know everything that was happening. I can’t not know you. There can’t be a world out there where we don’t love each other. Every secret that *any* of us have kept isn’t because we don’t know one another. I think that, really, it just shows that life is messy, people are messy and sometimes it all goes to shit. Sometimes, things don’t work out, and sometimes, they do, but people just love people and we hold on the best we can.”

James sniffed quietly, and Sirius didn't speak again for a heavy second. The clock on the wall was ticking, the night was still.

"I love you," James said quietly.

"I love you too." A pause. "But *really*, Prongs?" Sirius said suddenly. "My brother? My baby brother?"

James grimaced, shrugging Sirius's head off his shoulder. "Padfoot..." he said, sitting upright and twisting to look at his friend.

"I know, I gave my acceptance already. But honestly, you couldn't choose *anyone else*?"

"I've never wanted anyone else." James watched Sirius as the other man blinked at James, something serious flitting over his face.

"Really?" Sirius asked, suddenly tentative.

"Really..." James confirmed. "I- I've never... I just, I didn't even mean for it to happen, I swear. But he's— Sirius, he's *so*.... Regulus is just *perfect*," he spoke the last word in a whisper, as if it were a secret spilling into the night.

Sirius softened; he was still holding James's hand.

"Okay."

"I- okay?" James questioned.

“Yeah. You already told me it was serious, and even if you hadn’t, I saw you with him at the hospital. The way you looked at him... yeah, I’d prefer *no one* be defiling my little brother, but if someone is going to, I want it to be someone who loves him. And James, you look at that boy like he hung the moon—no, the whole fucking sky. The sun and stars and clouds, hell, maybe he put the birds up there, too. Who knows? Point is, you love him. At first, I was shocked. Like totally and completely blindsided, and then I thought about it. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that I should be more surprised it didn’t happen sooner. I’ve told Reggie for *years* that I thought he’d like you if he ever gave you a chance. Turns out he would bite your head off because he’d been in love with you the whole time... fucking crazy.”

“He was made for me, Sirius,” James said softly. “I feel almost like even though I didn’t always know that, a part of me—of both of us—did. Like the whole time, I didn’t know I was waiting for him, but I was. He waited too, intentionally or not. He’s beautiful and wonderful and a bit of a brat and I love him so much. I love him, and I was so awful to him. He deserves better.”

“Then do better,” Sirius said simply.

James paused. “That’s it, that’s all you have to say?” he questioned hesitantly.

“Just do better,” Sirius said again. “Try your best, love the people you love, stick around. I just don’t know what we’re going to do about the best man situation at your wedding. You and Reggie are going to have to fight to the death over it.”

James couldn’t help but throw his head back and laugh. One day, when the time came, James didn’t think he’d find it funny. In fact, whether Regulus or James got Sirius as best man was sure to be a long and stressful debacle.

Sirius smiled. James didn’t think too hard about the future, but it did exist in his head for a moment there.

--

James awoke to the sound of birds singing. He could smell coffee brewing and hear—

The sound of voices downstairs?

He sat upright, throwing back his blanket and hurrying out of his room. As he descended down the stairs, he stopped in the kitchen.

Regulus was there, cup clutched in his hand as he spoke to James's dad, halfway through an explanation of something musical that James didn't understand. He wasn't sure Monty understood either, but he was nodding, clearly interested in what Regulus was saying.

Regulus didn't stop speaking, but he seemed to notice James's presence because suddenly he was turning, grabbing an already prepared cup of coffee and pressing it into James's hands. He rose on his toes to press a kiss to James's cheek before turning back to Monty.

James just stood there blinking, listening as Regulus said something about a time signature. "...we've all been playing for our entire lives, you'd *think* by now the value of the note should be ingrained in her brain. But *every time* this bitch cuts off early!" he exclaimed. "Like I'm doing her a favor by playing accompaniment, do you know how many pieces I have to learn? Come on, she's a *singer*, it cannot be that hard."

James was pretty sure Regulus was being pretentious and probably offensive to singers by implying his own instrument was much harder. He was being mean. James smiled. He took a sip of his coffee, and it was sweet, just the way he liked it.

Regulus and Monty continued to chat while James just stood there and listened. When he'd finished his coffee, Regulus turned towards him.

"Come on, go get dressed."

"Huh?" James frowned as Regulus started pushing him towards the stairs.

“We’re going on a date.”

“We are?”

“Yes, you did promise me one, didn’t you?”

“I did, but I don’t have anything planned—”

“I do,” Regulus said. “Come on. Go change.”

James obeyed because what else was he supposed to do? When he returned, dressed for the day, Regulus had a blanket folded under his arm and a basket.

James paused. “Regulus, are we having a picnic?” he asked.

Regulus flushed. “Shut up, come on.”

James followed. He would follow Regulus Black anywhere he wanted to go.

They ended up sprawled out in the yard, lying side by side on the blanket. They were staring up at the sky, wordlessly watching the clouds that floated by.

Suddenly, without warning, Regulus jerked up and clambered on top of James. He straddled James’s waist, looking down at him seriously.

“Hello?” James questioned. He tilted his head back to examine Regulus’s face. The sun painted a halo behind him, illuminating Regulus from the inside out.

Love, love, love.

When Regulus didn't immediately speak, James reached out, putting a hand on his hip and smiling. "Pretty angel."

Regulus instantly flushed, letting out a choked sound. That never got old. Regulus never stopped getting flustered.

"I was going to say something," Regulus said, crossing his arms in offense.

"Sorry, princess."

"Stop!" Regulus hissed, gently hitting James on the chest. "Really, I have something to say."

"Okay, kiss me first, then go ahead."

Regulus scoffed but he leaned forward, bracing his elbow near James's head to kiss him properly. One of James's hands found Regulus's belt loops, tugging him closer. There wasn't really a *closer*, but James was determined to try.

James knew the kiss was ending before Regulus pulled away because, for a second, it deepened. Something sang between them as Regulus kissed James like he was trying to consume him. Just as it threatened to intensify just a step too far, he pulled back, breathless and touching his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Can I talk now?" Regulus asked.

"Yeah," James said softly.

Regulus leaned back, rolling off of James and onto his side. James rolled over too so they were facing each other.

“This isn’t how I expected my summer to go,” Regulus said softly.

“Yeah, me either...” James swallowed. “I’m sorry.”

Regulus reached out, straightening James’s glasses. “I forgive you,” he said in a whisper.

“I worry everyone is being a little too forgiving of me,” James muttered.

“You’re not a bad person.”

“That doesn’t mean what I did was okay.”

“It wasn’t,” Regulus said quietly. “I know that, you know that. That’s the thing. Keep trying, and we’ll be fine.”

James exhaled, his eyes searching Regulus’s face. “You think?”

“I do.”

James was pretty sure Regulus meant it.

“Okay...” James said softly. “Was that what you wanted to say?”

“I... I don't even know if I have the words for all the things I want to say.”

“Maybe you'll find them.”

Regulus smiled at that and his face softened, eyes glinting in the sun. “Yeah, I think I will.” He paused. “I- I love you.”

James melted, reaching out to brush his thumb over Regulus's cheek. “Until you find the words, I have a few. Not all of them, but some.”

“Okay,” Regulus breathed, lashes fluttering under James's touch.

“I love you. I'm sorry.” Regulus opened his mouth, but James quickly cut him off. “No, let me say it. Let me say it, and you're going to sit here until it sinks into your fucking bones, okay? I'm sorry, I'm sorry, *I'm sorry*. I'm sorry, and I don't care if you forgive me, I'll be sorry for the rest of my life. I'm glad you forgive me, but I'm still sorry and I'll stay that way. None of this should have happened. It shouldn't have been on your shoulders, it shouldn't have been your responsibility to take care of me. I won't let it be again. I have a doctor and treatment and meds and all these other things that I never wanted, but... I'd rather have them than hurt you. I'm not letting that happen again. I'm going to do better.”

“I believe you,” Regulus said quietly.

“Do you?” James questioned hesitantly.

“Yeah, Jamie... I have faith in you. You know, Remus was worried about you hurting me again or us being toxic or something, and it's just... it's not like that. It's a little ugly and messy, but we aren't inherently bad. The situation was bad, your mental health was bad, but those things can change.”

James surveyed him, drinking in every detail of Regulus's face. “You know,” James said after a quiet pause. “It's very strange how well you have your shit together at the moment.”

Regulus rolled his eyes. “You picked me up after therapy when I was sobbing my guts out. You were there during the years I didn’t sleep, didn’t eat, or get out of bed. It took a long time but... yeah, I’ve got some shit together now. *Finally*. I think I know who I am. I know who you are and what we can be.”

“You sound sure.”

“I am.” A beat. “Actually, I’m lying. But I’m pretending to be. I’m trying.”

James couldn’t help but laugh. “I thought you weren’t a liar,” he said, shaking his head.

“Potter, I have no idea where you got that idea,” Regulus scoffed.

“You said so!” James insisted.

“I assure you, I’ve never said that,” Regulus replied. “I am a liar, I’ve been lying my whole fucking life. It’s a problem, actually. But no more secrets.”

James frowned. He had a very clear memory of Regulus saying he *didn’t* lie. Was *that* a lie? Was he lying now? Was James remembering wrong? Did he misunderstand or had it ever even happened?

“What?” Regulus questioned, frowning as he noticed the change in James’s expression.

“I- I don’t know. I’m starting to wonder how many of the things I thought I knew are true.”

“I love you,” Regulus murmured. “That’s true.”

It didn't change the gaps in who James was. It didn't undo the guilt and shame that hung heavy over his shoulders. It didn't fill the hole in James's chest. But Regulus smiled, small and shy, and James thought: *there it is*.

He didn't know what *it* was, but he felt it anyway. Something warm and golden unfurling within James's ribs.

Maybe it was love. Maybe not.

He swallowed his shame. It burned a little on the way down, but Regulus was smiling and that burned differently.

Good.

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

How long could we be a sad song?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

How long could we be a sad song?

Dorcas

Dorcas called Marlene a week after she moved. When she picked up the phone, her voice was tinny over the line but familiar. Dorcas didn't know how it made her feel.

"We were friends first," Dorcas told her.

"I know."

"Do you think we could be again?"

Marlene didn't answer instantly. Dorcas waited. *"Maybe. Not yet, but eventually... Yeah, I'd like that."*

"Okay," Dorcas swallowed. "How's Scotland?"

She listened to Marlene talk about her new job and her new home. The weather, the people, and the things she'd done.

She didn't feel *lighter* when they ended the call, but she didn't feel worse either. All of the bitterness that had been brewing between them was suddenly gone in the wake of their breakup. Lately, Dorcas couldn't imagine why on Earth she'd prolonged it for so long. It was better this way. She felt better. It stung, and there was a hole at her side where Marlene had been for a very long time... but she began to adjust.

Dorcas went home.

She packed her London life in boxes, she snipped her ties.

The night before she left, Sirius insisted on hosting dinner to say goodbye to Dorcas. It was the first time they'd seen each other in months. The first time they'd all (minus Marlene) been in a room together since summer. The first time Dorcas saw James.

She was watching him now, standing in the kitchen, sipping her wine while she looked out into the living room. He didn't really seem different.

Or no, actually. He seemed different from the last time she'd seen him, but not different compared to the person she'd always known.

What was different was that earlier in the night, James and Barty had been side by side, talking about something. Barty rolled his eyes a lot, and James made an annoyed face more than once, but they still talked. They talked like friends, even when Barty promptly got up, saying: "*leave me the fuck alone, Potter.*"

What was different was that they were at Sirius's new flat, which Remus apparently didn't live at (though he seemed to spend a lot of time there), and Barty and Evan... *weren't arguing?* That was a fucking miracle. In fact, Barty had draped himself over Evan, shoving his legs into his boyfriend's lap.

Most different of all was Regulus, who was on the sofa. Dorcas watched James come up behind him, touching him gently on the back of the neck. Even before he looked, Regulus

seemed to know who it was, because he instantly lit up. A small smile bloomed on his face as he turned to look up at James.

James looked down, fond and soft as he reached out to tug on one of Regulus's curls. He leaned down to whisper something and Regulus shook his head, rolling his eyes.

Next to Dorcas, Sirius, who'd been pouring himself a drink, had paused. He was watching Regulus and James intently.

“Do you find it weird?”

Sirius jumped, looking away from the pair to blink at Dorcas. “What? James and Regulus?”

“Yeah.”

Sirius turned to look back at them. Regulus said something with a scoff, scowling up at James who just laughed, grabbing him by the face. He pressed a quick kiss to Regulus's cheek. Regulus—who hated affection, PDA, anything of the sort—fucking *blushed*, a bashful smile overtaking his scowl.

“It was surprising at first... now it's not, just not what I expected. But... I mean, look...” Sirius gestured. “They look happy, don't they? I'm pretty sure Regulus just *giggled*, Dorcas. Did you see that?”

“I did,” Dorcas said. She watched as Lily waved down James's attention and he turned from Regulus. All the while, he kept his hand there, letting go of Regulus's face to rest it on his shoulder. It was casual and natural, and there was just *something* that existed between them. Dorcas had loved Marlene and probably always would, but it wasn't whatever *that* was. That electric intensity that existed between James and Regulus... Dorcas had never felt it, but she wanted to. “I think they'll be good together. James seems—” She didn't want to say *better* because something lingered in his form. But it was true, he didn't seem healed or perfect, but he seemed better than the last time she'd seen him. Steadier, more present, just a little better. “He's here.”

“He’s hanging in there,” Sirius said softly. “We’re here, we’re together.”

“Yeah,” Dorcas said with a slow exhale. “We are.”

Sirius turned back to Dorcas, leaving James and Regulus to be disgustingly in love in peace. “You know, I wouldn’t say I’m an optimist. I’m certainly not as much of a pessimist as Regulus or Remus, but I’m not exactly the glass-half-full type either. I always kind of learned that if there’s *worse*, the universe likes to give it, but... I really have the strangest feeling that we’re all going to be alright.” He cocked his head, shooting Dorcas a small smile. “I think *you’re* going to be alright.”

Dorcas wasn’t sure anyone had ever said that to her before. *You’re going to be alright.*

It was only ever *do better, do it this way. Do more, be more, be something, anything else. Just not you. Don’t settle in as her, don’t be unapologetic. You’d be better if—*

If, if, if.

Dorcas had never been given permission to settle into her own skin, to be alright as who she was. Not that she needed it, she’d do whatever she wanted anyway, but it was nice to hear.

But Sirius was looking at her. He was telling her she’d be alright, and Dorcas didn’t think he was in any way qualified to know that, but she felt her heart tug. She hoped he was right.

Sirius clapped her lightly on the arm. “By the way, James says you should talk to Emmeline.”

Dorcas swallowed, straightening. “I- yeah, I will,” she promised.

Finding Emmeline wasn't hard to do; working up the nerve to ask her to come in the other room to talk *was*. She managed it, somehow, and as they stepped into the hall, Emmeline turned to her.

Her long black hair was in two braids, and her lips were glossy and pink in that Korean makeup style Dorcas wished she knew how to do. Emmeline looked so effortlessly perfect, and for the first time, Dorcas wondered if she actually *was*. The two little pieces of hair she'd pulled out of her braids to make it look looser were perfectly chosen. How long did it take Emmeline to do her hair and makeup today? Did she have to redo the braids multiple times, did she reapply her lip gloss in the bathroom?

Dorcas suddenly felt incredibly stupid as she looked at Emmeline Vance, and she looked more like a human than an enemy.

"Uh, I'm sorry," Dorcas said in a rush. "About the way I treated you over the holiday. I'm sorry. I was jealous because you were always with Marlene, and I didn't know how to talk to her, but you did. You always seemed so *perfect* and likable without even trying. It seemed wrong. It made me furious. Because I'm always trying so hard, and it doesn't work."

Emmeline blinked. "*I'm trying*," she said with a frown. "You don't even know me, Dorcas. I wish you had tried to instead of making assumptions. It was terrifying to come into your huge friend group as the newbie, the outsider. I'm not perfect, but I work very hard to pretend I am. My parents are disappointed in me, I have no idea what I'm doing with my life, I'm not perfect in any way."

Dorcas swallowed. "My parents are disappointed in me, too."

Emmeline shot her a small smile. "We have more in common than you think. You know, we gotta stick together, not make enemies of each other. I want to be your friend, Dorcas."

"Even after I was a bitch to you?"

"Even so, just don't do it again and we're fine. Get to know me."

“I-I can do that. I’m sorry, really.” Apologizing did not come easy to Dorcas, and she shifted uncomfortably.

“Good, I forgive you.”

“Okay, I... yes, okay. Good.” Dorcas offered a hesitant smile and Emmeline smiled back.

They weren’t enemies.

--

Dorcas went home.

She got a place ten minutes away from where she’d grown up. She started working at the veterinarian office that she’d taken her pets to as a kid.

There, she found routine, peace, and just enough excitement that she felt something inside her soul settle. This was what she’d always wanted, she’d known it.

There, at home, she found Emma Vanity.

Emma Vanity, who Dorcas went to school with from the time she was a toddler. Emma, who Dorcas never really knew, never had a proper conversation with. Emma seemed to know her, however.

“So, why’d you come back?” Emma questioned during Dorcas’s first week at her new job. “London life too much?” She was a little blunt and sharp, but there was an underlying quietness, too. Something so very *feminine* in her.

Dorcas found herself looking forward to one specific moment every day. The moment Emma would pause, pulling out her claw clip, her dark silky hair tumbling down her back. She'd then twist it back up, and sometimes it took her a few tries to get it right. Sometimes, she'd get frustrated and ask Dorcas to help her. Dorcas was not really a claw clip type of girl, but she may have gone home one night and watched a video titled: *How to Put Up Straight Hair With A Claw Clip (for the THAT GIRL look)*. Now, Emma often asked for Dorcas's expertise, and Dorcas—

Dorcas felt *something*. Aching, intense, electrifying... it burned in her chest every time she got to touch Emma Vanity's hair.

"I always wanted to come back," Dorcas had said. "I just... well, it was probably best for me to learn to be myself somewhere else, too."

"Hm, I see..." Emma cocked her head. "I stayed."

"I know. It's okay to stay."

At that, Emma smiled. "I know. We don't all need to be the next big thing. Me, I'm okay with just being this... it's okay to come back, too."

"That's what I keep telling myself," Dorcas muttered.

"It is. Eventually, you'll settle and you won't have to convince yourself at all, you'll just feel it. That's what happened to me. You'll be alright."

Emma was the second person to tell Dorcas that.

She was starting to believe it.

Dorcas stayed.

Emma always painted her nails red. Sometimes the shade changed, but rarely. They were always red, and she always wore her hair the same way. She smelled like caramel and almonds, and she wore tiny gold hoops in her ears. She was quiet but firm when she needed to be. She came off sharp and sarcastic, but when it was just Dorcas and Emma, she let it all fall away. She was sweet and sometimes she'd *giggle*. Emma had a sharp tongue and a dry sense of humor. She took life however it came, and for the second time in her life, Dorcas fell in love.

Sometimes, Marlene called, and in true lesbian fashion, they stayed friends. Marlene was busy taking on the world one day at a time, and Dorcas was happy for her. Marlene showed no signs of settling down, and Dorcas supported her in everything she did.

Dorcas still missed who they used to be sometimes. She wished it'd been different, especially seeing Remus and Sirius or Mary and Lily, who somehow managed to meet the love of their lives as kids and secure a happily ever after. Dorcas wished it could have been the same for her, but it wasn't. It just hadn't worked. Dorcas learned to let it go.

It's not like her friends were perfect either. In fact, Dorcas and Lily talked three times a week. Lily ranted about her wedding planning and her sister trying to steal her thunder. Life was tricky. They had different things. Different good things, and different bad things, too.

Dorcas fell in love. She stopped wondering if she'd be alright and just started *being it*.

The boxes didn't go away. Dorcas didn't learn to simply ignore them. People made comments. Her family liked to act as if there was any chance in *hell* that Dorcas was going to marry a man. People expected her to be things, and it was always hard to swallow. It didn't stop being frustrating. No amount of self-love could change the world around her. She knew when the day came that Dorcas *did* get married, things with her family would probably blow up when they couldn't deny her gayness any longer. But she hoped they would come to the wedding, she hoped they'd all make it through that.

Dorcas breathed.

Emma stayed. Dorcas did, too.

Regulus

Regulus Black was a pessimist.

This was not news to a single person who knew him. That had not and would probably never change. However, he was pretty sure he was a *happy* pessimist. Or at least, most of the time.

Maybe not now.

No, at the moment, Sirius was holding a spoon and dancing around the Potters' kitchen, screeching some pop song Regulus didn't know. Remus, the traitorous asshole, was too in love with Sirius to stop him. He was just smiling, shaking his head fondly.

James seemed to find Sirius funny, too, and no one was doing the job of smacking him over the head. Regulus let out a pained groan and James turned to him, cocking his head.

“What's wrong?”

“I need a smoke,” Regulus sighed, grimacing as Sirius's singing got louder.

“Then have one, I'll cover for you.”

“No... I can't.”

James cocked his head. “Huh? Why not?”

“I mean... I don't have any cigarettes.”

“Oh, are you out?”

Regulus straightened. “No, James. Uh- I quit.”

James jumped up from the sofa suddenly. “What?” he demanded. “When?”

“A while ago... like last month.”

James was frowning, a crease appearing on his forehead. “Why?”

Regulus shrugged, suddenly self-conscious. “Well... because you did.”

James didn't have a say in the matter. He'd been forced to live at home under his father's supervision and his dad was very strict about no smoking.

“I had to. You know, the whole suicide watch thing and my dad?” James crossed his arms. He'd started doing that lately, trying to talk about it lightly. It didn't really land, but Regulus thought it was better than James pretending nothing had happened.

“I know, but I figured if you were... I could, too.”

“Regulus...” James said. He seemed almost shocked. “Quitting was like, literally fucking hell. It was awful. You- you quit for me? You went through that?”

“Yeah,” Regulus shrugged. “I mean, it sucked. Sirius refused to be around me for a while because I was so mean to him during, but... I lived.”

“Oh.” James looked to Sirius who was still singing and had grabbed Remus by the wrist, forcing him to dance. “Well, do you want to go outside and stand there without smoking?” he suggested. “For a little nostalgia. Old time's sake.”

Regulus snorted, but he followed James outside anyway.

They stood there together for a while and made out against the porch railing.

Regulus had never felt more like he'd been made to be loved. James touched him like it was the only thing in the world. Something they were made for.

He thought of his childhood fantasies—dramatic love confessions, kissing in the rain. Somehow this was better.

Regulus was pretty sure that if he asked, James would kiss him in the rain.

James

He was lying on the living room floor. The carpet was itchy on his back, and there was a workbook lying on the floor across from him. It was the stupid DBT homework. He had to do it before the next day, but there were too many stupid acronyms floating around his brain. He always forgot what the second C stood for in ACCEPTS. After flipping through a few pages, he found it: *comparison*, according to the worksheet. James had stared at the word too long, and he couldn't think of a comparison to a time he'd '*successfully handled a distressing emotion*' anyway.

The stuff was confusing, and it was a lot to remember, especially when he felt himself spinning out. His first instinct wasn't to stop and work through anything. Still, Barty told James DBT was something good, and James had met a girl who said that with DBT and

meds, she lived a life nearly free of symptoms. James couldn't imagine that; the concept sounded far away.

But sometimes, when the doubt was especially loud, he recalled a conversation with Regulus.

"I don't know how to be any other way," James had said.

Regulus's response: *"Have you ever tried?"*

He hadn't. Regulus had clocked that. Of course he had.

James was trying now. It was uncomfortable.

He felt overwhelmed, so he pushed the homework further away. He breathed.

In and out, *one, two, three, four, five...*

The itching feeling under his skin receded a little. James lived past the moment.

He turned his head. Regulus was sitting on the floor, leaning against the sofa. He had a book in his hand, fingers absently tapping out some silent melody on his thigh. The sun was spilling through the curtains, setting his grey eyes alight and casting some of his face in stark shadows.

Regulus seemed to register James watching him because he looked up from his book. "What?" Regulus questioned, arching an eyebrow.

James rolled onto his stomach, reaching out to grab Regulus's tapping fingers. "Playing something?" he questioned, running his thumb over Regulus's knuckles.

“Hm, my teacher made me play the same part about a million times today,” Regulus said softly. “It’s just in my head.”

James nodded. He paused. “I’ve never actually heard you play.”

Regulus didn’t play for people. If you wanted to see him play, you had to go to the performances, he didn’t *‘hand them out’* as he’d always insisted. It was by chance, really, that somehow James had never been able to make it to a show before.

Regulus didn’t play for people. He stood up anyway.

“Has anyone used this thing this century?” he asked, pushing up the cover on the piano in the corner of the room.

“My mum used to sometimes,” James said, scrambling up from the floor. He watched, almost entranced as Regulus played a few keys experimentally. He cocked his head, listening to the sound.

“Not that out of tune,” he mused in surprise. James crossed the room, watching as Regulus sat down on the bench. Everything about his movements was somehow purposeful, but natural as well. He held himself straight, posture strong, but in a way where it was clear he didn’t even think about it.

James stopped behind Regulus. Everything was quiet. Easy quiet, perfect quiet. The kind that felt like being wrapped in a warm hug. Regulus placed his hands over the keys.

James leaned forward, resting his forehead against the back of Regulus’s neck.

He breathed deeply. Regulus was warm. The day was late, and the sun broke through the clouds, painting dancing patterns across the floor.

Love, love, love, love.

“I can’t play if you’re leaning on me,” Regulus said, even though he’d let James stand there in silence for more than a few minutes. “Sit.”

James straightened, obeying at first. Then, because he was not content to simply *sit* next to Regulus Black, he scooted down the bench.

“*Jamie*,” Regulus complained as James laid down, ducking under Regulus’s arm to put his head in the other man’s lap.

His legs were hanging off the edge of the piano bench and the wood was hard on his back, but James didn’t mind, not when Regulus’s hand left the keys to dance across James’s cheek. His touch was feather-light, gentle.

“I’m going to jostle you when I use the pedal,” Regulus remarked.

“Don’t care,” James said, looking up at his boyfriend.

Regulus sighed, shaking his head. “You’re fucking impossible,” and then in the same breath. “I’m so in love with you.”

“I’m in love with you too. Now play for me, angel,” James demanded.

Regulus laughed softly. He withdrew his hand, and James missed it. It was made up for when Regulus finally *did* begin to play, and it was the most beautiful thing James had ever heard.

He knew nothing about piano or technique, but Regulus played like he was born to. The sound was warm and intricate. It filled the room, filled James’s chest with something warm.

I think this might be what it feels like to live.

James wasn't sure he'd ever really done that before.

The piece was long, it ebbed and flowed, jumping and changing. It reminded James of the ocean. *Regulus* reminded him of the ocean. Of being eight years old on the coast, the rocks and sand under his feet. His mother in a brightly colored dress, the vibrance standing out against the grey of the beach and the swirling ocean behind her. She was a bright spot, a shining point of sunlight, even when the sun was hiding behind the clouds.

"It's raining," his father might say, *"not beach weather."* Effie Potter never cared. Any weather was beach weather, if you're able to make it there.

James remembered it was cold, he was soaked to the bone despite his raincoat, but his mother took his hand. She was warm and bright against his side. *"Isn't it beautiful?"*

James looked up. *Regulus* was concentrating, his face set in something equal parts serious and peaceful as he played. James turned his head, nuzzling his cheek into *Regulus's* lap. He was warm and safe.

Regulus reminded James of the water, the days at the lake. The first time James truly felt they both gave something, *Regulus's* bare skin pressed against James's torso. He was warm, not so vibrant, not so blinding, but something soft and tentative. The sun peeking over the horizon asking carefully. *Let me warm you, let me shine.*

James would always let him.

The day seemed to bleed into every other, the moment stretching out an eternity. The music dipped and fell, rising, falling, dancing around the living room. It filled James's chest, beating alongside his heart.

Regulus felt like safety. Like talking of death in a whispered voice. Like it wasn't a crime to give, to break.

When Regulus played the last note, it rang out, his foot holding down the sustaining pedal. Regulus let it live and die in the space between them.

The sun had hidden away behind the clouds sometime in the last few minutes. James had noticed it on the horizon, clouds rolling in, a thunderstorm brewing

“Wow,” James breathed, his voice breaking through the silence that followed. “You’re beautiful.”

Regulus looked down at James in his lap, his dark lashes fluttering. “Don’t you mean *it* was beautiful?”

“No,” James said firmly. “You’re beautiful, everything you do and everything you touch is beautiful as well.”

“Shut up,” Regulus muttered, his cheek flushed pink.

They were silent for a while. Eventually, James sat up.

His DBT homework was still sitting on the floor, it was lurking at the corners of his mind, pressing, itching.

“What is it?” Regulus asked, clearly noting something on James’s face.

“I’m afraid,” James said suddenly.

“Of what?”

“Everything, nothing. Of blaming you... sometimes, when all this hard, I want to blame you for it. Because if it weren't for you, I'd still be comfortable, still be able to pretend. I'd be safe, living the way I always had.” The room was dark now under the stormy sky.

“You'd be dead.” Regulus didn't bite back the words. A lot of people did, they danced around it. As if the fact that James hadn't made it as far as slitting his wrists meant it wasn't quite certain. But he was there, he was days, hours away from the end.

“There are worse things to be.”

“There are better things, too.”

James turned his head; he looked over at his boyfriend. The downturn of Regulus's lips, the freckles on his cheeks, the soft curl of his hair at the nape of his neck.

“I guess.”

James *agreed*. It sat in the space between them.

He'd agreed.

“Yeah,” was all Regulus said, his voice careful. He didn't touch the statement, didn't press, but James saw the way he blinked, eyes widening the smallest amount.

“I'm just afraid that...” James trailed off, unsure if he could speak the words without hurting Regulus.

“Afraid?” Regulus repeated—pressing, giving James the okay to voice whatever he was hesitant to.

“Yeah. Uh- afraid that I’ll never forgive you... I mean, I *do* forgive you, but sometimes I get angry again and I feel like it goes away.”

Regulus responded instantly. “I don’t need you to forgive me, I need you to live.”

“I’m not sure I ever have.”

“That’s okay. The hardest thing you can do is learn to let yourself exist.”

Quiet, quiet, quiet. It sat there.

“Oh,” James swallowed. “I’m not sure I want to do hard things. Sometimes, I just want to give up.”

“I know, but you’re allowed to exist. I’m not saying to be magically happy or healed or perfect. I’m just saying, sit here, stay here, breathe... *exist.*”

James was pretty sure he was existing right now. He felt like he did.

“I’m here,” he whispered.

Regulus reached out, grabbing James’s wrist. “I know,” he whispered, holding James’s hand up, tracing the lines of his fingers.

There was a quiet moment. James was watching Regulus intensely, he instantly caught the moment when Regulus paused, brow furrowing.

“What?” James questioned as Regulus stared down at James’s hand, a frown painting his lips.

“I- I don’t know... déjà vu I guess,” Regulus said slowly. “It feels familiar, like I’ve been here before.”

“Maybe we were born here.”

Regulus laughed suddenly, his frown melting away. “*James,*” he said, turning his head to look at James in amusement. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“I-I just mean, like we were made to be here, you know?” James said glaring defensively. “You and me, right? Like the world was holding its breath, waiting for us to get here.”

Regulus shook his head, but he softened anyway. “You’re so fucking weird and sentimental.”

There was a crack of thunder outside. James threaded their fingers together more firmly, squeezing Regulus’s hand.

“Says Mr. I’ve-been-in-love-with-you-since-I-was-a-teenager.”

Regulus scoffed. “You don’t need to rub it in.”

James didn’t. He just smiled. “You think we’ve been here before?”

“No, I don’t think so. A second ago maybe... but not this. This is new.”

Another clap of thunder rumbled overhead and Regulus turned his head, looking out the window as the sky opened up and rain began to pour.

James just watched Regulus as he watched the rain. Something thoughtful flitted across his face and he turned to James suddenly.

“Come on,” Regulus said, jumping up.

“Hm?” James questioned as Regulus grabbed for his hand.

“Come kiss me in the rain.”

James didn't know why this was Regulus's request. He didn't know where it came from.

James didn't know how he was going to answer his homework questions or what he was going to do about school, a job, or the future. He still couldn't quite find the words, he didn't know if they'd ever come back.

He followed Regulus out the front door, down the porch, and onto the wet lawn. It was cold, and James was instantly soaked to the skin, raindrops collecting on the lenses of his glasses.

Regulus's hand was heated in his. He grabbed James by the face, pulling him down into a kiss. There was water dripping down James's nose, his glasses were slipping down his face. Regulus's hair was curling, sticking to his forehead. James kissed him back like it was the most important thing he'd ever done.

He didn't have the words. He didn't know if they'd show up, but Regulus was warm.

“Are you coming, sweetheart?”

Light spills out over the lawn. His mother is opening the front door.

Silence. Quiet.

She waits.

The rain was pouring. Regulus smiled into James’s lips.

“Can you give me a little while?”

She smiles too. “That’s what I was hoping you’d say.”

Chapter End Notes

and onto the last part :,)))

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

the words

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Uh, sorry, excuse me?”

The man paused suddenly, turning around. He seemed surprised to be stopped. “Yes?”

The sun was shining down, spring just beginning to give way to summer. He squinted in the light, shielding his face with his hand to look properly.

“Sorry, again. This is probably weird, but aren’t you that author? James Potter?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, warmly. “That’s me.”

“Okay, I- I read your book and it really resonated and I just... it was real. Like I don’t know, I don’t have those sorts of words, but it was nice to see that somebody did.”

He smiled, something wistful and a little sad crossing over his face. He pushed his glasses up his nose, and as he did, a wedding ring glinted on his finger. It shone brightly in the sun. “Well,” he said, “I didn’t always have them either. They come and they go.”

“What do you do when they go?”

He shrugged. “You force yourself to exist through it.”

“Sounds hard.”

“Oh, it is. The hardest thing you’ll ever do is learn to let yourself live.”

Chapter End Notes

SO. This has been a journey... this fic is the first thing I did after writing anti-hero and I genuinely thought no one would care. But you guys DID. And even if you hadn't... I still learned so, SO much as a writer from ppp and I've done a lot of bits of writing in here that I'm proud of. Thank you to every person who stuck around week after week, I know who you are and I appreciate you very much <33

Most of all, biggest hugest thanks to my beta [@pastelanxiete](#) who has taught me so much and worked with me to put out updates every Friday without fail (we never missed a single week since the first chapter?? NEVER) A lot of work goes on behind it all. On that note thank you to my entire little writing council ily guys. But especially

@pieceofchocolate and @rsbarelle who helped me with so much of my concerns over fic for months! They always let me rant it out in voice notes <33 From whether or not Regulus would wear shorts to varying Regulus' POV compared to James when it came to the sex scene... every aspect! I appreciate all my friends so much <33

Much love! Mwah!
-Mere <33

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