

Writing Prompt:

A group of friends find themselves locked in the library overnight. They discover they can travel into any book's story. What happens next?!

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Tangled, Pressed Book Flowers

Lily stretched back in her wooden seat and, once again, wished she had a cushion. Of course, there were no downy pillows at the library. But still, a girl could dream. Well, Lily could not dream. Nor could Lily sleep. Finals at Texas A&M university were two days away and Lily intended to get straight A's.

Lily pressed her fingers against her eyes.

"If I ever hope to be a literary professor, I need to at least be a decent student myself," she mumbled.

"What did you say?" Kenai asked, as he popped his head over Lily's study cover.

"Oh, nothing," Lily, said. "Sorry, Kenai, I was just talking to myself. I didn't mean to disrupt your studying."

"Ha," Kenai smirked. "I'm not studying."

Lily peaked around her cubicle into Kenai's study area. On his computer, spaceships flew across a darkened sky and exploded.

"I am being a Master Jedi," he said and grinned.

Lily laughed.

“What are you two jabbering about,” Tierney said, as she too poked her head up.

Her eyes looked red and her mascara smudged.

Kenai smiled at Tierney.

“The little pixie fell asleep again,” he said and reached up to tug playfully on Tierney’s big, blonde bun of hair.

“Yeah,” Tierney said, with a yawn. “I don’t know how you study for so long, Lily.”

Lily just shrugged her shoulders and looked around, searching for the last member of their group.

She heard his snoring before she saw him.

Lily tip toed over to his seat and playfully tickled at the back of Dylan’s ear. He swatted at it in his sleep until Kenai slammed a textbook on his desk.

Dylan jumped up.

“What’s going on?” he said, and looked around, dazed.

“It’s time to go home, Sleeping Beauty,” Kenai said.

“That’s good,” Dylan said, and stretched. “I’m ready for bed.”

“We may not be going home,” Tierney said, as she looked around the room.

“Look at the library! It’s empty.”

“What time is it?” Kenai asked.

“Oh man,” Dylan said, looking at his phone. “It’s 11 pm.”

Lily rushed over to the front of the library and tugged on the door handles. Locked. Panic bloomed in her chest and she rushed to go try the other doors. No luck.

“What are we going to do? We have finals. We need to rest; we need to prepare,” Lily said.

“We’ll be ok,” Dylan said, and offered a reassuring smile. “Let’s just hunker down and I’m sure the librarians will be here early.”

“Yeah,” Kenai said. “We can make this fun! Like camping.”

He found one of the couches near a reading section and flopped down on it.

“Camping in the library?” Tierney asked. “We need snacks.”

Kenai pursed his lips and then dug into his backpack.

“I got some coins. We can make a feast from the vending machines,” he said.

By midnight, the friends had laid out a meal of Doritos, Gatorade, and candy. They were all snacking and talking about life, when Lily looked down at her phone.

“Sheesh,” she said. “We need to at least get some sleep before finals.”

“But Dylan and Tierney already got a nap and I am still wide awake,” Kenai said.

“I have to admit, I’m wide awake, too” Dylan said.

“What we need,” Kenai said, and smirked. “Is a bedtime story.”

“There’s many to choose from!” Tierney said and giggled.

“I know,” Kenai said. “We need a ghost story. We are pretty close to the cemetery here. Perhaps spirits dwell here.” He lifted his eyebrows up and down in a playful way.

“No,” Lily snapped. Her face reddened in what seemed a mixture of pain and anger.

The room went quiet and everyone stared at Lily. They had forgotten, for just a moment, that last year, they were at that same cemetery for Lily's little brother's funeral.

An awkwardness stifled the air and Kenai spoke up.

"Lil," he said. "I'm sorry; I forgot."

Lily's face now reddened in embarrassment.

"No," she said, and looked down at her hands. "I'm sorry. It's just still so hard, you know. I didn't mean to snap."

Kenai went over and squeezed her shoulders. The room calmed and the friends drew closer together.

Tierney stood up and brushed her fingers along the spines of the books.

"Yes," she said. "We need a happy book. Ah, this will do nicely. Fairy Tales."

Tierney pulled from the bookcase a copy of *Hans Christensen Andersen Fairy Tales*.

"Oh gosh," Lily said. "You know, Tierney, the original fairy tales from Christensen or the Grimms brother are not the kind you are hoping for—they can be, well, grim."

"Really?" Tierney asked, and flipped open the front cover.

The light around them flickered and, soon, all became black.

"What happened?" Kenai asked.

"I think the lights went out," Dylan said.

But then, the sound of a waves crashing upon a shore filled their surroundings. A moon slowly formed above them and they each realized, in fear, that they were somehow outside.

"Where are we?" Lily called out.

"I'm not sure," Dylan said.

"We are next to an ocean," Kenai said, peering out into dark waters.

A woman with a large fish tail laid on a rock within a watery cove—a mermaid. She looked at them with haunting, melancholy eyes and blinked slowly.

“Oh my,” Tierney said, and then called out to the mermaid: “Are you hurt?”

The mermaid looked away from them, and up at a castle.

“Where are we? And who is she?” Kenai asked.

“I think,” Lily said, “I think we are inside the book.”

“What?” Dylan asked, and raised his eyebrows.

“Yes,” Lily said. “And this is *The Little Mermaid*.”

Across from the mermaid and beneath the castle, on a sandy shore, a man lay on the ground and a different, beautiful woman bent over him and helped him to his feet. At the sight of them, the mermaid lifted her forlorn eyes, but did not move.

“Oh!” Tierney said. “Is this where the sea witch tricks the prince? We need to go tell the mermaid everything will be ok.”

“No, it won’t,” Lily said, quietly. “In the Christensen version of *The Little Mermaid*, the prince marries another and the mermaid, well, she dies.”

“What?” Tierney said. “That’s awful. What a terrible story!”

They stared at the mermaid as she sunk deeper into the water, her black spools of hair surrounding her like dark ink.

“No,” Lily said, and reached out for the mermaid. But the mermaid was already gone.

“That should not be the end,” Tierney cried.

With that word, the moonlight faded and the sound of the ocean quieted.

They were in the library again.

“What was that?” Tierney spoke first.

“We somehow went inside the storybook,” Lily said.

“So, it was just a story,” Kenai said. “No one really got hurt.”

He seemed to be trying to reassure himself. The friends sat for several moments, trying to comprehend their night. After several minutes of quiet, Kenai chirped up.

“Let’s try it again,” Kenai said. “I say we try something a bit more adventurous. Anyone up for Star Wars?”

“Oh no,” Tierney said as she jumped out of her seat. “This is my chance! We need to go meet *him*.” She ran to the shelves.

“What is she up to?” Kenai asked.

“I think she wants to meet her own version of Prince Charming,” Lily said, and laughed. Kenai frowned.

“Aha!” Tierney called out from a row of books. “I found it. *Pride and Prejudice*, by Jane Austen. Let’s go!”

Lily looked over to the children’s section of books.

“You all go ahead,” Lily said. “I’m going to try and open a different book.”

Kenai shook his head.

“These girls are going to be the death of us,” he muttered.

“Well,” Dylan said. “We better go be their study buddies. You go with Tierney. I’ll go with Lily.”

When Tierney opened the book, she fell near the punchbowl of a Pemberley type party.

She first looked around at the regency era festivities. Dancers swooshed by her and fine gentlemen bowed asking ladies for their dancing cards.

She found *him* even before she even had to ask anyone. She knew by how the other ladies looked in his direction. And, well she knew, because she had read the book and seen the movie too many times to count.

Mr. Darcy.

Tierney nearly tumbled over herself to meet him. She had no one to introduce her, but oh well! Formalities can be excused for true love, no?

“Hello, Mr. Darcy,” Tierney said. She mistakenly stepped on his foot as she approached.

Mr. Darcy looked down at her with his quizzical brows, rolled his eyes, and mumbled, “Ah yes, another lady with the grace of a young calf.”

Mr. Darcy’s eyes seemed bored until another woman walked into the room, and only then, did Tierney see some happiness warm his cold face.

“Excuse me,” he said and he walked towards the dark-haired woman.

Tierney stumbled back. With her face hot, she rushed out onto the terrace. She felt close to tears, but laughed at herself—how silly she was! But a few hot tears trickled down her cheeks anyways.

“Who was that bimbo?” Kenai said, as he walked up beside her.

“Oh, just *him*,” Tierney said, and sighed. “My childhood literary crush.” She laughed at herself, but still couldn’t help the tears.

“Hmm,” Kenai said. “I do not think that he is the one for you.”

Tierney sniffled.

Kenai cleared his throat and tried again, “Now, I’m no fancy gentleman, but um, my lady? If you could do me the honors?”

When Tierney turned around, she found Kenai, holding out his hand to her.

“A dance, please?” Kenai asked, and smiled at her both with a mixture of hope and newfound nervousness.

They slow danced for what felt like many pages.

And when both leaned in to kiss, Tierney whispered, “This is a much better ending.”

With that word, again, the feeling of fluttering pages overwhelmed them and Kenai and Tierney found themselves back in the library.

“But where are Dylan and Lily?” Tierney asked.

An open book laid on the ground in the children’s section. Its title read: *Where the Red Fern Grows*, by Wilson Rawls.

Dylan found Lily beside the graves. Owls hooted and the crickets chirped with life, but Lily stayed beside the graves and the red fern.

Dylan sat next to her and waited for her to speak.

“I was too late,” Lily finally managed to say.

Her voice was just a whisper in the dark.

“Miles used to ask me to read this book to him, at night,” Lily continued. “He loved it so much. We both did. But we always cried at this part.”

Lily blinked in the dark.

“I was hoping,” she said. “I could change the story a bit.”

Her cry was just another soft noise in the darkness of the forest, mixed with the croaking frogs and sighing, sleeping birds.

Dylan drew himself closer to Lily. He wrapped his arms around her and then, hesitantly, respectfully, kissed her forehead.

“I do not know much about literature, Professor Lil,” he said. Lily smiled at his nickname for her.

“You know I’m just a science guy,” he continued. “But I do believe, that a comedy can become a romance. Or that a scary story can become hopeful.”

Lily nodded in agreement.

“And fiction can become non-fiction,” she said, in a whisper.

He drew Lily closer into his chest and put his head on top of hers. “Yes, and a tragedy can become a happily ever after.”

Lily looked up at Dylan’s eyes.

“That’s just my scientific hypothesis,” Dylan said, and then whispered closer to her ear, “And my other hypothesis is that you are destined for a happily ever after.”

Lily tucked her head into his chest.

“Yes,” Lily said. “That does sound like a beautiful ending.”