Perfect Storm
by cherrystreet

Summary

What do you do when your best friend asks you and your (now) ex to be the best men at his destination wedding? You can either tell him the truth, tell him you’re not together anymore, and deal with the consequences, or you can pretend you’re still together and roll with it, just pray you don’t spiral. Fake it ‘til you make it. You know, for the sake of the wedding.

Harry and Louis choose the latter.

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Tumblr

Notes

Inspiration
It’s January 1st, the first morning of the new year, and Harry can’t imagine being more hungover than he currently is, right now, in this moment. His head is pounding, the Denver sun too bright even through the closed shades in the living room, and Louis will not stop fucking whining that he needs coffee, needs a sweatshirt, needs to unpeel his contacts from his eyeballs, needs something to throw up into.

“Lou, baby, for the love of God, shut the hell up,” Harry groans from his position behind the kitchen counter, wincing as the refrigerator door slams behind him.

“No, it’s your fault I feel so shitty. You forced me to drink.”

He snorts as he pours the cream into his cup of coffee, watching the colors swirl together. “That’s not exactly how I recall it. I believe it went more along the lines of you chugging a bottle of red wine, followed by 30 or 40 shots.”

Louis whines louder, pulling a throw pillow over his face, voice muffled. “You lie. It wasn’t that many. It was only, like, 27. And a half.”

Harry takes a sip of his coffee, ignoring how it nearly burns his tongue, and makes his way to the couch. “It’s astonishing that you aren’t dead yet. Truly. Move over.”

He doesn’t actually move, just lifts his legs up, giving Harry about a quarter of the cushion to squeeze into, then drapes his legs across Harry’s lap, complete dead weight. “I smell coffee,” he says, face still hidden under the pillow. “That had better be for me.”

“Yours is on the counter.”

Louis lets the pillow fall to the ground, pouting and blinking heavily. “But that’s so far away.”

“Yeah, those 13 steps are killer.”

“Exactly.”

Harry’s about to argue that Louis’ laziness has reached an all-time high, but speaking feels like too much work. Instead, he sinks further into the couch, closing his eyes, resting his hand on Louis’ knee, drawing circles with his thumb. Louis makes no attempt to get up and get his mug from the kitchen, Harry makes no attempt to point out that it’s probably going to get cold, and he closes his eyes, head tipped back, brain screaming to shut down and go to sleep. And he’s almost there, Louis’ breathing even, thighs warm against Harry’s, but then someone knocks on their front door, startling both of them, Harry spilling coffee all across his lap.

“Fuck, shit,” he hisses, jumping up immediately. “What the fuck.”

Louis laughs, the bastard, not bothering to sit up. “Harry, darling, someone’s at the door.”

He stares at Louis, unamused. “Sorry, I have a little situation here.”

“Hurry up. It isn’t going to open itself.”

Harry rolls his eyes, scoffing as he makes his way to the door, and brainstorms ways to make Louis’ death look like an accident. He grimaces at the way the coffee drips down his legs, quickly
going cold, and so far, this year is not going well, barely ten hours into it. He squints through the peephole, surprised to see Liam, who looks annoyingly perky to be standing on the other side of the door at 9:25 in the morning, rubbing his hands together and smiling. Harry pulls open the door, jaw clenching when it creaks.

“Good morning!” Liam chirps, not bothering for Harry to welcome him in before he steps through the doorway. He looks down and frowns. “Looks like you might’ve peed your pants, Styles.”

“It’s coffee,” he grits out, shutting the door.

“Sure, whatever. Anyway.” He heads into the living room, nearly prancing. “Tommo! Hi!”

Louis sits up and looks up at Harry over the back of the couch. “Harry, why is this man in our home. He’s scaring me.”

“I know, baby, me, too,” Harry pouts, taking a seat on the recliner, doing his best to ignore the way the coffee is now completely cold and seeping into his boxers. He’s unsuccessful. It's disgusting.

Liam’s eyes are wide as he bounces from one foot to the other, shrugging out of his winter jacket, clearly excited about something. “Okay. So.”

“What, Liam, spit it out,” Louis sighs, rearranging himself, wrapping the fleece blanket folded over the back of the couch around his shoulders. He looks so tiny, just his head visible, like a human cacoon, and Harry smirks.

“Alright. Last night.” Liam breaks out into a huge grin. “I proposed to Annie last night.”

“Oh, thank God,” Louis says, flopping back down against the cushions. “It only took you four years.”

“You and Harry have been together for five! And you’re not engaged yet!”

“Yeah, but we live together and have a child.”

“A cat isn’t a child, Lou.”

Louis gasps. “Shh! Prudence can hear you!”

Harry laughs, shaking his head. “Congrats, Payno.”

“Thank you!” He takes a seat next to Louis on the couch, patting him on the knee. “I asked her last night at her parents’ New Year’s Eve party, right as the ball was dropping.”

Louis pretends to gag, batting Liam’s hand away. “That’s actually worse than I thought it would be.”

Liam ignores him. “We’ve started looking at dates--”

“Already?! Give her some time to back out, for fuck’s sake.”

“--and we’re thinking a January wedding.”

Harry frowns. “It’s great that you guys are clearly very… Enthusiastic to get this show on the road, but, like, do you really think you can plan an entire wedding within a month?”

“No, jeez.” Liam rolls his eyes. “Next January.”
“Oh.” He pauses. “Liam, Colorado in the winter is terrible. Like, definitely not ideal for a wedding. It’s fucking freezing. And you won’t be able to do anything outside.”

“Wow, I’m so glad I came to you guys first to share this news with. I knew you'd be supportive and positive.”

“Sorry, just. *June* is nice,” Harry offers.

Liam snorts. “So is Hawaii.”

“Ugh!” Louis kicks Liam’s thigh. “You want us to go all the way to *Hawaii* for your wedding?!”

“Yes, I do.”

“Do you have any idea how expensive that’ll be?!”

He nods. “Yep.”

“And you are aware you could just elope, right?!”

“I’m aware.”

“Fuck, and you’re gonna make us stay for, like, a week, too, aren’t you.”

“Absolutely. Probably even longer.”

“*Ugh,*” Louis groans louder. “Why can’t you get married locally like regular people. I’m hopefully starting med school soon, Payno, I’m not gonna have time for a month long wedding excursion on your behalf.”

Liam looks at Louis, at Harry, then back at Louis. He takes a deep breath. “I want you two to be my best men.”

Harry’s eyes go wide in surprise. “Both of us?”

“Of course. I can’t have Tweedledee without Tweedledum.”

Louis snorts. “Nice.”

“I’m serious, though,” Liam laughs. “I want you both up there with me.”

“It’s okay if you just want Louis,” Harry says, brows knit together. “You’ve been best friends with him since the dawn of time. I came along much later. I won’t be offended.”

“Nope,” Liam argues, shaking his head. “Annie likes the idea, and I could never choose between the two of you.”

“Why the fuck not?” Louis asks. “Harry’s right. I’ve been here way longer. I should be the only best man.”

“Christ,” he laughs. “Maybe I want just *Harry*.”

“Watch yourself,” Louis warns, whipping his pillow across the sofa.

“*Regardless,*” Liam continues, deflecting the pillow, “it’s an entire year away, so you both have time to plan, and I think it’ll be a lot of fun. It’ll be like a giant family vacation.” He licks his lips,
expression serious. “I want you both there. I need you there.”

Harry nods, saying, “We would never miss it, Liam,” at the same time Louis sighs, “Fuck, we’re gonna be your bitches for the next 12 months, aren’t we?” and Liam laughs again.

“Good. And yes.”

They celebrate a toast - just coffee, because the mention of alcohol has Louis threatening to vomit all over the floor - and make a plan to take Annie out as a foursome later in the week, Louis promising he’s just kidding about all his negativity, Harry slinking off into the bedroom when the two other boys make fun of him for tearing up at the video Annie’s mom took of Liam down on one knee the night prior. He’s in the middle of (finally) changing into clean sweatpants in his and Louis’ bedroom when he hears Liam in the kitchen ask, “So, when are you popping the question, Tommo?”

“Mmm, when I decide he’s worthy,” he replies, and even through a wall, Harry can hear the fondness in his voice. He smiles, tripping into his pants, nearly slamming his head against the wall.

“I bet you’ll be engaged by the time my wedding happens,” Liam says.

“That’s a safe bet.”

“I’m surprised you aren’t engaged already, actually.”

“Yeah, me, too. It’ll be soon.”

“No doubt about that. Hey. Cheers to you, Lou.”

“To you, too, Payno.”

A little over a year later, Harry and Louis are standing together at Denver International Airport, an uncomfortable distance between them as they check their bags. The woman scans Louis’ boarding pass and she points to Harry, asking, “Are you two together?”

Louis doesn’t bother glancing back when he answers. “No. We’re not.”

“She’s asking if we’re traveling together, Louis,” Harry sighs.

“Whatever.” He still doesn’t turn around, but Harry can nearly see the irritation written all over his movements, all across his voice, and he heads into the line for security without waiting for Harry.

The woman scans Harry’s ticket and gives him a pity smile; he forces an equally weak smile back and readjusts his backpack over his shoulder, dreading the next several hours of being stuck on a plane beside Louis, unable to escape. He steps into line behind him, sulking, and takes off his shoes before placing them on the conveyor belt, surveying the group of people surrounding him. In the past, Harry and Louis have made up backstories about the families and couples traveling around them, guessing which were going on a luxurious vacation, which were heading out of the country on a new adventure, which were leaving for home. This time, they’re silent, doing their best to avoid contact of any kind.

They’ve traveled together countless times before, standing in this very line, Louis panicking he’s
forgotten his headphones or that the plane is going to nosedive or that the airline screwed up their reservations and they aren’t going to be seated together. Right now, though, Louis isn’t saying anything, and he definitely isn’t afraid they aren’t sitting together. At this point, not sitting together would be best case scenario, and Harry is crossing his fingers that that’s a possibility.

Louis walks through security without checking to see if Harry needs a hand with anything, and Harry swallows heavily, knowing this is going to be an exhausting flight, an even more exhausting nine days, and as he shrugs his sweatshirt back on over his head, all he can think about is how safe he felt at this time last year, how everything felt secure and solid, remembering how Liam and Louis were discussing Louis and Harry’s future engagement plans, how Harry couldn’t stop smiling at his own expense.

Their gate is mostly empty, just a few people there ahead of them, and when Harry sits down near the window, Louis keeps walking, picking a seat on the completely opposite end, his back turned to Harry right up until their zone is called to start boarding.

Harry rubs the back of his neck as he follows Louis through the jetway, wincing as the January air hits him right before he steps onto the plane. It hurts, everything hurts.

How the hell could they have been this wrong.

Falling in love with Louis was the easiest thing Harry had ever done. He didn’t mean for it to happen, wasn’t looking for a relationship or anything close to it, but then during his sophomore year at college, Liam, a new friend from his philosophy lecture, grabbed him by the shoulders and said, “You have to meet my best friend Louis. He’s a year above us. I’ve known him since middle school and got stuck with him here, too. You guys would hit it off, I know it.”

Harry nudged Liam’s hands away. “And why do you assume that?”

“Trust me.”

Two months, seven parties, three platonic pizza dates, an infinite string of texts, just as many late night phone calls, and one pot brownie that Louis swore wasn’t laced later, Harry was desperate to find a way to ask out the boy with tiny tattoos up and down his forearm, the boy with the blue eyes that watered whenever he was piss drunk or watched Titanic, Harry positively desperate to touch and kiss and do everything and anything with. Unfortunately, it was very one-sided, Louis flitting between just about anyone else, confiding in Harry about his seemingly endless suitors, Harry biting his tongue to pretend he didn’t care, that he wasn’t green with envy. About four months into knowing Louis, Harry drunkenly swung at Liam, missing his face entirely, falling flat on his ass, mumbling, “You did this. It’s all your fault. I’m sad and want him and I’m sad and he’s kissing someone who isn’t me and I’m sad, Liam.”

Liam laughed, helping Harry back up on his feet. “He’ll come around, Styles. I told you to trust me.”

But he didn’t come around.

A year later, Harry (somewhat) accepted the fact that Louis only viewed him as a best friend, the best friend that always graciously allowed him to crawl into his bed at three in the morning, the best friend that picked him up from bars and lectures and work, the best friend that sometimes let his drunk hands wander, typically rewarded with a friendly slap across the chest. And Harry dated, saw a girl named Zoe for a few weeks, followed by a guy named Ty for two months after that, and they were both nice - gorgeous and witty and exactly Harry’s type - but then Louis would show up...
at his apartment unannounced, backpack shrugged over his shoulder, wearing socks with sandals and an oversized sweatshirt, nose red from the cold, and Harry couldn’t be bothered to pretend that anyone outside of Louis actually existed.

Louis was just so good, was the thing, and Harry couldn’t help but fall for him, helpless not to. He was unlike anyone Harry had ever met before; his laughter was contagious, his brain was brilliant, his heart was big and loved everyone, everything. He spent spring nights on Harry’s bedroom floor, Harry quizzing him on his stack of notes from anatomy and chemistry, Harry happy to do so, eager to watch the way Louis’ mind worked, the way he tapped his pen against his lip when he didn’t immediately know the answer. He spent summer mornings in Harry’s basement back home, groaning and complaining that he didn’t want to go to work, that he didn’t want to leave, and every time, Harry had to choke back, “Then don’t.” He spent winter days wrapped up in his bed with a cup of tea or coffee or hot chocolate, anything to warm him up, bitching that Colorado was too fucking cold, Harry shaking his head the whole time, endeared in a way he couldn’t explain.

Harry loved Louis through all the seasons, through all the moods and emotions. Harry loved Louis before he really knew what that meant, before he could voice it, before he’d even touched him. He didn’t have to, to be sure.

Louis was like a hurricane, one that swept Harry up whenever he least expected it to, but he embraced the storm, the chaos, never worried that it would knock him down entirely if it, in fact, already hadn’t.

It was an unusually freezing cold day in October the day Harry broke, losing all semblance and control, finally giving in, the words falling out of his mouth before he knew what was happening.

“Harry, your DVD collection is honestly deplorable,” Louis said, skimming his fingers along the tops of the cases. “Can you believe Niall fucking Horan has more choices than you do? Niall. Kid watches golf 365 days a year and he still has more movies. Ridiculous.”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, hey, Louis. I want to take you on a date.”

He paused at that. “I mention Niall’s name and this is your reaction?”

“No, just.” He swallowed, pushing his hair out of his eyes. “I can’t stop thinking about it. It’s been driving me nuts for months. I need to take you out. Like. Anything you want, let’s do it. Dinner or a movie or both or fucking skydiving, I don’t care. Please.” He knew he sounded borderline pathetic, but kept going. “I’m serious. And I’m going out of my mind, a little bit.”

Louis smirked, just slightly. “I can tell.”

“Is that a yes or a no?”

“It’s… I had no idea.”

Harry’s shoulders slumped. “So. No.”

“I didn’t say that.” He cocked his hips, twisting his hands together. “Alright.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I think. I mean, you’re, like, my best friend. So it’s probably gonna be weird?”
He made a face. “I don’t want it to be, though.”

“Well, it kind of already is.”

“Nuh uh.” Harry frowned. “Is it?”

Louis laughed, running his fingers through his hair, cheeks reddening. “How long, Styles?”

“How long what?”

“How long have you wanted to ask me out?”

He rubbed his hands up and down his thighs mindlessly. “Well, today is Wednesday, so… About a year.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” he breathed out, eyes darting around anywhere and everything but Harry’s gaze. “That’s. A long time.”

Harry swallowed, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah, you’re right, this is weird.”

“It is.”

He winced, pissed at himself for spilling his poorly kept secret, even more pissed that he was so easy for Louis. “Do you wanna forget about it?”

“Is that possible…?”

“Not on my end.”

Louis groaned. “Fuck.”

“Okay. Listen.” He pursed his lips together, trying to figure out what to say that would sway Louis in his favor, not make him completely panic. “One date. Just dinner. I’m only trying to attempt it because I know we could work so well together. I’m.” Harry furrowed his brows, thinking. “You’re one of the only things that matter to me, and I’ll take you any way I can have you. I just can’t stop thinking about what it would be like to really have you.”

He breathed in deeply for a moment or two, rubbing his hands up and down his thighs. “You’ve thought a lot about this?”

“Too much, probably.”

Louis squeezed his eyes shut. “Can I sleep on it?”

“Louis, c’mon!” Harry laughed.

“Oh, shit, fine, we’ll go, but if this is a disaster and wrecks everything… You’re my best friend. Like, no one tolerates me like you do.”

“It won’t be a disaster,” he argued, promised, his heart beating wildly. He stood up and made eye contact with Louis, not allowing him to break it. “It’ll be so much fun and it’ll be good, Lou. Really good.”

“Alright, kid,” Louis replied slowly. “We’ll try it.”

“Are you only agreeing because you pity me and you feel uncomfortable?”
“100 percent, yes.”

Harry smirked, cheeks heating up. “It’ll be good,” he repeated, weight lifted off his shoulders, heart threatening to beat out of his chest completely.

It wasn’t good. In fact, it was the complete opposite.

They went out to dinner Saturday night; Harry made reservations at a much too expensive restaurant downtown, hoping it would impress Louis. Instead, he admitted over the phone, “I have nothing to wear to a place like that, Harry.”

“That’s fine, I’ll wear sweatpants with you,” Harry pleaded. “Just, don’t back out.”


The night’s attire ended up being the least of Harry’s worries, Harry going for a button up shirt, Louis obviously able to scrounge up something to wear, as well. He looked stunning, stepping out into the apartment’s parking lot with a blazer and black skinny jeans, looking effortlessly flawless, a look Harry had seen many times prior but never for him, and the image made his throat tight. It was finally happening, finally at his fingertips. But then he tried to open the passenger’s door at the same time Louis did, the force of their combined strength causing the door to fly back and accidentally smack Harry in the face. He stumbled backward, grabbing his nose, wincing.

“Oh, Jesus Christ, are you okay?” Louis asked, snorting from trying to hide his laughter.

Harry wiggled his nose around, making sure it wasn’t broken, tears springing to his eyes. “I’m good.”

“Harry, you’re crying,” he said, shoulders shaking from laughing.

“Not intentionally!”

“Oh my God. Seriously, are you fine?”

“Get in the car, Louis.”

And the rest of the evening, as it turns out, was even more painful than a Toyota Corolla door attempting to crack Harry’s face in half. Their dinner was atrocious, they couldn’t seem to keep a steady, natural conversation going, and Harry couldn’t stop shaking his leg under the table, which caused a major wine spillage across the surface of the tabletop, effectively ruining what was left of their meals. The entire thing was unbearably awkward, and when the waiter dropped off the bill, Harry was actually relieved.

He walked Louis back to his apartment door through Louis’ protests to drop him off in the parking lot, hands shoved in his pockets, trying to find a way to apologize for screwing up their friendship, for forcing them to do this. But Louis was looking at him with a crooked smile and his eyes were warm and Harry wasn’t sorry. Not in the slightest.

“So…” Louis started. “What’re you thinking.”

Harry swallowed, pursing his lips together. “I’m thinking that I just went on a horrible fucking date and I’m embarrassed and all I want to do is call my best friend and tell him all about it, like I normally would, but my best friend was there. He knows how bad it was. No need to go over it
again.”

He laughed, eyes crinkled in the corners. “You’re right. I was there. And it was definitely shitty.”

“I hate that I want to take you out again,” he murmured under his breath. “My face hurts and my head is pounding and I think I ate a piece of wine glass from when it shattered into my dish…”

“You think we have the chemistry?” Louis asked. “To go out again?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe not.”

“What if all we have is friend chemistry? Is that a thing?”

“That’s possible.” Harry sighed. “I want to try again, Lou.”

“Ah, I dunno…”

“Louis.” He took a step forward, allowing his hand to reach out and grip Louis’ hip like he’s wanted to for so long. “One more time. Something less fancy. Something more us. This could be so good, I know it. I really do. Tonight was bad. I was too nervous and I don’t even really like wine but I really like you. So much. I’m.” He stopped talking, not knowing how to word the rest of his thoughts without coming off like a complete nut.

Louis sucked in his cheeks, nodding slightly, pausing for an uncomfortable small eternity. “C’mere for a second.”

“What?”

“Just. Come here. I need to see if it’s just friend chemistry, to see if you’re totally insane.” He tilted his head to the side, lips parted, winding his arm up and around Harry’s neck, pulling him in closer, and Harry almost stopped breathing entirely.

The moment their lips slotted together, Harry forced himself to keep in mind that this could be it, this could be the only time he’d ever get to kiss Louis, so he threw himself into it, kissing Louis the way he’d always imagined he would, the way he knew Louis wanted it. He wrapped one arm around his waist, palm curving around his hip, and the other cupped his jaw, thumb dragging back and forth across his cheekbone. He pulled him in close, closer, their chests lined up, toes of their shoes touching, and when he felt Louis breathe sharply against him, he kept going, kept pushing. He ran his tongue along Louis’ bottom lip before he dove in, manipulating Louis’ body to mold against him, to taste him, to work his mouth over and over until it was too much for both of them.

And right before Louis pulled back, Harry was vaguely aware of the feeling of Louis’ hands on his own hips, squeezing and tensing, tiny whines coming from the back of his throat. It was too hot, better than Harry had ever pictured it to be, and he’d spent a lot of time picturing it, to be candid.

Louis let his head slump forward when they broke apart, Harry able to catch the pinkness in his cheeks, and he swallowed, rubbing his hands up and down Louis’ back, feeling him breathe.


“Lou,” he whispered back, voice a little gruff.

“Wanna go out tomorrow night?”

Harry laughed, mostly a hysterical noise that screamed relief. “Really?”
Louis looked up, blinking lazily. “That is not the kind of chemistry friends have. I’m, uh.” He touched his bottom lip, puffy, and Harry couldn’t stop staring. “That was a really good kiss, Styles. You kiss everyone like that?”

He shook his head, being honest. “No, I don’t.”

“Okay, can you, like, not kiss anyone else anymore? Especially like that?”

Harry smirked, cupping the back of Louis’ neck. “I won’t,” he mumbled against Louis’ lips, his heart hammering in his chest when Louis surged up to kiss him again, firmer this time, deep, purposefully.

Two weeks later, as Louis was walking backward toward his bedroom with his hands on the button of Harry’s jeans, Harry’s mouth seared to his neck, he murmured, “Thank you for waiting for me.”

“Tonight?” Harry panted out, hands squeezing and palming against Louis’ ass through his black jeans. “You were only a little late to the movie, it’s alright--”

“No. Not tonight. The past 300 nights. I had no idea what I was missing with you. It took me a while to catch up and get on the same page but I’m so glad I’m here now.”

He paused, leaning back to meet Louis’ gaze. His eyes were wide, lips parted, shockingly gorgeous as always. Harry’s chest hurt, knowing he was the one that got to have Louis this way. “Can’t wait to show you how crazy I am about you.”

Louis swallowed heavily, fingers grazing below Harry’s belly button as he popped open the button, voice a little shaky when he said, “I think I’m starting to get the idea.”

Harry looked down, overwhelmed by the way Louis’ hands looked on his jeans, slipping inside. He didn’t try to come up with anymore words. He couldn’t.

That was over five years ago, and Harry hasn’t kissed anyone else since.

But now, there’s no reason not to.

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**DAY ONE | FRIDAY**

The seven and a half hour flight to Honolulu is worse than Harry thought it would be. It’s a full flight so they can’t sit separately, even after Louis insistently badgers the innocent flight attendant, and Harry is stuck in a middle seat, Louis at the window, wiggling around and complaining about every last detail under his every breath. Normally, Harry would find a movie for them both to watch on the TV built into the headrest in front of them, or pull out Louis’ favorite snacks as if he’s an actual toddler, or force Louis to rest his head on Harry’s shoulder until he fell asleep, warm and quiet. Now, he does his best to act like Louis’ behavior isn’t over the top obnoxious, hardly flinching when Louis “accidentally” drops his 20 oz. bottle of water directly onto Harry’s bare foot, his boots already kicked off under the seat in front of him. He doesn’t want to give Louis the satisfaction that he’s getting to him, even when Louis climbs over him, shoving his elbow into his face, politely asking the woman on the end to stand up so he can use the restroom, sneering when Harry doesn’t so much as budge. And Harry knows Louis well enough to know he’s trying to make Harry fight back, trying to get under his skin and make him crazy, trying to piss him off to match
Louis’ very obvious mood. It’s working, but Harry will be damned if he ever lets Louis know that. So, he continues to ignore Louis when he unplugs Harry’s headphones from the arm rest’s jack, the worst he can come up with four hours into the flight. He’s losing steam, and Harry is stuck between feeling relaxed and wanting to punch himself in the face.

It’s not just irritation, though. It’s a lot of residual feelings seeping out, unstoppable and palpable. And it’s impossible to sit next to Louis and not have his mind race with memories - all just out of reach - all rising to the surface whenever he steals a glimpse of Louis out of the corner of his eye, or when he catches a whiff of his shampoo or cologne. It’s all dangerous territory, being trapped with Louis, unable to walk away and take deep breaths, to convince himself that he’s fine, to make himself to stop thinking about Louis and their situation. He’s stuck, doing a poor job of not staring at him from seat 23B, trying to swallow the fact that he’s still pitifully in love with his boy.

Not his boy, not, Goddamnit.

It feels achingly similar to the way he pined for Louis that entire first year of friendship, wanting more so desperately but couldn’t choke out the words, couldn’t do anything other than sit there and take it, afraid and not ready and on edge with every conversation. And halfway through the flight, Harry almost loses it, almost breaks and says everything that’s on the tip of his tongue, but then Louis pours the last few sips of his Coke on Harry’s lap, and Harry might just hate him, instead.

By the time they land, Harry’s patience is wearing thin, his fists clenched, his mind on repeat, chanting Don’t crack, that’s what he wants, don’t stoop to his level. It’s easier said than done, Louis pulling out all the stops to irritate Harry and bring him down alongside him. Normally, when he’s being a major pain in the ass like this, Harry can joke him out of his mood or distract him. This time, he’s the reason for Louis’ attitude, and the only thing he can do is continue to ignore him, pretend he’s okay. He’s not.

Solid plan. Everything is working perfectly so far.

Harry hails a cab, which Louis promptly climbs into, slamming the door behind him, telling him through the cracked window to find another one, and when Harry finally catches up with him at the resort, Louis purposely sticks his foot out, Harry trips over it, and yes, everything is working fucking perfectly.

They broke up in October, about 12 weeks prior to Liam and Annie’s wedding, and though Harry had a million and one thoughts on the tip of his tongue that first weekend alone, he opened with, “What are we gonna do about Honolulu?”

Louis sucked in his cheeks, pulling his beanie down tighter over his head, almost like he was trying to make himself invisible. “I dunno. Do we really have to talk about this now? Can’t you just take the rest of your shit and go?”

Harry shook his head. “No, we have to figure this out. We’re Liam’s best men. We both have to be there. And Liam is… challenging, as far as this wedding is concerned.”

That was truly the understatement of the year. It took about a week into the engagement for Liam to turn into groomzilla, texting both Harry and Louis at all hours of the day - often times in the middle of the night, as well - with ideas for the bachelor party, the first dance, the centerpieces, the tuxes, the cocktail hour, and about a thousand other little details that no one, probably not even Annie, gave a flying fuck about. It was hard to pretend to be excited about the upcoming nuptials in a beautiful, tropical location when their phones never seemed to take a damn break with the incessant ringing and buzzing. After reading a string of texts about various color schemes during
dinner one night, Louis whipped his phone across the room, screaming, “I can’t fucking do this anymore! He’s horrible! They don’t even have a date set yet! It won’t be for another year! Harry, I’m gonna fucking lose it. Help me.”

Harry pulled him in for a hug, rubbing his hands up and down his back, coddling him. “I know, baby, he’s a monster.”

“Any chance Annie will realize she’s way too good for him and will leave him in the near future?” he asked, voice muffled against Harry’s chest.

“Doesn’t seem likely. I’m so sorry.”

And on the planning went, Liam asking Niall, Davis, Jake, and Connor to be his groomsmen, which took a significant amount of heat off of Harry and Louis, their phones finally breathing for the first time in weeks. But as the days ticked by to “the wedding of the century” (Liam’s words, obviously), the more stressed he got, and the more stressed he got, the more Louis threatened to break Liam’s neck.

“I have never known a man to be like… this,” Louis complained. “We have to say something. I can’t focus on homework with him calling me every hour on the hour.”

“He’s just excited, Lou. Horribly, obnoxiously, over the top disgustingly excited.”

Louis stared blankly. “Do not support him. I will cut you in your sleep.”

“You’re cute when you threaten me,” Harry smirked.

“I’ll make you go to the wedding alone.”

His eyes grew wide. “Wait, no, that’s worse, don’t leave me.”

“Exactly. So we’ll say something.”

“Yeah,” Harry sighed, “I guess.”

But before they could get to Liam, Annie got to them. She pounded on their door much too early one Saturday morning, waking both of them up, coffee cups in her hands, forced smile on her face.

“Look who has coffee!” she sang, handing them each a cup.

“Thanks, Annie…” Harry said slowly. “Were you in the neighborhood?”

“At 7:04 in the morning?” Louis grumbled from behind him.

“No, not really, I just wanted to pay my two favorite boys a visit.” She blinked, face still frozen with a smile.

“Are you alright?” Harry asked. “You seem… Off.”

“Me? Off? No!” She threw her head back and laughed, almost hysterically.

“Annie, why don’t you take a seat,” Louis said, brows furrowed. “Where’s Liam?”

Her movements stilled. “Why, did he say something?”

“No, just--”
“Louis, I had to sneak out. He’s driving me fucking crazy. He’s the worst.”

“Oh my God, you think so too?!” Louis pumped his fist in the air, Harry bursting out into laughter. “He’s a menace!”

“I know! Try living with him!”

“Fuck no.” Louis smiled, patting her on the back. “Did you come here to escape?”

“Just for a little while, if that’s okay.” Annie walked over to the kitchen table, took a seat, paused, then put her head on the table. “I’m the biggest asshole on the planet, huh?” she asked, voice muffled against the tabletop. “What kind of bride complains about her future husband being too involved in planning their wedding?”

Louis took a seat beside her. “The kind of bride who doesn’t want to live and breathe ‘chicken or steak’ for 12 straight months.”

She sat back up, eyes slightly crazed. “I love him. I do. I love him so, so much. And I know he loves me just as much, hence the insane behavior. He just wants everything to be perfect for us. That’s why it pains me to say I honestly will kill him before next January happens if he keeps this up.”

Harry snorted, sitting next to Louis, warming his hands on his coffee cup. “Is there anything we can do to help keep your sanity?”

“Yes, Jesus.” Annie drummed her fingers across the table. “Just, keep doing whatever you’re doing. He’s so excited to show me the ideas you both put on the table and loves how involved you’re being with all of it so far. And. For the love of God.” She grabbed each of their hands, squeezing painfully tightly. “Don’t fucking leave me. I need you. The wedding needs you.”

Ten months later, they stood amongst five years worth of items and memories, the apartment a disaster, Louis’ arms crossed against his chest. His fight stance, one Harry knew well.

“Annie would die if we both didn’t show up,” Harry said, mindlessly kicking a sweatshirt out of his way. At that point, he didn’t remember if it started as his or as Louis’.

“Probably.” Louis grumbled.

“And can you imagine not being there for Liam’s wedding?”

“No. I can’t.” He shrugged. “You don’t have to be there, though. I’ve known him way longer.”

“Okay, that’s not fair. I’ve been best friends with him for years now.”

“So?”

Harry pushed his hair out of his eyes. “Non negotiable, Louis. We’re both going to the wedding.”

“Whatever.”

This was going about as well as Harry predicted it would go when he played this conversation over in his head on the way here. “It’s too late for us to change or cancel our flights, unless we can come up with about $500 each for fees.”

“Um, no. Absolutely not.”
“Right.” Harry sighed, doing his best to ignore how soft Louis looked, his sweatpants way too big, falling over his feet and covering his toes.

“So, like, do we both go separately? Do our best to avoid each other?”

“You mean, tell Liam his two best friends - his two best men - split just before his wedding and are requesting to not be in the same room together?”

Louis put his hands on his hips, blinking twice. “Yes.”

“No, that won’t work. First of all, Liam is a basket case—”

“True.”

“--and second, you know Liam. If he figures out what’s going on, he’s going to try to fix everything. That’s just how he is. We can’t put that on him during his wedding week.”

He tugged at the bottom of his shirt. “I guess.”

“And third, don’t you think it’s a little selfish to ask for those kind of accommodations? To be kept apart? It’s not about us.”

Louis’ movements stilled, eyes turning into slits, demeanor changing instantly, like a switch was turned on. “You want to talk to me about selfish?” he sneered. “How about the fact that you left me with an apartment that you know I can’t afford? Or that you came here and ambushed me this morning when you know I have three huge exams to do by tonight?”

“Lou, I’m not ambushing you… I told you I was coming over.”

“No.” Louis shook his head, fists balled by his sides. “You’re fucking selfish. And I can’t believe I have to go to a fucking nine-day long wedding with you. And I can’t believe even more that Liam thought a wedding needed to last for over a fucking week.”

Harry nodded, in agreement with that last part, not in the mood to fight Louis on the rest, even if he was being irrational, irritable, completely one-sided. It’d been an emotionally draining week, and he was too tired to do much more than hold his hands up in defense. “Okay, you’re right. Yup. Just. What do we do for the wedding, Louis?”

“I’m not talking about this anymore. I want you to leave.”

“No. Get out.”

“Stop. We have to figure this out. You never want to discuss anything. Ever.” Which is the reason we’re in this predicament now, Harry thought.

“It’s still 12 weeks away! Enough.”

Harry closed his eyes, trying to find the best way to reason with his angry ex-boyfriend. God, his chest stung with how terrible this all was, of how much he hated it, of how wrong this all was. “Let’s just not tell Liam or Annie, okay?” he murmured quietly. “We’ll go to the wedding as us and we can deal with everything else after.” He knew it was a terrible plan, but he couldn’t come up with anything else and all he could focus on was the hurt in Louis’ eyes.

Louis turned around, shoulders slumped. “I’ll box up the rest of your stuff and put it in the hallway
when I’m done. Just go.”

He tried to make his mouth move, to form the words *Okay, I’m leaving*. But he felt completely and utterly frozen. His brain couldn’t seem to force his legs to bring his body to the door, couldn’t walk out with Louis barely able to keep it together. Fuck, he hated the way Louis’ shoulders were shaking, but he didn’t say anything about it as he worked up the strength to leave and close the door gently behind him.

Two days later, Louis left all of Harry’s belongings in the hallway outside of the door, and when Harry begrudgingly opened up the boxes in his new studio apartment downtown later that day, he noticed several of his favorite t-shirts appeared to be missing. He didn’t say anything about that, either.

The resort is *stunning*, that much Liam made sure of. Harry follows Louis into the main lobby, the floors a shining marble, palm trees growing in the center, orchids and hibiscuses and gardenias lining the room in vibrant pinks and whites. This is the first time upon landing that Harry has actually taken a second to let it sink in: he’s in *Hawaii*.

They make their way to the front desk, dropping their bags at their feet, and find themselves face to face with a woman in her early 30’s, brunette and chipper.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen!” she says, smile on her face. “I’m Terri, welcome to the beautiful island of Honolulu!”

Louis makes a face and puts his elbows up on the desk. “Gee, thanks.”

She pauses slightly, then turns to Harry. “Are you checking in?”

“Yeah, we are.”

“And what’s the name?”

“Styles. Wait, oh, God.”

Terri raises her brow. “Is everything okay?”

Harry puts his hands over his face. “Louis, we forgot to get another room.”

“What?”

“We forgot. To reserve. A second. Room.” Deep breath. “We’re still sharing.”

“How could you forget to do that?!” Louis asks, stomping his foot. “Fuck!”

“I’m sorry,” Terri says slowly. “Is there something wrong with your reservation?”

Harry frowns, staring at Louis. “Wait, why was it *my* responsibility to get another room? The first room is under *my* name. Technically, it’s mine.”

“You wanna fucking keep *everything*?!” Louis sneers. “The hotel room, the iPad, the series collection of *Scrubs*, the window seat on the plane—”

“*You* had the window seat! And I didn’t take the iPad! It’s in the drawer next in the nightstand next to the bed, for God’s sake.”
“--so the least you can do is get another room. Now.”

He closes his eyes, focusing on his breathing, then opens them again. “Are you going to continue to be like this for the next week?”

Louis flicks his hair out of his eyes, cocking his hips. “Yes.”

“Awesome.” Harry turns back to Terri, who looks unbearably uncomfortable. “I’ll take another room.”

“And I,” Louis says, reaching into the bowl in front of him on the desk before he saunters off, leaving Harry to deal with the room arrangements, “will take a mint.”

Terri nearly chokes on her words when she explains that they’re all booked up for the weekend, no rooms free until Sunday afternoon, and even then, that room is on the other side of the resort, not a part of the wedding block of rooms. Harry debates on begging Niall - who knows about their situation - to share, but then he remembers Niall brought his girlfriend Steph along, and there is no way in hell he’s going to be sharing a room with those two.

“Shit,” he grumbles under his breath. “I guess I’ll take that room. And I’ll have to find someone else to bunk with in the meantime.”

“Please let me know if there is anything I can do to help to make your stay more comfortable,” she says, but the look on her face screams Please don’t come back here.

“Thank you, you’ve been a great help,” Harry says, reaching into the mint bowl.

It’s empty.

Louis cleared it out.

It takes less convincing on Harry’s part than he figured it would to get Louis to agree to share his room for the weekend. He almost looks defeated when he holds his door open all the way and says, “Whatever. There’s no room in here for a cot, though, so you can take the floor.”

Harry chalks Louis’ quick response up to pure exhaustion, the seven hour flight finally catching up to him, amongst other things. Instead of dwelling on it further, he just purses his lips together, sighs, drags his suitcase in and mumbles, “Thank you.”

They unpack silently, Harry checking the clock several times, keeping in mind that Liam might potentially choke them alive if they miss “family dinner,” reservations set for six o’clock on the dot. He looks over at Louis who’s hanging up his dress shirts on hangers haphazardly in true Tomlinson fashion. Harry didn’t expect anything less.

“Do you mind if I jump in the shower? I feel gross from the plane,” Harry says quietly, conversationally.

Louis doesn’t answer, just continues to hang up his shirts, slamming the metal hangers onto the rod in the closet a little harder than necessary.

“Lou? Alright?”
Silence.

“Okay, good talk.” He sits down on the floor beside his suitcase, rummaging through his toiletry bag for his shampoo, and just before he stands back up, Louis nearly runs into the bathroom, telltale sign of the lock clicking into place moments later. The water starts up immediately after that.

Harry doesn’t bother standing up, just leans against the side of the bed until his legs go numb, tapping his fingers on the rug underneath him. Death by Liam Payne isn’t looking so bad at this point.

Somehow, Louis manages to stay in the shower until 5:57, just enough time to jam himself into a pair of jeans and a clean top, definitely not enough time for Harry to attempt to get his own shower in, and Harry isn’t even annoyed by Louis’ pettiness. He’s impressed.

Dinner is delicious, and by Harry’s fourth cocktail, he finally feels loose, feels like he can relax, talk, joke around. Even with Louis sitting beside him, the tension seeps out of him, and when they all clink their glasses together in celebration, his smile is genuine.

Niall, however, can’t stop shooting them worried glances at a much too frequent rate to be subtle. He makes eyes at Harry during appetizers, kicking him in the shin from across the table, and Harry groans, rubbing his leg.

“What the hell was that for,” he whispers.

Niall clears his throat gestures for Harry to follow him. “Hey, Harry,” he says loudly, a few of the people at their table pausing their conversation to look. “Want to go to the bathroom with me?”

“Wow. That’s.” He closes his eyes, shaking his head slightly. “A tempting offer, Niall, but I’m not quite sure you need the moral support. You’ve been toilet trained for, what, three years now?”

“Harry,” he says again, this time through gritted teeth. “Bathroom.”

“Jesus, fine.” Harry does his best to push back his chair and squeeze by Louis, but Louis, unsurprisingly, doesn’t budge, making it nearly impossible for Harry to climb by. “Thanks, Lou,” he mumbles sarcastically, and Louis retaliates by shoving backward, trapping Harry up against the wall behind them, only freeing him when Niall shoots him a murderous glance.

He follows Niall around the corner into the bathroom, pushing open the swinging door. Niall gives him a pitied look, followed by a head tilt.

“Alright, I know this is hard but you’ve got to act better than you’re acting right now if you don’t want Liam or Annie to catch on.” He frowns. “Actually, Liam probably wouldn’t even notice if you got major reconstructive surgery this week. That’s how obsessed with this wedding he is. Annie, on the other hand, is a much sharper tack. Do it for her.”

“Hey, I’ve been doing fine,” Harry argues. “As far as anyone knows, Liam’s best men are happy and dandy, Liam and Annie are currently stress free, and you are being a mega creep, luring me into the bathroom like this.” He looks around. “Nice bathroom, though. Look at that couch. Although, who actually sits on a couch in a public bathroom? Why do nice bathrooms always have couches?”

“Oh my God, focus,” Niall scolds. “No, you’re not doing fine. And you wanna know why?”
He sighs. “Why, Niall.”

“Well, to start, it’s pretty obvious, and not just to me. You and Louis haven’t shared food, haven’t made fun of each other, haven’t even *looked* at one another. Do you know how weird that is?”

Harry shrugs. “I dunno.”

“By this point, you’re normally pulling Louis into your lap, or ordering him whatever he wants. It’s gross and we hate it and it’s something we expect to happen. You’re not on your game, Styles.”

“Oh, come on, *awful* joke?! How was it awful?!"

“That’s not the point of this conversation…”

“What kind of tree fits in your hand? A *palm* tree. That’s genius!”

“I don’t need to relieve it, Harry, I heard it the first time and I hate it just as much, if not more, the second time around. And also, just because we’re in a tropical location does not give you the right to tell us horrible jokes about palm trees.”

“But—”

“*Or* coconuts. Or volcanoes. Or any pun involving leis.”

“Or leis.”

Harry pouts. “I memorized so many, though…”

“I don’t doubt that. Listen.” Niall puts his hands on Harry’s shoulders. “Keep trying, dude. It’s only a week.”

He nods. “It’s hard to try when the other person involved doesn’t care. At all.”

“You know he does. He’s hurting, Harry. Bad.”

“And I’m not? Every morning feels like a giant kick in the stomach when I remember we’re not…” He trails off, inhaling, exhaling. “He hasn’t met me halfway in months. What makes you think he’s going to do it now?”

“He will.”

“No, this was a stupid idea, we should’ve just told Liam from the beginning.”

“It’s definitely a stupid idea,” Niall agrees, “but it just shows how much you love Liam. Willing to put on this ridiculous front to keep him and Annie happy? You and Louis are so, so good. The best.” He smirks. “The best *men*.”

“Ugh, even *I* wouldn’t make a joke that stupid.”

Niall stares blankly. “You’ve been humming ‘put the lime in the coconut’ for about two hours now. Believe me, you are the reigning king of stupidity.”
“Thanks.” He glances over at the mirror and stares at his reflection. “Wow, I look like shit, huh?”

He laughs. “Kind of, yeah. Tomorrow’s a new day. I think the plan is to hike around the island a bit. It’ll be nice.”

Harry does his best to smooth his frizz down, failing miserably. “It’ll be nice,” he echoes. “As long as Louis doesn’t, like, push me off a cliff or anything.”

“I’ll talk to him, too,” Niall says as he pushes open the bathroom door, “but no guarantees.”

The morning Harry and Louis broke up, Harry didn’t know where to go, lost and sick to his stomach. His family wasn’t local, he didn’t want to involve Liam if he didn’t have to, and most of his friends in the area didn’t have any space for him to crash. That is, except for Niall.

He showed up at Niall’s house without warning, just a small bag of clothes plus a phone charger in hand, and the second Niall saw the look on his face, he welcomed him inside immediately.

“Stay as long as you want,” he told him. “Until you find a new place.”

Harry nodded, squeezing his eyes shut, desperately trying not to let the tears slide out. Again.

“Thank you.”

For weeks, Niall evenly split his time between Harry and Louis, joking one night that he felt like he was visiting his dads in a messy divorce, checking up on both of them to make sure they were still showering and getting dressed every morning. It didn’t make Harry laugh, though. Instead, it made him feel sick and achy all over.

“But he’s doing okay,” Niall said. “If that’s what you want to hear.”

“Is is what I want to hear.” Harry smiled half heartedly. “I can tell that’s a bullshit answer, though.”

He pursed his lips together before sighing. “He’s a fucking mess, Harry. I don’t really know what else to say.”

“Thanks for trying,” he said, his heart sinking. “And thanks for basically giving up your office for me. Best air mattress around, I’m telling you.”

“That’s the spirit,” he laughed, patting him on the back.

Harry stayed with Niall for about three weeks until he could move into his new apartment, and in those three weeks, he caught up on a month’s worth of writing for the column, scheduled and attended seven private photoshoots, drove the 43 miles each way to see his mom twice, graded about 83 exams, bought a six-month supply of granola bars for no reason other than, “I can, so, shut up, Niall,” and went to the bar down the block exactly 16 times until Steph dragged him out on a Wednesday night, telling him to lay off the alcohol and sleep.

And though he thought about calling Louis in every spare moment in between, he didn’t. He resisted the urge, didn’t allow himself to break, didn’t drive back home to make up and move back in and tell Louis how very in love with him he was, that their hearts were made for each other. Instead, he laid on that terrible air mattress, staring at his lifeless phone, begging for it to light up with something, anything, from Louis.

But Louis wasn’t breaking, either.
Harry follows Louis back to the hotel room, trailing a few paces behind him. He watches as Louis slides his room key card into the slot, cranking up the air conditioning as soon as they step inside.

“Wow, 61 degrees?” Harry asks, peering over his shoulder. “That’s pretty cold.”

“Niall just lectured me for the past 20 minutes, I don’t need you to, too,” he snaps, but Harry can hear the fatigue in his voice.

“Okay, sorry. I’m just.” He points to the bathroom. “Gonna shower.”

“Awesome.” Louis steps out of his pants and shirt leaving him just in boxers, apparently not in the business of brushing his teeth tonight before he slides under the heap of blankets on the bed. He looks impossibly tiny, soft and essentially naked, and Harry has to bite his tongue to prevent himself from saying anything to cross the invisible line.

“Well. At least you’ll stay warm,” he says lightly, gesturing toward all the blankets.

Louis doesn’t respond, just turns out the light beside him, burrowing his way deeper into the comforter.

Harry takes a hot shower, one that leaves his skin red and pruny, taking his time. He knows when he gets out, he’s going to have to sleep on the floor, and that idea is so unappealing, he thinks that pulling an all-nighter to avoid it sounds like the better alternative.

He steps out of the bathroom around midnight, thankful that the alcohol is making him tired, even with the jetlag. The room is absolutely frigid - fucking 61 degrees, for the love of God - and just as Harry is about to go searching through his luggage for the sweatshirt he’s only half certain is in there to keep him from contracting hypothermia, he notices something on the floor and freezes.

There, next to the mattress, are all the blankets previously wrapped around Louis, smoothed out with a pillow on top, acting as a makeshift bed. Harry’s eyes trail up to the mattress and he sees Louis lying under a single sheet, most definitely uncomfortable, most definitely freezing cold. The way he’s breathing, Harry can tell he’s still awake.

The floor still sucks, hard and unforgiving, but it’s significantly better with the comfort of the down blankets. Harry settle in, wraps it around himself, pulling it up to his shoulders.

“Thank you, Lou,” he whispers, blinking in the darkness.

Louis sighs. “Good night.”

Harry closes his eyes. “Night.”

He isn’t sure what Niall said to Louis, and though Harry is sure it helped, Louis isn’t one to do things just because someone else tells him to. He’s stubborn, strong willed, never one to give in simply because it’s easier. He does what he wants to, when he wants to.

He wanted Harry to be comfortable. He wanted Harry to have the blankets.
This is Louis trying.

That’s what he keeps in mind as he finally drifts off to sleep.

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**DAY TWO | SATURDAY**

Even with the added comfort of the blankets, Harry wakes up with a stiff neck and a sore back, and rolling his shoulders only seems to make it worse. He winces when he sits up, clenching his jaw through the shooting pain, hopeful that the front desk has some sort of pain relief medication. Typically, Louis is the one who remembers to pack things like that - ibuprofen, Tums, aloe vera, etc. - but Harry isn’t about to sort through his luggage, nor does he want to ask.

Louis is already showering while Harry gets dressed, searching through his suitcase for a decent pair of shoes for their hike, and Louis emerges shortly after, cheeks pink from the hot water, towel wrapped around his waist. Harry tries not to be too obvious as he eyes the droplets of water dripping off the ends of his hair and down his chest.

“Shower’s free,” Louis says. “If you want it.”

“I showered before I went to bed, so I’ll hold off for now. Thank you, though.”

He nods. “Yup.”

It’s painfully cordial, but it’s better than the silent treatment. They continue to stand in awkward silence before until Harry breaks it by clearing his throat, grabbing Louis’ attention again before he starts to get dressed. “Did you sleep, uh, well?”

“I did.” Louis gestures toward the pathetic excuse for a bed on the floor. “And you?”

“Uh, yeah, I did,” he lies, rubbing the back of his neck. “Thank you. Again.”

“Sure.” He looks up through his lashes. “You’re lying, though.”

Harry huffs out a laugh, dropping his hands to his sides. “Kind of.”

“I have ibuprofen in the front zipper of my backpack.” He shrugs. “If you need it.”

“I do, actually,” he replies earnestly, “that’d be really helpful.”

Louis points over to his bag before he picks up his clothes and heads back into the bathroom. “Help yourself, Styles.”

He watches Louis disappear behind the bathroom door, and even though his entire back is screaming for relief, he doesn’t reach for the backpack to find the ibuprofen. It’s the first time Louis has addressed him by name since arriving in Honolulu, and he knows it’s a reach, that it means nothing, but he’s going to take it.

They meet the rest of the group for breakfast before they head out for the day, and as Harry takes his seat beside Louis at the table, he tries to keep Niall’s advice in mind. *Be playful, joke around, take care of Louis like before*. He can do that.

If Louis will let him.
The waiter comes over and takes all of their drink orders, starting with Addy and Moriah at the other end of the table and makes his way around. When he stops at Louis, Louis puts down his menu and looks up.

“I’ll have a mimosa, please. Extra champagne, if you will.”

The waiter nods. “Excellent.”

Harry nudges Louis with his elbow. “Orange juice gives you heartburn.”

“Excuse me?” Louis asks.

“Orange juice always gives you heartburn,” he repeats. “I think I saw a coconut drink on the menu. You’d like that.”

“What are you doing…”

Louis looks up at the waiter. “Do you have anything with mango? My boy loves mango.”

“Harry…” Louis warns.

“Sure,” the waiter says. “Virgin?”

“That’s personal,” Harry jokes, and the waiter throws his head back in laughter. Louis, however, is not amused.

“What the hell, hello, I’m right fucking here,” he grits out. “I don’t want anything mango or coconut. I want a mimosa.”

“Baby, you’re gonna feel like shit for the hike,” he murmurs, letting the term of endearment roll off his tongue for the first time in months. It feels unfairly natural. “I’m trying to help.”

“Okay, but you don’t get to do that anymore,” Louis says under his breath.

Harry stares for a beat too long before he breaks eye contact and looks back up at the waiter. “We’ll both have water, please.”

“With lemon?”

“That’d be great, thanks.”

The second the waiter walks away, Louis slams his hands down on the table, the silverware jumping. “What the fuck, Harry!”

“What?”

“That was so obnoxious! I can order my own fucking drinks! If I get heartburn, it’s my damn problem, not yours!”

“Eh,” Harry says shrugging. “I beg to differ. Seeing as I’ll end up being the one to has to find Alka-Seltzer somewhere.”

“Sometimes I just want to choke you, I swear to God. And no tip for that waiter, what a dick.”

He starts to laugh, which he knows is a risky move, but then Liam is laughing, too.
“You guys are so predictable,” he says, shaking his head. “I knew the second Louis ordered something with orange in it, this would happen. Just like that time in San Diego, remember?”

Harry nods, smirking. He remembers. “Yeah, and he was just as pleasant that time.”

“Okay, fuck off. Sweetheart.” Louis leans back in his chair, appearing to be slightly less irritated now that he understands the game. “I’m tired, okay? Slept like shit last night because someone hogged all the blankets. I was freezing.”

“Maybe don’t keep the AC turned down to Arctic temperatures? Just a thought.”

“Need the AC to be cranked because you snore so Goddamn loudly, I need some sort of noise to block it out.”

“See, this is why we need a TV in the bedroom.”

“You know I hate TV’s in bedrooms!”

They banter back and forth for a few more minutes, and though the majority of it is complete bullshit, it actually feels good to playfully argue, even if it’s just for show. It manages to relieve some tension in the process, and when Harry drapes his arm around the back of Louis’ chair, Louis doesn’t mention it.

On the way out of the restaurant, Harry pulls his hair up out of his face and into a bun, squinting in the sunlight. It’s only ten o’clock and it already feels like a thousand degrees.

“Hey, Styles.” Niall comes up behind him and pats him on the back. “‘Atta boy, making an effort.”

Harry groans. “He’s gonna shave my head in my sleep, isn’t he.”

“Nah, I don’t think you bugged him too much.”

“Niall…”

Niall pauses to laugh. “Yeah, I’d say losing your hair is a safe bet. But dude, when you started going on about the way he leaves his socks on the floor, oh God, the look on his face was so worth it. Good work.”

The group spends the afternoon winding their way up and around the stunning views of Honolulu, only pausing to stop and yell at Harry every couple of minutes for slowing them down, thanks to the Canon hanging around his neck.

Over the course of the past several years, he’s taken a lot of photos - a lot - but he’s never been somewhere this tropical before, somewhere with crystal clear waters, striking flowers, coves and animals and culture blooming in every corner. He doesn’t bother to turn off his camera as they journey around the island, his finger essentially never leaving the capture button, loving how vibrant everything seems, even through the lens of his camera.

He doesn’t just take photos of the scenery as they traipse throughout the landscapes, though. He makes sure to take a significant amount of his friends, Liam and Annie especially, shaking his head at the way Niall crosses his eyes whenever he catches Harry zooming in on him, a trait he most
definitely picked up from Louis. He smiles thinking about it.

It’s a subconscious move, the fact that by the end of the afternoon, about \( \frac{2}{3} \) of his camera roll seems to be Louis. Harry has always been drawn to the way Louis moves, the way he squints in the sunlight, and if Harry can manage to preserve it on film, he will. Just because they’re not together doesn’t mean he fails to recognize how stunning Louis is on film - and not.

Old habits die hard, apparently.

If Louis realizes he’s been Harry’s main focus for the better part of two hours, he doesn’t mention it. He does, however, surprise Harry by hanging back with him when the group stops at a waterfall, Harry standing back just far enough so the spray doesn’t touch his camera.

“Any good shots?” he asks, pulling his tank top over his head.

Harry nods, wondering how the hell Louis is already tanned. He looks impeccable. “Yeah, a few really cute ones of Li and Annie, actually. I’m hoping I can get a couple nice candid ones and have them framed for when we get back.”

“That’s a nice idea.” Louis pushes his sunglasses up to the top of his head. “Can I see?”

“The pictures?”

“No, the camera. I wanna play around a bit.”

“Yeah, of course, absolutely.” Harry ducks out of the strap, handing it over to Louis. It feels vaguely similar to all the other times over the past several years that Harry has willingly given Louis some basic photography lessons, happy to, Louis picking it up rather quickly. “Anything in particular you wanted to do with it?”

“Not really.” He drapes the leather strap around his neck, dragging his finger across the top of the camera. “Where’s the lens cap?”

“I left it back in the hotel, why?”

“And your phone?”

“With my wallet in the vault. Why…”

Louis shrugs, holding the camera up to his face. “Just wondering. How close do you think I can get to the waterfall without getting the camera wet? Or falling in?”

“I think you have another few feet of room.”

“Hm. Okay. One more question. How do I change the mode on this?”

Harry makes a face. “What? You know how to do that.”

“I forget.”

“Alright, c’mer.”

Louis takes a step toward him, camera gripped in his left hand, and before Harry can figure out what’s happening, Louis is pushing him until his balance is gone and he’s toppling into the water below him. And it isn’t a big fall - no more than a four or five foot drop - but it’s the shock of it that has Harry screaming.
“Louis, what the hell!” he sputters at the surface, pushing his loose strands of hair out of his eyes, kicking to stay afloat. “You just pushed me into a fucking waterfall!”

“You’re not under the waterfall, you crybaby,” Louis yells back, shrugging, face splitting into a grin.

“Close enough! Why did you just do that?!”

“That’s for not letting me get my mimosa. And you’re an idiot if you think I actually don’t know how to change the mode on a camera. Jesus Christ.”

“Are you serious?!”

“As a heart attack.” He smirks as he holds down the capture button, taking a string of photos of Harry with his hair dripping in front of his eyes, clothing completely stuck to him, the rest of their group now pointing and hysterically laughing.

Harry hates all of them.

By the time he hoists himself up and out, shaking the water from his curls, he’s less angry and more impressed that Louis remembered to ask about the lens cap before he shoved him off a fucking cliff. (Well, he’s not sure if a four-foot drop qualifies as a cliff, per se, but the sentiment still stands.) And Louis is clearly pleased with himself, too, based on the way he cocks his hips and smiles when Harry walks back over to him, cringing at the sound of his feet squelching in his sneakers.

“You are such a pain in the ass,” Harry mutters, shaking his head, pushing his hair back.

“Now we’re even.”

“I don’t think what you just did was on par with what happened at breakfast.” He sighs when he sees Louis is tapping his foot, and it’s easier just to play along. “Whatever, you’re right. We’re even.”

“Thank you.”

Harry rolls his shoulders, wincing at the soreness that won’t seem to go away. “Water was actually nice, though. A lot warmer than I expected it to be. If it was any colder we’d be having a different conversation right now.”

Louis frowns. “Wait, is your back still bothering you?”

“No, but you are.”

“Harry.” He’s serious.

Harry sighs. “Yeah, a little bit, but it’s fine.”

“No, we can head back soon. I’m sure the front desk has something for you.”

“I’m good. Really.”

He stares, hand on his hip. “Don’t do that.”
“Do what?”

“Lie. Again.”

Harry laughs. “My back has always sucked. Don’t worry about it.”

“You sure?” Louis asks, toying with the buttons on the camera.

“Yes.”

He hums. “Okay, if you’re really sure.”

“I am.”

Louis rolls his eyes. “I know you're still lying.”

He tries his best not to smile. “I didn't doubt it.”

After Louis takes off with the camera to join Moriah and Steph, Niall lags behind, staring smugly at Harry.

Harry raises a brow. “Can I help you.”

“You’re doing much better. Louis, too.”

He kicks a rock out of the way, happy that his clothes are finally mostly dried. “What do you mean?”

“That conversation about your back. Nice touch.”

“Oh.” Harry looks up ahead, watching as Louis pauses to take a picture of rock. He wonders how many pointless pictures are now taking up space on his memory card. “Yeah. That was.” Not fake. “A nice touch,” he echoes.

“You doing alright?”

Up ahead, Louis is forcing Liam and Annie to take a cringe worthy posed photo together, complete with a makeshift bouquet of weeds and sticks in Annie’s hands, Liam kissing her on the cheek. He jolts back when he notices a stick bug in the bundle of twigs, but Annie seems delighted, yelling out about how precious it is. Harry can't help but laugh. “Yeah, I’m doing alright.”

This time, he isn't lying.

Long before Harry landed his job teaching photography classes at the community college three times a week after he graduated school, he spent nearly all his free time glued behind the lens of his Canon, his “baby,” which he referred to it as. His mom got it for him as a gift for his 19th birthday, and Louis went ahead and bought a second lens for their second anniversary, helping to “add to the addiction,” Louis said.

The more he practiced, the more knowledge he obtained, and learning felt exciting, never like a chore. The difference between his skills at the very beginning compared to a few years later was almost laughable. He used to think he was good, really good, but when he looked back on it, it was clear to see how heavily he relied on Photoshop and oversaturating. Nothing looked natural, and
while sometimes Harry liked the look of over exaggeration, his favorite shots were typically the ones that seemed a little more raw, exposed, honest. And he never viewed it as work; not many people can proudly say their hobby is their job, and Harry hit the jackpot in that department.

Harry often dragged Louis along with him, Canon dangling around his neck, into the city in the springtime to find blooming trees, wet sidewalks, pedestrians bustling up and down the streets without heavy jackets, more pep in their step. They ventured into the mountains in the autumn, Harry loving the way the reds and oranges and yellows looked against the cloudless sky. The winter always involved a lot of snowflake shots, icicles, footprints in the snow; the summer was full of moments at the lake, the inside of crowded bars, his family’s annual Fourth of July bash. And though Harry loved the ever changing Colorado seasons, the split between nature and city life and strangers alike, he had a favorite subject, one that always seemed to sneak his way into the majority of his photos, wild, loud, and beautiful. One he loved fiercely, and made sure it was known to anyone who would listen.

It was their Sunday morning tradition for as long as Harry had been an avid photography lover. Together, he and Louis would head down to the print shop, collecting Harry’s photos taken over the course of the week, Louis teasing Harry for the sheer abundance of them, Harry rolling his eyes, smiling through it. They’d settle in at the coffee shop down the street with the pictures in hand, sorting through the good and the bad, eating bagels smeared with too much cream cheese, drinking coffee and tea. Louis had never taken a photography class and he still curiously asked Harry how most of the functions on the Canon worked and he still curiously asked Harry how most of the functions on the Canon worked but he had an eye for quality, pointing out which photos he liked best, Harry agreeing with him four out of five times.

“The contrast between the real camera pictures and the pictures taken on your iPhone are, like, shockingly different,” Louis would say conversationally in between bites of his croissant. “But even though the quality is usually better from the Canon, I don’t always like it best, if that makes sense.”

Harry nodded, understanding completely. “Definitely. Like this one.” He held up a Polaroid he’d taken earlier in the week, a blurry photo of the frost on the windshield. “It’s nothing special, but I love it.”

“Foggy, almost. I dig it.”

He smiled. “Me, too.”

Disposable, Polaroid, phone, or Canon, they were all so different, all captured unique moments, but the one thing they all had in common was Louis, Harry’s wild, loud, and beautiful subject.

“It’s getting a little embarrassing, Styles,” Louis teased one night, staring at the pile of photos on the kitchen table. “If a stranger went through these photos, they’d think you had no other friends. Or were a stalker.”

“Do people typically agree to move in with their stalkers?”

“Eh, I’ve always been a little outside of the box.”

In the beginning, Louis was annoyed with the constant picture taking, considering he seemed to always be in the frame. He’d put his hands in front of his face, whine, flip off the camera. But as time went by, he embraced it (after realizing he couldn’t really do much to stop it), joking that the world could finally see him as the “shining star” he truly was. He stopped posing whenever Harry
held the camera up, too, which Harry typically preferred. The candid ones were more honest, carefree, simple, Louis, and he ended up printing out too many of them. Leaving them on a screen where no one could see them felt like a waste. He referred to them as natural photos, and natural they most definitely were. A series of pictures featuring Louis lounging in sweatpants at the kitchen table with his knee pulled up to his chin. Louis scuffing his sneakers along busy sidewalks. Louis brushing his teeth with his towel riding low and wrapped around his waist after a shower. Louis mid-conversation on the phone with his mom, evident by the way he’s laughing, eyes crinkled. Louis’ bare skin in the middle of the night, riddled with goosebumps, white sheets rumpled below him. Louis across from him at the table at their favorite restaurant downtown, glass of red wine in hand, shadows from the flickering candle dancing across his face. Louis’ hand in Harry’s, middle finger slightly crooked from that time in middle school when he broke it fighting with the kid next door when he made fun of Louis’ younger sister, just one of the many, tiny details about Louis that Harry was obsessed with.

The camera did its best to capture Louis’ radiance but always seemed to fall slightly short, and Harry worked tirelessly to do his best to preserve it, working angles, shooting in the early morning light of their bedroom when Louis was still waking up, soft and slow and for Harry’s eyes only. Harry loved his photos of his family, of the mountains, of beaches and planes and graffiti and the starry night sky. But there was just something about his boy that put the rest of his work to shame.

And every time he flipped through the pictures of the two of them together, or through his favorite shots of Louis being caught off guard, giving Harry a look that was reserved just for him, Harry would trace his finger along the edges, thumbprint smudging the corners, the only thing he could think of was, This is what love looks like.

The group grabs an early dinner, early enough that when they wrap up to split off separately, the sun is still setting. The temperature has dropped significantly, and Harry feels like it would be a waste to sit in the hotel room for the remainder of the night. He watches everyone pair up and head off to do different things, scratching at his jaw, trying to figure out where to go.

Louis seems to be in the same boat, scrolling through his phone, making no attempt to go out of his way to find something to do or impose on any of the other couples, but Harry can see in the reflection of his sunglasses that he’s scrolling up and down through his contact list, obviously just as lost as Harry is.

“Hey, Louis,” he forces out, “wanna head down to the beach? We haven’t even been in the water yet. Well.” He smiles. “I have, thanks to a certain someone.”

“Yeah, no it’s alright. We’re alone now, Harry, we don’t have to hang out anymore.”


Louis purses his lips together, shrugging. “I’ll see you back at the room later.”

“Sure.” He smiles weakly. “Got that great bed waiting for me.”

“I’ll call the front desk and ask for more blankets.”

“I don’t think more blankets is gonna help with my back.”

“I meant because I was so fucking cold last night with just the sheet.”

Harry laughs. “Duh.”
“Duh.” Louis looks down, smile fading quickly. “Alright, see you later.”

“Yeah. Sure.” Harry waits for Louis to maybe say something else, hopefully, but he doesn’t, and he takes off in the direction of his room, leaving Harry standing there alone outside of the resort’s restaurant. He sighs, wondering how pathetic it would be to drink on the beach alone.

As it turns out, it’s *miserably* pathetic.

He manages to get through three and a half piñ a coladas before the sun sets completely, and he can’t decide what’s worse: sitting on the beach by himself trying to get drunk off coconut flavored alcohol, or going to bed early on the floor of his ex’s hotel room floor.

It’s a toss up, really.

It’s about nine o’clock when he drags himself back to Louis’ room, figuring that a hot shower might help with the ache in his muscles, might make time seem like it’s moving a little faster if he’s able to drag out getting ready for bed as long as possible.

Goddamnit, if he and Louis were together right now, they could be at a bar or doing a night tour of the island or using the sauna or something fun, something that Louis would inevitably complain about because he’s tired and his feet hurt from hiking. And Harry would love every second of it.

Moot point.

When he opens the door to the bedroom, he’s almost expecting Louis to be asleep, or possibly dead out of sheer boredom, and he’s kind of right on both accounts. Louis is laying flat on his back on the bed like a starfish, staring at the ceiling, eyes nearly glazed over. The TV is on - an infomercial for a vacuum - and Louis is clearly making no effort to change the channel.

“Uh, Lou? What’re you doing?” Harry asks cautiously, letting the door slam behind him.

“That restaurant was terrible,” he says, still staring at the ceiling. “Why were the portions so small?”

He laughs before he can help it, kicking off his shoes. “You’re right. Tiniest portions ever.”

“I’m so fucking hungry, I can’t even think straight.”

“Why don’t you order room service?”

“Don’t you think I tried that?! The kitchen stopped making food an hour ago.” Louis sits up, his frown so over the top, Harry can’t help but laugh again. “What kind of shitty ass hotel is this?!”

“Did you look for a vending machine anywhere on this floor?”

“Oh my God.” Louis jumps off the bed. “I forgot about the vending machine down the hall. You’re a genius.”

“I try.”

He’s out the door before Harry can get another word in, nearly sprinting down the hallway without shoes or socks on, leaving Harry standing there trying to figure out the sudden shift in Louis’ mood. He’s always been hot and cold, keeping Harry on his toes at all times, and it’s something Harry has always found endearing. Now, he’s just mostly exhausted trying to keep up, but he’s
been missing this playful side of Louis in a bad way, so he’s going to tread lightly and go along with it until he isn’t allowed to anymore.

Harry’s in the middle of flipping through the channels, looking for something better than a commercial for the Hoover, and stops when Louis storms back in, his arms full of what seems like a week’s worth of junk food. He gestures toward the heap of chips Louis throws onto the bed. “Impressive.”

“Thanks. I figured you’d want something, so.” Louis tosses him a bag of salt and vinegar chips. “There’s M&M’s and peanut butter crackers here, too, if you want them.”

“Ugh, you get me.” He tears into the bag. “My hero.”

Louis smirks and climbs back into the bed, ripping into his own bag of sour cream and onion chips. He eats a handful, then looks up at the TV and makes a face. “Really, Harry? Vin Diesel?”

He shrugs, realizing he landed on *Fast and the Furious*. “I dunno what to tell you, but I love a man who can rock the bald look.”

“I still can’t tell if you’re kidding.”

“Pitbull, Bruce Willis, that guy from your chem lab senior year who sneezed into your tea… All perfection.”

Louis smirks. “Remember that time you tried to convince me to shave my head?”

Harry sits on the edge of the bed, doing his best not to invade into Louis’ space. “Yeah, but first of all, I was completely black out drunk, and second, you have a lumpy skull. I just wanted to see what it would look like without hair.”

He rolls his eyes. “This is still a weird argument, even three years later. My skull is fine.”

“Yeah, well.” Harry rips open the package of crackers with his teeth. “You’d probably look hot with any hairstyle, really.”

“Okay, that’s enough”

“Or any clothes,” he continues. “Toga, suit of armor, Big Bird costume…”

“Big Bird costume?” Louis asks incredulously. “That was one of the first things you were able to come up with?”

“See, you thought bald was my thing.” He bites into a cracker, crumbs falling onto his lap. “But it’s actually feathers.”

“And you waited until right now to tell me?”

“I didn’t know how to bring it up. Sorry.”

Louis snorts, reaching for his drink on the nightstand. “This got weird again.”

“I’m tipsy. I drank on the beach.”

“There’s only so much you can blame on alcohol, Styles.”

Harry wants to blame the alcohol for a *lot*, actually. It’s the reason he continues to move inch by
inch across the mattress to get closer to Louis. It’s the reason he’s not attempting to filter the slew of compliments that are seemingly flying out of his mouth, way too flirty, definitely too risky, considering the past several weeks, or days, even. It’s the reason he can’t stop staring at the way Louis’ mouth moves when he says Harry’s name, or the way he pulls his knees up to his chest, making him look tinier, somehow. It’s the reason Harry’s chest aches with all the things he wants to tell him, wants to say sorry for, wants to thank him for.

Louis’ guard is down for the first time in so long, and Harry can’t help but take advantage. It’s a weak moment - for whatever reason - for both of them, he has to keep reminding himself. But it’s just so easy to be with Louis, to love him, to joke with him and rip into a package of disgusting blueberry Pop-Tarts to share, watching the credits roll by for a crappy movie that neither of them bothered to watch.

Alcohol, truly, has nothing to do with it.

It’s nearing midnight when Harry realizes he still hasn’t showered, reminded by the way his back and neck almost sting with pain. He hadn’t wanted to break the spell, wanted to enjoy this time with Louis until they both snapped out of it, but now, he’s realizing just how stiff his muscles are, and he can’t help but wince when he rolls his shoulders. Louis notices instantly, scoffing.

“Did you not take the ibuprofen?!”

“I didn’t feel like looking for it!”

“I swear to God, it’s like you’re eight years old.” He gets up off the bed, shoving all the candy wrappers aside, and digs through his backpack. “Here, Jesus,” he says, tossing Harry the bottle. “It’s like you didn’t even try.”

“I didn’t.”

“Useless.”

Harry smiles after he swallows the pills. “What would I do without you. Always so prepared. Like that time in Virginia Beach when I got poison ivy and you had calamine lotion. Who packs that?!”

Louis zips the backpack, humming. “Yeah, that’s me. I’m, uh.” He points over his shoulder at the bathroom, expression completely changed. “Gonna get ready for bed.”

He watches as Louis heads into the bathroom, faucet turning on moments later, and Harry groans. He crossed the line, somehow, and the magic slips away as quickly as it had emerged. He doesn’t try to make sense of the mess in his head as he slinks to the floor, doing his best to make himself comfortable in the pile of blankets, shifting around, gritting his teeth. He keeps his eyes closed as he waits for Louis to return, to crank the AC and shut off the TV and all the lights, and he tries to force himself to be tired, but it sucks, this all sucks. The floor is hard and Louis is now laying in the bed about two feet away from him but it might as well be miles.

They manage to stay quiet in the blackness of the room for about three minutes. Harry has an apology on the tip of his tongue - even though he’s not quite sure what he’s apologizing for - but Louis breaks the silence first.

“Harry, come up here.”

“What?”
“I can’t let you sleep on the floor again. Come here.”

“Are you sure?”

“Jesus, yes. Up.”

“I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

Louis sighs, shifting around on the mattress. “The only thing making me uncomfortable is thinking about you crying on the floor all night.”

“I did not cry.” He stands up, pulling the blankets to him. “But. Thank you.”

He nods, moving over to make room. “Yeah, it’s just for tonight. Then you get your own room, right? It’s all good.”

Harry slides under the sheets; they’re cold and feel amazing on his sunburned shin. “Yeah. Just for tonight.”

It’s comical, almost, the way they both lay there flat on their backs in complete silence, quiet enough for Harry to be able to hear someone walk past their room in the hallway. He wants to laugh, or cry, maybe, out of frustration; he’s never felt so out of place in his entire life, and definitely not when in the presence of Louis.

He’s trying to focus on his breathing - why can’t he remember how to exhale? - when Louis rolls onto his side, facing away from Harry. He’s completely still, stiff, almost, and Harry knows it hasn’t been enough time for him to have actually fallen asleep yet.

Louis’ uncomfortable, too.

He does his best to ignore the heavy feeling settling in his chest, but then Louis shifts again, now on his other side and facing Harry. Harry twists to look at him, breath caught in his throat at how intently Louis is staring.

“Harry, I have a question.”

Harry licks his lips. “I probably have an answer.”

“What’s the word we made up for when there’s a song stuck in your head?”

“Oh my God.” He bursts out laughing, closing his eyes. When he opens them, Louis is still staring. “I don’t remember.”

“You said you’d probably have an answer!”

“Well, I’m full of shit, I guess.”

Louis laughs. “Fuck. I can’t think of it.”

“Why do you need to know right now?”

“Because I have a song stuck in my head,” he says, matter of factly, “and if I could have come up with the word, we could have avoided this whole conversation.”

“What song is it?”
“‘Beautiful Soul’ by Jesse McCartney.”

“What the fuck.”

“Shut up.”

Harry pauses. “Ugh, now it’s stuck in my head.”

“Good.” He pulls the sheets up to his chin and closes his eyes. “And stop staring at me.”

“How do you know I’m still staring?”

Louis yanks the comforter all the way up over his head, only his cowlick on the top of his head visible. “You’re always staring.”

Harry smirks, settling under the weight of the blankets, the ache in his chest easing, just slightly.

Louis’ right.

It takes ages for Harry to finally get tired enough to close his eyes, for his breathing to even out and grow steady. It’s a lot to be in the same bed with Louis, to be able to feel how warm he is but not being allowed to touch, especially after so long. He’s always found such comfort in waking up beside Louis, sharing space and morning touches, Louis’ eyes always a softer shade of blue after a night’s sleep. It’s one of the things he misses most about his relationship with Louis, the simplicity and privilege of having him all to himself, close and safe. Now, as he forces himself to stop thinking about it and go to sleep, he listens to the familiar inhale, exhale next to him, and wonders if being without Louis will ever get easier.

It reminds him of the first night they ever shared a bed together. It was during Harry’s sophomore year of school, Louis’ junior year, and Louis had stumbled into Harry’s apartment, absolutely hammered, his sweatpants on backward and his smile crooked. He crawled under the blankets beside Harry, mumbling something about being out of chocolate cake, and then promptly fell asleep, taking up almost the entire bed. And it wasn’t exactly how Harry had imagined it over the past several weeks prior, but he didn’t dare move, didn’t attempt to wake Louis up. Instead, he watched the way Louis’ eyelids fluttered in his sleep, reminding himself over and over not to touch, and when he woke up with Louis plastered to his back, he decided that the terrible crick in his neck was worth it.

He went to the bakery down the street before Louis noticed he was gone, ordered two slices of cake to go, and when Louis woke up, he rubbed his temple and said, “Shit, this looks good. A perfectly balanced breakfast. How the hell did you know I’ve been craving chocolate cake for, like, days?”

Harry shrugged, handing him a fork. “Just a hunch.”

The first time they slept together, though, was better than how Harry had imagined it, the build up of over a year of waiting making the entire thing so unbearably hot, quick, perfect.

They’d just gone out on their fourth date - a simple dinner and a movie - and though the movie was slightly gorey, it still left Harry on the edge of his seat with how badly he wanted to grab and touch Louis, fuck into him, wake up next to him, have him. And Louis seemed to be on the same page,
based on the way he lifted up the armrest halfway through the movie, his hands restless against Harry’s thigh.

By the time they got back to Louis’ apartment and into his bed, Harry was afraid he’d do something to fuck it up, to say something that was too much and scare Louis off, but Louis was tugging on the hem of Harry’s t-shirt like he wanted him just as badly as Harry did. As soon as there was skin on skin, Harry was positive that that was impossible, that there was no one who wanted anything as badly as Harry wanted Louis.

He ground down roughly, living for the way Louis’ eyes rolled to the back of his head, and when Louis wrapped his arms around Harry’s neck, murmuring, “I think I’ve probably wanted you this whole time,” Harry just about lost his mind.

“Waited over a year to decide I might be worth it?” he asked, kissing up Louis’ jaw.

Louis whined high in his throat. “Had to make sure you were good enough.”

“How am I doing so far?”

“Fuck.” He lifted his hips up, rolling them in time with Harry’s movements. “You’re doing amazing.”

Harry slid his hands up and down Louis’ bare sides, staring. “So glad you gave us a chance.”

Louis dug his nails into Harry’s back, biting down on his lip. “Don’t know how I couldn’t see it.” His cheeks were pinker than usual, his throat bobbing when he swallowed. “Want me to suck you off?”

“God, yes,” he groaned, squeezing his eyes shut. “Quickest way to get myself off, thinking about you doing that.”

“You think about it a lot?” Louis asked, teasing, squirming out of Harry’s grip.

Harry laid back on the pillow, licking his lips as Louis stared at him from the end of the bed, his breath hot against Harry’s thighs. “Too much.”

And from then on, it was all just the white hot heat of Louis’ tongue around him, working meticulously to get him off, his hair a mess and his back arched and Harry couldn’t fucking take it more than three or four minutes, too desperate.

“No, gotta stop,” Harry groaned. “Wanna fuck you.”

Louis slid his mouth all the way up Harry’s cock, lips slick and shiny, and the visual was almost too much. “I’m not impressed with your stamina so far.”

He tried to laugh but then Louis’ mouth was back on him and he couldn’t get his tongue to work. Instead, he did his best to focus on not thrusting up, not coming on the spot, eyes trained on how unfairly hot Louis looked, making all of Harry’s unspoken fantasies over the past several months come true. And then Louis sucked his cheeks in all the way, sunk down, his nose brushed against Harry’s naval, and Harry had to physically push him off, too worked up for anything more than that.

He worked on keeping his cool as he hovered over Louis, whispering the words on the tip of his tongue, smirking when Louis’ cheeks turned a deep shade of red. He slicked his fingers up with lube, bit down on his lip in concentration as he pushed the first one in, marveling at Louis’
reaction, all whines and moans, definitely over the top, definitely doing it for Harry.

“You’re really hot,” he said, working a third finger in.

Louis grinned, eyes squinted into slits. “Eloquent.”

“You’re not allowed to make fun of me right now.”

“I can make fun of you whenever I want,” he grit out, chest heaving.

Harry leaned down to suck a bruise into the side of Louis’ neck, breathing hotly. “You’re perfect.”

Louis stopped talking after that.

By the time he was alternating between two and three fingers, slick and working into Louis in all the right places, Louis was a mess, eyes shut and hands gripping at the sheets like a lifeline, words nearly being punched out of him. Harry was in disbelief that he could pull these reactions from him, that after an entire year of waiting, it was actually worth it.

It was almost too much when he finally pushed into Louis in one, swift motion. Louis grabbed onto his back, whining high in his throat, and Harry kissed his forehead, eyelids, cheeks, jaw, bit at his shoulders and collarbone, trying to work through the tension surging through his body.

“You’re,” he grit out, working his hips mercilessly, “fucking incredible.”

“Shut up,” Louis answered, his voice tight, then gasped. “Oh, fuck, that feels good.”

Harry worked double time to keep that up, to keep Louis groaning and whimpering and digging his nails into the back of Harry’s neck. And for the first time in a year, Harry was completely and utterly candid, letting his secrets slip out, not afraid for Louis to hear them. He murmured how gorgeous he found him, how badly he always wanted him, how he’d been thinking about getting Louis underneath him for months and months, how he couldn’t think of a single person in the entire damn world he’d want to be with more than Louis. That combined with the steady thrust of his hips into Louis had Louis coming across his stomach, voice caught in his throat. It took one look at Louis falling apart for Harry to follow suit, his body shaking with the force of it, face pressed against Louis’ shoulder.

It was late - too late to be having any real conversation - but Harry couldn’t stop talking and Louis seemed content to go along with it, letting Harry drag his fingers up and down his arms, tracing his tattoos.

“No, I swear, I remember,” Harry said, “the first time we met, we were at that pizza place right off campus, and you were wearing those black Vans with the hole in them. And you were eating a turkey sandwich and you said, ‘Hey, you, with the curls, pass me the hot sauce.’”


“Yes, it did. Because I remember thinking it was weird that you were putting hot sauce on a sandwich. And now I know that you put it on everything.”

“Not everything.”

Harry pressed his thumb into the tattoo inked across Louis’ wrist. “I like it.”
“You like me.”

He nodded, because that was the understatement of the year. He took his time to come up with an answer, stalling. “Before we started any of this, I thought I knew what it felt like to be in.” Harry stopped himself. “To be so crazy about you that I can’t even think straight half the time. But now that I’m allowed to really have you…” He pressed a kiss to the side of Louis’ head, his hair matted down and flying in multiple directions. “I just need you to know that I’m all in. I’m not going anywhere.”

Louis burrowed his head against Harry’s chest. “Thank you for being patient with me and for waiting,” he murmured against his skin. “I just. Didn’t know it would be like this. But you did. You knew.”

He dragged his hand up and down Louis’ back, letting it settle at the bottom of his spine. “I think you already said that.”

“Probably.”

He smiled. “You can say it again, though, if you want.”

Louis looks up at him, his expression serious, joking gone. “You’re my best friend. And now, you’re like.” He paused and licked his lips. “I’m really happy, H.”

Harry nodded, because he got that, he understood that. He let his mind twirl for a few moments, almost asleep. But then Louis was whispering again, lips pressed up against the spot just below his ear.

“Oh, and Harry,” he whispered, “that wasn’t the first time we met.”

“Hmm?”

“First time we met was at a party when we were stinking drunk. I was singing Avril Lavigne, and you made a complete ass of yourself, cheering me on.”

Harry was quiet. “Oh sweet Lord, I completely forgot all about that until right now.”

Louis laughed. “Thank God you have me, huh?”

“Yeah,” he murmured. “Thank God.” Harry pulled him in closer, then, slotting their lips together, hoping Louis could feel what he was trying to tell him. And based on the way Louis held on as tightly as he could, Harry was pretty sure Louis knew.

DAY THREE | SUNDAY

Harry wakes up the next morning with Louis breathing up against his chest, his body warm and pliant, eyelashes resting against his cheekbones. He stares at him, hands itching to reach out and drag across his jaw or his back, desperate to wake him up in a way that he knows has been proven effective in the past.

Christ, he’s forgotten what it felt like to wake up without a knot in his stomach, to feel anchored by the even breathing of Louis beside him. He can’t help it when he wraps his arms tighter around him, unable to keep his eyes off the messy sweep of hair across Louis’ forehead. Louis shifts slightly in Harry’s arms, sighs deeply, then falls still once more.
He isn’t sure how long he holds Louis up against him like that, too afraid to move in fear that Louis would wake up and push him away, so he stays impossibly stoic, breathing in the scent of Louis’ shampoo, doing his best not to stir or move his arm, which is now riddled with pins and needles. But it’s worth it to have this again, even if it’s just for now, even if it’s pretend. The sun is peeking through the curtains, dust particles reflecting off of the rays, and it’s all so familiar and comforting that Harry feels short of breath thinking about what he doesn’t have anymore.

Louis’ eyelids start fluttering after a few more minutes, muscles tensing, and that’s when Harry reluctantly lets go, rolling back onto his back. He briefly thinks about acting like he’s asleep, but he knows Louis has already caught him.

“Sorry for, like.” Louis clears his throat, voice rough with sleep, and fuck, Harry wants him so much, is having a hard time shoving that down when Louis is looking at him like this. “Kind of invading in your space.”

Harry nods. He looks away and stares at the ceiling. “Best I’ve slept in weeks.”

“Don’t,” Louis warns. “Just. I’m gonna go shower. You can probably check into your new room now.”

“Yeah,” he agrees. “I’ll go do that.”

Louis doesn’t say anything else as he climbs out of bed, tripping over his suitcase and cursing under his breath on his way to the bathroom, shrugging out of his t-shirt, dropping it to the floor.

Harry goes back to staring at the ceiling.

He packs up all his stuff before Louis makes it out of the bathroom, stuffing his clothes back into his suitcase, not bothering to change before he makes his way back to the front desk. The same woman - Terri - is there from before, and she greets him with a warm smile.

“She new room is all set for you, sir,” she says, handing him a key card. “Room 318.”

“Thanks. Hey, actually, before I head up there, can I place an order for room service?”

“Absolutely. It’ll be up there shortly after you get settled.”

“Not my room. Room 233. Please.”

She raises her eyebrows in surprise. “Okay, sure, no problem. Do you need to look at a menu?”

“Nope,” he replies. “I know what he likes.”

An hour later, after Harry has dumped all his clothing out onto his bed in the hopes of finding something that requires minimal ironing, he meets Louis in the lobby before they join the rest of their group. Louis is standing with his hands on his hips, expression unrecognizable for once.

“How was breakfast?” Harry asks, doing his best to not sound smug.

“Good,” Louis replies. “Waffles were really fluffy.”

“And the bacon?”
“Crispy.”

He smirks. “And the mimosa?”

Louis rolls his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest. “Perfect.”

“I’m glad.”

They start to walk outside together, Harry scanning the grounds for Liam or Niall, when Louis sighs. “Orange juice gave me heartburn, though.”

Their plans for the day are minimal - lunch with a four-hour gap before they head to a comedy show at the resort - as Annie demanded they be back by one o’clock for the Patriots game.

“You know that’s absolutely insane, right,” Louis starts to protest, but Liam holds his hands up, look of fear in his eyes.

“Don’t even try to argue with her. I know she loves me but I think she loves Julian Edelman more.”

Annie looks over her shoulder and makes a face. “You think?”

They start off with drinks overlooking the ocean, followed by lunch an hour or so later. The breeze is warm, the company is right, and when Davis cracks a terrible joke that almost no one laughs at, Louis nudges Harry’s arm and says, “Even you wouldn’t make a joke as shitty as that one.”

Harry smirks at that, pushing his hair out of his eyes. “You’re right, I wouldn’t.”

“Well. Not soberly, anyway.”

“My jokes are always on point.”

“Sure, Styles. Sure.”

He scoffs, holding his hand over his chest. “Baby, you wound me.”

Louis takes a bite of Harry’s crab cake from off his plate. “You’re fine.”

Harry opens his mouth to say something else, but he catches Niall’s glance from across the table. Niall nods, then winks, and up until that moment, Harry had honestly forgotten he was just pretending.

“Okay, so, do you think we should come up with a backstory for the realtor? Like, are we interesting enough that the couple will want to rent to us?”

Harry snorted as he backed out of Louis’ family’s driveway. “You don’t think we’re charming enough?”

“No. Harry, it’s our first apartment together. We have to seem experienced so they like us and pick us.”

“I’m not sure it works that way…”

Louis cracked the window, then put it back up. “Yes it does. Do you not pay attention when we
“I guess not.”

“The buyer always picks the best couple with the best story.”

“I thought they just picked the highest bid…”

“Whatever.” Louis put his hands in his lap. “I really like this place.”

“We haven’t been inside it yet.”

“I can tell. It’s right where we want to be and it’s open and not astronomical in price.”

“I know.”

“And,” Louis continued, “it has a balcony. It’s gonna be sick.”

“Just don’t forget to keep the sliding door closed,” Harry said, merging into traffic, “we can’t let the cat get out.”

“Since when do we have a cat?”

“We’re gonna get one. As soon as we’re approved.”

“Can I name her?”

“Her? Sure.”

Louis hummed. “Prudence.”

“Very John Lennon of you.”

“Shh. Now. What’s our backstory. It’s gotta be good. And more interesting than ‘our mutual friend introduced us at a party when we were both blackout drunk.’”

“I’m sure you’ll come up with something,” Harry said, shaking his head.

“Absolutely I will.”

The apartment was just as gorgeous in real life as it was in pictures, if not better. They checked out the closets, cabinets, bathroom, Louis obviously pleased with what he saw, nearly bouncing around the space.

“Harry, what’re you thinking?”

“I’m thinking,” he said, smoothing his hands across the countertops, “that we could be very happy here.”

“I agree.” Louis turned to their realtor. “Harry was overseas in the military for the past six months. I’m so glad to have him back for good. My soldier boy.”

“Oh, isn’t that so sweet,” Alyssa replies, putting her hand over her heart.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yeah, quite the story we have.”
Louis nudged Harry with his elbow. “We wrote letters back and forth to each other for a while. Real romantic.”

“It sounds like it!”

“This will be our first home together,” Louis continued, winking at Harry. “He’s done touring, so this is it. Stuck with me for life, kid.”

Harry held back a laugh. “I guess so.”

“Put some enthusiasm into it, please.”

“I missed you every single night for over 200 days and now I’ll never have to miss you again.” He stared at Louis, doing his best not to break. “Better?”

Louis shrugged, cheeks pink, obviously pleased. “I suppose. Just glad I have someone to watch The Bachelor with me again.”

“But that show is embarrassing.”

“As if I don’t know that. You complain throughout the entire thing.”

“Then why do you make me watch it!”

“Stop acting like you hate it, Harry. I know you love our Monday nights, screaming at the TV.”

Harry snorted, rubbing his hands across his face. He looked up at Alyssa. “You think the renters are gonna let this mess in?”

She laughed, clasping her hands together. “They’d be stupid not to.”

They moved in three weeks later, and Harry moved out two years after that. The first Monday alone, Harry wandered around his studio apartment aimlessly, boxes unpacked, refrigerator empty, a sick feeling stuck in his stomach. He turned on channel eight around 9:30, getting through about two minutes of that God awful show before he had to turn it off.

It wasn’t the same.

The comedy show starts at eight o’clock, and the group of them makes their way to a table to the left of the stage. Harry pulls out Louis’ chair before he takes his own seat, reaching for the menu in front of him as he gets comfortable. He skims the drink list and nods at Louis.

“Want me to get your usual? Bar doesn’t look too busy right now.”

Louis purses his lips together. “Yeah, thanks.”

He makes his way over to the bartender, leaving the tab open as he carries their drinks back, and Louis twists his mouth into a smile when he returns, patting his leg as a silent Thank you.

Harry doesn’t get the chance to respond as the lights go down, his mouth dry when he realizes Louis’ fingers lingered just a beat too long.
The comedian is terrible. The majority of his jokes aren’t funny, his timing is awkward, he’s actually slightly racist, but Harry is having a hard time actively paying attention. It’s been just over 48 hours of Louis and he’s spiraling miserably. It didn’t take much - he knew it wouldn’t if he wasn’t careful - but he thought he was doing okay. He thought he was being so cautious and safe.

As it turns out, just being around Louis is enough to set him back in weeks worth of emotional progress.

He doesn’t think twice when he goes back to the bar without asking for rounds two and three to get more drinks for both Louis and himself, he keeps his arm resting comfortably on the back of Louis’ chair, hand occasionally grazing Louis’ shoulder, he brushes Louis’ hair across his forehead and behind his ears. It’s not because the others are looking. None of them are paying attention at all, really. It’s because he wants to, can’t help himself, feels like it’s what he’s supposed to be doing. And when Louis doesn’t shove him away, he leans in, just slightly, needs to feel a little closer.

When the show ends, Harry walks Louis back to his hotel room, and Louis gives him a weak smile before he slips into his room without a word, closing the door behind him. He stares at room 233 for an embarrassing amount of time, as if he’ll be allowed to spend another night if he stands there long enough, but Louis never comes back out.

His heart hurts, he thinks, as he drags himself back to his own room, the AC not turned down low enough, the closet too tidy. Louis is separated by far too many rooms, and looked unfairly hot tonight, white t-shirt plain and clinging in all the right places. Harry wants him so, so much in every way possible, and can’t stop thinking, for the millionth time, how stupid it is that they’re pretending they’re together, how stupid it is that they’re actually not.

And it’s like a flip has been switched. They aren’t shying away from each other anymore, now seamlessly slipping into what once was, what should be. He’s going along with it, welcoming it, and now that Louis doesn’t seem to be actively on edge anymore, Harry can feel the tension in his shoulders start to drain, can feel it pooling in the rest of his body, leaving him feeling achy and desperate.

His mind isn’t on repeat like it was in these past few months, telling him to get through the week, to move forward. Instead, his gut is telling him to fix this, to get his boy back, because going back to his hotel room alone isn’t the option he wants. He’s done acting like this is working.

He’s sick of falling asleep alone.

One weekend of Louis. That's all it took. That's all it's ever taken.

About two weeks before they were set to leave for Honolulu, Harry worked up the courage to meet Louis at his apartment, knowing they had to go over some final “best men” plans, and one-word answer texts on Louis’ part wasn’t cutting it anymore. He knew Louis was uncomfortable and upset - Harry was, too - but they hadn’t met in person since the afternoon Louis told Harry to get out after he’d try to discuss wedding details.

Harry had the feeling this was going to go just as swimmingly.

It’d been over two months since they’d seen each other in person, and Harry braced himself for the inevitably rough impact upon seeing his face after so long. And it was like a punch to the gut when Louis opened the front door, glasses sliding off the bridge of his nose, bags under his eyes,
sweatshirt sleeves too long, skinny jeans too tight, and overall just as stunning as Harry remembered him to be, was trying not to focus on or he’d lose his damn mind.

Louis stepped aside to let Harry in, arms crossed over his chest. He made no effort to make eye contact, to make Harry feel slightly less awkward in the home they shared for over two years. Instead, he let the door slam behind them and headed into the living room without a word.

Harry took a seat on the couch, Louis sitting on the armchair across from him, mindlessly scratching his thigh. He still wasn’t looking at Harry. Harry sighed.

“The bachelor party,” he started. “I mentioned maybe doing that sea excursion? I looked up some prices and they didn’t seem too bad. There’d be drinks and food and music…” He trailed off, trying to read Louis’ expression. “You didn’t seem too interested when we talked about it in the email chain with the groomsmen, though.”

“That’s because I wasn’t,” Louis said, voice flat. “I’m still not.”

“Oh.” Harry rubbed the back of his neck. “Okay. What about a pub crawl?”

“Do you honestly think we’re going to be able to find a series of pubs to go to on an island? For fuck’s sake.”

“I don’t know!” Harry said, rubbing his eyes. “I don’t see you putting any suggestions in!”

“How about I take Liam and the rest out, and you can fuck off.”

“Nice. Real nice, Lou.”

Louis glared at him. “You could have sent me an email or a text. You didn’t need to fucking come here.”

“Yes, I did! You barely answer me when I text you! We’re leaving in two fucking weeks and we don’t even have a plan for who’s doing the Goddamn best man speech!”

“You really expect me to sit down with you and work that out when I can’t even stand to look at you?”

Harry stood up, resisting the urge to scream. “How am I supposed to even try to sit down with you when you’re like…” He waved his hand around. “This.”

“I’m not like anything. I’m just being honest. And I’m honestly telling you that there is no reason for you to be here. That I honestly don’t want you in my apartment.”

He tried to ignore the sting of my apartment. “Why am I the only one who cares about this wedding?! I’m so frustrated that you aren’t putting even an ounce of effort into it and I’m busting my ass to try to get all of this together and you’re just staring at me like none of it is a big deal. Hate to break it to you,” Harry said, heart hammering in his chest, “but our best friend is getting married in 14 days, we are in charge of making sure it all goes smoothly for him, and it is a massive deal.”

Louis stood up, too, matching Harry’s glare, and even though he was at least four inches shorter, the way he was staring made Harry feel very, very small. “I’m glad you’re so invested in making Liam’s wedding perfect. I’m glad that’s your number one priority. I’m just so fucking glad,” he said, moving closer, fists clenched, “that you’re the one frustrated with me.”
“How can I not be?!” he countered. “Every time we talk, you attack! You don’t even try to be civil. I have no idea how we’re gonna be able to function in Hawaii. There’s no way. I’m trying so hard and you--”

“No. You are not trying. You are the one who left. And I’m not going to stand here and pretend like everything is fucking fine when I’m doing my best right now to not start swinging.”

Harry bit down on his bottom lip. “I know you’re angry. I understand. But, like, you know that’s not what happened. It’s not. That is such a one-sided version of what happened, I can’t even begin to get into it…”

“So don’t. I’m not asking you to. I don’t even want you here.”

He inhaled, exhaled. “You’re being a hypocrite.”

“Excuse me?” Louis sneered. “Wanna try that again?”

Harry swallowed, very aware of how close they were suddenly standing. “You’re being a hypocrite,” he repeated. “You yell at me for not trying, and when I try to explain myself, you yell at me for that, too. I don’t. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do, Louis. This isn’t hard for just you, okay?”

“I don’t want to have this discussion,” Louis said under his breath. “Stop.”

“Then what do you want from me?! Fucking tell me and I’ll do it.”

Louis looked at him with an expression that Harry has since tried to desperately erase from his memory to no avail. It was a combination of hurt, anger, disbelief. “I want you to leave.”

He shook his head. “No. I’m not leaving. I’m not leaving you like this.”

“You have before.”

“God, just.” He dragged his hands across his face. “No. No.”

“No,’ what?!”

Harry stared at him for a moment, then two, couldn’t find adequate words to make sense of the chaos in his brain. “That’s not what…”

Louis tugged at his sweatshirt - nervous habit - before he put his hands on Harry’s chest and pushed him backward. “No. I told you. We’re not having this discussion.”

“Christ, Louis,” he said, barely moving at Louis’ attempt to shove him, “it’s like a never ending fucking cycle with you. It’s always a guessing game. Or you just brush it under the fucking rug. If you have a problem--”

“I have a lot of problems with you.”

“--then say it.” Harry looked down, staring hard, waiting for Louis to say something, anything. And Louis’ eyes were wide, lips parted, and Harry didn’t feel like waiting for him to break, couldn’t stand there and beg with no reply in return.

Whenever he goes over this moment in the following week - and he goes over it a lot - he still can’t figure out who moved first. It felt magnetic, Harry’s lips chasing Louis’ without preamble, as if giving in would be the best solution to get through all of this.
Definitely not the best, but certainly the easiest, and that was what they both needed. Something easy for once, because the past year was anything but.

Harry put all of himself into it, cradling Louis’ face in his palms, holding on like he’d never lost permission in the first place, Louis’ fingers digging into the back of Harry’s neck, leaving behind a sting that Harry welcomed. It made it feel real, like this was actually happening. Harry didn’t try to force the words out of Louis, Louis didn’t push away, and for the first time in months, Harry loved the silence.

Louis’ mouth was persistent against Harry’s, his hands rough, his movements angry. He was taking his obvious frustrations out on Harry’s body, but Harry let him, wanted him to. If letting Louis use him like a punching bag was what it took to start powering through the bullshit that had become their relationship, then Harry would do it. He’d still do anything for him.

He pushed forward, tasting Louis, gripping at the small of his back, biting at Louis’ bottom lip. He knew he was being rougher than usual, but he knew that’s what Louis needed. To be honest, that’s what he needed, too. Something a little harsh, something that hurt, something to match the constant ache in his bones.

Harry started walking Louis backward toward their bedroom, needed more than just a heart wrenching kiss. And Louis seemed to be in agreement, yanking Harry with him as he let Harry guide him to the bedroom, eyes closed, steps memorized. It felt practiced, cinematic, as Harry slid his hands up underneath Louis’ sweatshirt, feeling his skin, hot to touch. He broke the kiss to pull Louis’ top off all the way, exposed and ridiculously hot, pressed up against the wall. He watched as Louis’ hands grabbed at the wall, eyes wide, blue, bloodshot. Harry sucked in a deep breath.

“I need to fuck you,” he whispered, pausing for Louis’ reaction. “Need to--”

“Just, be quiet,” Louis said, reaching for the button on Harry’s jeans. “Don’t talk for once.”

Harry bit back his reply, fists clenched at his sides. “Okay.”

He looked up through his lashes. “Seriously. Just, like. Can you…” He tipped his head back, swallowing, and it made no sense, but Harry understood. He nodded, locked in on the way Louis’ irises seemed to be shrinking, and dragged his hands up and down Louis’ sides.

“Are you gonna make me fuck you out here or…” Harry nodded toward the bedroom.

Louis pushed Harry back a step or two, turning on his heel before making his way through the bedroom door, and Harry took a deep breath as he followed. It all felt like too much all of a sudden. He didn’t know how to do this, to sleep with his ex-boyfriend that he was still desperately, hopelessly in love with. He didn’t know how to touch him and kiss him without joking, without compliments, without whispering secrets into Louis’ skin, thoughts that only Louis was meant to hear. He didn’t know how to strip out of his own jeans in the bedroom they once shared, slide into the sheets that he picked out, and act like it was nothing. Instead, he didn’t let himself think about any of that and focused on Louis, climbing over him on the bed, grinding down roughly, Louis’ own movements just as frantic, just as painful.

Harry breathed in sharply when Louis’ hands found their way to the zipper on his jeans, sucking his stomach in as Louis yanked them down, no warning, eyes focused. He was already hard, just the promise of Louis naked underneath him enough to get him all the way there, and when Louis got his hand around him, Harry groaned, pushing his hips forward into the feeling.

“Love your hands,” he murmured, unable to stop himself.
Louis looked up at him. “I am seriously begging you not to talk,” he said, voice breaking on the last word. He squeezed his hand around Harry’s cock harder. “Just. Get your pants off all the way.”

Harry nodded, heart in his throat. He forced all his words back down and pushed himself off of Louis, shrugging out of his shirt and pants, watching as Louis shed the rest of his clothes, too. He looked obscenely good - definitely a bit thinner than the last time Harry was with him, but still gorgeous - and Harry didn’t bother hiding how badly he wanted him when he dove back onto the mattress, covering Louis’ body with his own. He dipped down to kiss Louis, fervent and messy, Louis arching into it, moving quickly, moving roughly. Harry did his best not to spit out how much he missed him and wanted him and loved the way he looked, and the expression on Louis’ face made it clear that he didn’t want to hear it. Harry kept his mouth shut.

He sucked a bruise into Louis’ collarbone as he reached down to palm at Louis’ cock, completely hard, too, living for the way Louis whined at the contact. He worked over him quickly, desperate to get Louis to an incoherent place, and it didn’t take long, the combination of Harry’s hands and mouth enough to have Louis panting and silently pleading for more. He was holding Louis’ hips down in an attempt to keep him from thrusting up into Harry’s mouth when Louis leaned over, grabbed something in the nightstand.

“Here.” Louis threw a condom at him. “Who knows where you’ve been.”

“Jesus, Louis,” Harry said, tossing the foil onto the floor, clenching his jaw at Louis’ accusation. “I’ve only been with you for six years.”

“Why should I believe that. We’ve been apart for 12 weeks. Could’ve been out, fucking anyone you want.”

He sucked in his cheeks. “You know I haven’t.”

“Whatever.” Louis looked up at the ceiling and swallowed heavily, and Harry obediently stared at the way his throat bobbed.

“Why, have you?”

Louis licked his lips. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

He dragged his hands up and down Louis’ bare thighs, squeezing tight enough for Louis to whine. “Yeah, I think I deserve to know.”

“You deserve to know? Why do you think you deserve anything?”

Harry’s chest heaved as he reached out for Louis’ cock, jerking him firmly without warning. “Because I’m about to fuck you and I can’t fuck you bare if you’ve been with other people, Jesus Christ, and my God, the idea of you being with someone else is…” He pressed his thumb into the slit and Louis arched his back.

“No, no, fuck, I haven’t, okay? I haven’t.” His eyes rolled to the back of his head, front breaking just slightly, done playing the game, and Harry could nearly feel tension he didn’t know he was carrying drain out of his body. “Fuck me.”

And Harry could have probably made him beg, could have probably made him ask for it over and over, but he didn’t want to. He missed everything about having Louis like this - the way his body shook, the way his hands were restless, the way he arched his back when he came - and it felt like a lot at once to be together again. But he didn’t dwell on it, afraid Louis would change his mind.
He couldn’t chance it.

“Yeah, make you feel good,” he murmured nonsensically, reaching for the lube. “Just wanna get you off.”

Louis nodded, legs spreading apart, eyes shut. “Please,” he whispered. “Just wanna feel good.”

Harry couldn’t do a lot of things. He couldn’t fix the hurt in his chest, couldn’t wipe that look off Louis’ face, couldn’t figure out a way to erase the damage between them. But this, fuck into Louis the way he liked it best, needed it, was something he could do. Something he’d been thinking about for months.

He didn’t say much when he pushed one finger in, then two, concentrated on making this count instead of praising Louis like usual. And Louis was quiet, too, sans the occasional whine and gasp, looking everywhere but Harry’s face. It wasn’t the way they typically did this, intimacy replaced with tension and rigidness, but Harry was willing to take him any way he could have him, even like this.

Harry pulled his fingers out and Louis got up on his hands and knees, rocking back into Harry’s hands. “C’mon,” he gritted, letting his head hang down. “Just. Go.”

Harry wanted to kiss his back, the knobs in his spine, but refrained, knew Louis would tell him to fuck off or push him away. Instead, he just coated himself in a liberal amount of lube before lining himself up with Louis’ body, pushing in, eyes rolling to the back of his head with how good it felt. Louis clenched down around him, and Harry swallowed heavily at the feeling, at the visual. The nape of Louis’ neck was damp, his back curved, his tattoos across his biceps taut with the exertion of holding himself up. Harry wasn’t allowed to say much so he didn’t try, his breathing hard enough that he almost missed Louis whimpering, quiet and low in his throat.

He straightened his back, rearranging himself on his knees, pulling Louis by his hips, watching the way his cock disappeared inside of him. He closed his eyes, digging his fingers into the meat of Louis’ sides; his body felt like live wire, pins and needles everywhere. It was so much, and the more he thrusted, the more he trembled against Louis’ skin.

Neither of them talked as they moved together, Harry’s hips slamming into Louis, Louis groaning and seizing with it, and Harry lost track of time, could only focus on not coming, getting Louis there.

“You gonna come for me?” he whispered when he knew he couldn’t hold back any longer, the heat pooling in his spine. “Louis, come on.”

Louis didn’t say anything, just pushed back onto Harry’s cock, the thrusts harder, painful, almost. And Harry could feel Louis coming before he could see it, entire body tightening, Louis holding onto the sheets in front of him with a death grip. It only took another minute or so before Harry seized up and let go, pushing in deep when he came, eyes squeezed shut hard enough for him to see swirls and patterns behind his eyelids.

He pulled out slowly, not speaking, wincing at the sensitivity, hands gentle on Louis’ back, his thighs. He hated the way Louis’ shoulders were shaking, the way he refused to turn around. “Louis…” he whispered, treading lightly.

“You gonna just go home now?”

“I.” He dragged his finger across the threading of the comforter. “This solved nothing.”
Louis spun around at that, his eyes rimmed with red, and Harry wanted to reach out more than anything. He didn’t. “No, it didn’t, but you got what you came here for, yeah?”

“What the fuck, no, Louis, cut that shit out.”

“Cut what shit out? I’m just stating the obvious.” He crossed his arms across his chest, on the defense, as always. “You got a good fuck in, you’re all set.”

Harry pushed his hair out of his face, anger bubbling to the surface. “That is so gross and you know it.”

He shrugged. “Sure.”

“God, I’m so tired of you being such a dick all the time, it’s exhausting.” He got up off the bed, eyes roaming for his pants, his shirt. “I fucking get it, you’re pissed, you’re hurt, you’re whatever, but you are not the only one. I am heartbroken without you and I can’t carry the weight for both of us. I can’t.” He wrung his hands together, vaguely aware that he was still naked. “It’s enough. For once, would you shut up.”

Louis nodded, lips parted. He looked like he wanted to hit Harry, or cry, or both. “Are you done?” he asked.

Harry picked up his t-shirt from the floor, barely getting it over his head before he was reaching for the doorknob. “Yeah. I’m done.”

When he climbed into his car minutes later, he cranked the heat, teeth chattering, gripping the steering wheel hard enough for his knuckles to turn white. His mind was a blank as he stared at nothing through the windshield, heart pounding.

It took him 17 minutes to finally pull out of the parking lot, to make the drive back to his own apartment, radio playing a song he’d never heard before. He liked it, something alternative, but he slammed it off during the middle of the second chorus. He didn’t want to ruin a perfectly good song with this night, didn’t want to look back and associate the feeling in the pit of his stomach with anything ever.

Harry didn’t remember the drive home. He didn’t remember turning on the lights in the kitchen, purposely slamming the door behind him hard enough for the wall to shake. He didn’t remember climbing into his bed, jeans still on, jacket still zipped up to his neck. He did, however, remember feeling like complete and utter shit, the sting in his chest spreading whenever he thought about the look on Louis’ face when he finally gathered the strength to walk away.

He didn’t sleep much that night, but what else was new.

The next morning, Harry woke up to an email from Louis. It was brief, to the point.

I already wrote the best man’s speech. Unless you want to add something, you don’t have to worry about it. And I’ve been checking out different clubs near the resort. I showed one to Niall and he said he thought it would be a great option; it’s cheap and Liam will like it.
I won’t lash out anymore. You’re right. We’re done.

Harry’s response was just as curt, exhausted from fighting back, exhausted from always losing.

Okay.

Louis didn’t respond, and Harry didn’t expect him to.

They didn’t speak again until the flight.

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**DAY FOUR | MONDAY**

Harry wakes up feeling slightly refreshed, a small glimmer of hope on the horizon. Yesterday with Louis wasn’t terrible. Maybe they’re on the mend, maybe Louis has finally decided that the constant emotional torture isn’t worth it anymore.

Maybe he’s just gotten a hell of a lot better at faking it.

Either way, Harry can sense the barely there change, and it’s enough to have him fighting back a smile as he steps into the shower, the steam and water hot, perfect.

Besides, today is Bachelor Party Day. It’s going to be a good day.

It has to be.

The group of guys - Harry, Louis, Liam, Niall, Davis, Jake, and Connor - all gather for breakfast at a small place just off the resort. It overlooks the water, the food is fantastic, and the champagne appears to be bottomless. They raise a glass to Liam, who is alarmingly already buzzed, and after Louis orders a second side order of bacon, he scoffs.

“Okay, but really, who has a bachelor party on a Monday.”

Liam shrugs, cutting his pancakes. “I dunno, man, you planned it.”

Louis pouts. “It’s gonna be a good fucking night, don’t complain about it, dick.”

“You were complaining!”

“Hey, I’m not the one drunk at 11:30 on a Monday morning.”

Liam opens his mouth to retaliate, but Harry intervenes, holding up his champagne flute once more. “Hey, one more time, to Liam and Annie.”

Louis snorts, clinking his glass against Harry’s and Jake’s. “Smooth transition.”

“No arguing allowed on this blessed day,” Harry says.

“Blessed?” Louis laughs, patting Harry’s knee. “Not sure how blessed it’s gonna be at the club later on.”

Harry swallows the last of his drink, thinking about the way Louis gets when he’s drunk and
dancing and handsy, and suddenly wishes that he, too, was already drunk at 11:30 on a Monday morning. And when Louis makes no attempt to move his palm from Harry’s thigh, warm and familiar, that’s when Harry clears his throat, calling over the waiter.

“Can we get a round? Of tequila?”

Liam pumps his fist in the air. “You’re gonna join me?!”

Harry nods, wondering if ordering 12 shots for just himself is considered an aggressive move. “Happy bachelor party, Payno.”

Throughout the rest of the day, they keep themselves separated from Annie and her bridesmaids, spending some time on the beach, Niall making sure to keep the drinks coming. It’s relaxing, a welcomed juxtaposition from what Harry knows is coming later, and he keeps his feet in the sand until the sun starts to go down, chest pink from the sun no matter how much sunscreen he applies.

They all head back to their perspective hotel rooms after they force down burgers and sandwiches at the cabana, Liam already too drunk to notice Harry and Louis aren’t walking in the same direction to get ready for the night. Harry is also teetering between the faint line of buzzed and drunk, and when he stupidly mumbles to Louis, “Gonna wear something sexy for me for the club?” Louis actually laughs, albeit with an eye roll, clearly taking pity on him.

When they meet in the lobby, Harry is cringing at the way the water droplets drip off the ends of his hair and down his neck from his shower, but he stops moving when Louis emerges, pushing his own hair out of his eyes. His black skinny jeans are nearly painted on they’re so tight, leaving little to the imagination, and his shirt, obviously new, is just as clingy, showing off all his curves and tattoos. Harry knows he’s not being subtle about the way Louis’ hair sweeps to the right, but it’s his favorite style on Louis, simple yet extremely effective.

As they climb into the party bus, Liam first, Louis second, Harry trailing behind, he leans in close and whispers, “I was kidding about wearing something sexy for me. You look…” He trails off, waiting for Louis to turn around, meet his gaze. “Ridiculously hot.”

Louis shrugs, raising his brows, obviously feeling smug. “Who said I dressed up for you?”

They arrive at the club - Ginza Nightclub - just shy of 11 o’clock. It’s not packed, considering the day of the week, but it’s busier than Harry thought it would be, people bumping into him left and right. He purses his lips together when he sees the line for the bar and nudges Louis with his elbow.

“Thank God you had the hindsight to call and reserve a room,” he says, straining to hear his own voice over the noise of the crowd. “Look how many people are waiting for drinks.”

Louis nods. “And it’s only going to get busier. Monday’s after midnight, it’s a foam party.” He smirks. “And I’m pretty sure they throw off glitter bombs, too.”

Harry whistles, putting his hands on his hips. “Happy coincidence?”

“Please. Why do you think I planned for this a Monday?”

He smirks. “Liam’s probably gonna hate the glitter.”
“Why do you think I planned this for a Monday?” he repeats.

“Good call,” Harry says, laughing, making eyes with Liam over Louis’ shoulder. “Hey! Payno! Lou reserved a room in the back. They’ll bring us drinks and then we can head back out here.”

“Sweet! Are there gonna be strippers?”

Louis stares, unblinking. “Do I look like the kind of guy who would get strippers.”

Liam frowns. “I’m not sure, but you kind of look like three guys right now.” He closes one eye, squinting. “Maybe two, if you’d stop moving.”

He looks down at his feet, then back up. “Don’t think I’m moving, Payno.”

“Christ, are we sure we really wanna let him drink more?” Niall asks, biting back a laugh. “He’s been at it since, like, nine o’clock this morning.”

Harry watches as Liam makes a wobbly line from their group toward the private room in the back, stumbling into people unapologetically. “Follow the leader,” he says, shrugging.

It doesn’t take long for the rest of their group to catch up to Liam. By 1:30, the entire room is a blur, Harry’s limbs heavy like lead, and he can’t wipe the smile off his face. For the first time since landing in Honolulu, there’s no pressure to cover anything up, to act, to behave. Right now, it feels natural, like a giant group hang out, Louis not bothering to avert his gaze whenever Harry makes eyes at him.

Thank you, Vodka.

He’s covered from head to toe in foam. It’s disgusting, sticky, stuck to his eyelashes, and it’s hilarious. Louis can’t stop laughing at him - foam clinging to his own hair - pointing at the way it’s dripping off of Harry’s nose. Harry tries to tell him to cut it out, but his brain is moving at snail’s pace, and he can’t seem to get his tongue to work to form the words. Instead, he smirks, pushing Louis’ hair out of his eyes, Louis blinking slowly.

“I hate your dimple,” Louis says, just barely audible over the noise from the DJ.

“No, you don’t,” Harry replies, finally finding his voice.

“No, I don’t,” he mouths back.

Harry takes a step forward, the toes of their shoes touching. He’s trying to come up with something to say that isn’t I’m still obsessed with you when someone shoves him from behind. He loses his balance, nearly toppling into Louis, and he turns around, ready to yell, but the guy has a sincere apologetic look on his face, holding his hands out.

“Shit, I’m so sorry, dude,” he says, eyes wide. “I slipped on fucking foam on the floor. I didn’t mean to hit you!”

Harry’s demeanor softens immediately, and he squints, as if that’ll help him focus over the beat of the music. “Hey, no worries, you’re all good. Wait.” He looks at the guy’s t-shirt, which has a college logo on it. “CCD?”

“Community College of Denver. I’m a junior!”
“No way!” Harry clasps his hands together. “I teach there!”

“Shut up! Fuck!” He laughs, holding his hand out. “Small fucking world. I’m Joel, by the way.”

“Harry,” he replies, shaking. “Small fucking world, is right. What’re you studying?”

Joel smiles, his drink sloshing out of its glass as he talks about his sociology class, and Harry has to lean in close to hear him, nearly snorting when he finds out Joel’s best friend Amanda was in Harry’s first semester class. It’s all extremely funny - most likely due to the 15 or 16 shots he’s thrown back in the past hour - and when he turns to grab Louis’ arm to introduce him, he realizes he’s grabbing at thin air.

“Lou?” he calls out, spinning around, almost tripping over nothing. His eyes search the club, nearly impossible now that there’s fucking glitter flying around the room, making everyone and everything look identical. He purses his lips when he finally catches Louis by the bar, leaning against the counter, talking to a guy in a red shirt that Harry doesn’t recognize. He turns back to Joel. “Hey, sorry, I gotta go find my boy,” he says.

“No problem,” Joel says, finishing off the rest of his drink. “I’ll let Amanda know I kicked it with her professor in Hawaii.”

He laughs, asking Joel to tell her he said hello before he saunters off in Louis’ direction, pushing through a mass of foam and glitter covered people. And as he approaches Louis, he realizes Louis is standing just inches away from Red Shirt, dragging his thumb across his own bottom lip, gestures exaggerated as soon as he catches Harry looking at him. It’s a move he knows well, a move that Louis has pulled on him hundreds of times over the past half a decade. Harry knows that stance, knows that face. That son of a bitch is flirting, and he’s clearly doing a good job at it, based on the way Red Shirt is leaning in, keeping his hand steady on Louis’ hip. Louis is doing it to piss Harry off.

It’s working.

Harry furrows his brows and forces his way through the crowd, even angrier when Louis blatantly ignores Harry’s presence to keep talking to Red. Harry taps him on the shoulder. “Uh, hi.”

Louis turns lazily, smile fake. “Can I help you?”

“Yeah, what the hell, you left me.”

He shrugs. “You were busy. So now I am, too.”

“What?”

“This is Ben,” Louis says, pointing to Red. “He was about to buy me a drink.”

“Sex on the Beach?” Ben asks, and Harry despises the way he says it, despises the not so subtle implications behind it.

“No, he’s all set,” Harry says before Louis can get a word in. “Baby, c’mon, I saved us a spot on the floor. Our song is playing.”

“Your song is a remix of Sandstorm?” Ben asks slowly.

Oh, that’s what song this is. “Yeah, is that an issue?”
“Nope.”

“Great. Lou?”

Louis makes a face, stepping back twice. “I’m all set here. Ben and I are having a good time. And you and jailbait, over there, seemed to be clicking, too.”

Ah. “Oh, come on, seriously?”

“Yup. Go on, Styles.”

Harry looks over his shoulder, spotting Liam in the crowd. “But Liam—”

“Liam wouldn’t notice if we were on fire right now. You can leave now.”

“Okay, but.” He looks down. “Wait, why are you holding your shoes? Oh God, ew, why are you barefoot?!”

“I wanted to touch the foam,” he says matter-of-factly.

“Sure, right, awesome. Hey, Ben, thanks for taking care of my boy, but if you’ll excuse us.” He grabs Louis’ wrist, alcohol making it tricky to keep a strong grip, but Louis is obviously just as drunk, falling in step beside him, unable to shake free.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he hisses once they’re out of Ben’s earshot. “No one’s paying attention to us. We don’t have to keep the charade up. If I wanna talk to some other guy, I’m allowed to. If you wanna blatantly flirt in front of me with some douchey frat boy, by all means, don’t let me stop you.”

The music is so loud that the floor is vibrating, Harry has sweat dripping down his back, his head is pounding, and all he can pay attention to is the look on Louis’ face. “You were jealous,” he says, licking his lips.

“Absolutely not.”

“And you were trying to make me jealous.”

Louis cocks his head. “No, I wasn’t.”

“It worked,” Harry says. “I hate that guy.”

He snorts. “Are you 12?”

“Yeah. I’m 12 and I hate that you were flirting with that guy.” He looks down at the ground. “I also hate that you’re barefoot. You’re gonna break your toes. Or, like, step in something.”

“Is it bothering you that much?”

“Yeah, this club is disgusting.”

“No.” Louis bites down on his bottom lip. “That guy.”

“Oh.” He stares at the way Louis’ teeth leave tiny, white indents on his lip, stares at the glitter stuck to Louis’ collarbones, basically asking to be touched. “Drives me crazy, thinking about other guys wanting you.”
“Yeah?”

He knows he’s not allowed to feel possessive, but he can’t help it, hands itching to grip Louis’ hips, thighs, the small of his back. He’s been watching Louis dance all night, watching him throw back drinks, watching him laugh and sing and touch that guy’s arm…

“C’mere.”

Louis’ cheeks are blotchy when he slurs, “Bad idea.” If Harry didn’t know him, he would maybe believe that Louis didn’t want Harry to keep pushing. But he does know him, knows him inside and out.

“I wanna dance with you,” he tries again.

“Bad idea,” Louis repeats, much weaker this time.

Harry swallows, reaching out to drag his thumb across Louis’ jaw, collecting silver glitter as he moves. “I don’t care.”

He pauses, hesitates, then: “Okay.”

“Yes,” Harry mumbles nonsensically, pulling Louis into him, and under normal circumstances, he would make fun of Louis for still holding his shoes, for walking around barefoot in a raunchy club, but these aren’t normal circumstances. This is Louis grinding backward into Harry, his hand gripping at Harry’s thigh, body small and tight and moving just for him. It’s been so long since they’ve had this, and Harry wants it all.

The beat of the song picks up and Louis pushes himself further into Harry’s body, leaning his head back against Harry’s chest. Harry can see that Louis’ eyes are closed, his lips parted, and it should be ridiculous that he’s covered in glitter and foam but it’s somehow unbearably hot. Harry slides his hands down the length of Louis’ body, stopping at his thighs, gripping tightly, glad he set his drink down at the bar and now has free hands to hold him this close. What a waste it would be to not be able to touch Louis this way.

He doesn’t think about it as he bends down to run his lips along Louis’ jaw, the stubble scratching Harry’s chin, and when Louis whines audibly over the noise of the bass, Harry squeezes his thighs tighter, hands resting dangerously high. He drags his mouth down his jaw to his neck and starts making work of a bruise, visible for anyone and everyone to see. Mine, it screams.

Louis winds his free hand up to hook around Harry’s neck, lolling his head to the side to give Harry more access, and the feeling of Louis’ fingers tangled in Harry’s curls is enough for him to pull Louis by his chin, to slot their lips together. There’s no hesitation on Louis’ part, and he twists around in Harry’s arms to deepen it, hand firm against the back of Harry’s neck, pulling him in closer as if there was any space in between them at all.

Harry bunches Louis’ shirt in his fists, tasting the tequila on Louis’ tongue, teeth clinking together. It feels just like every other drunken kiss they’ve shared over the past several years, except this time, Harry is afraid to let it break. It’s always been overwhelming to love Louis, and he’s more aware of it now than ever.

When he finally has to pull back to take a breath, he opens his eyes to find Louis already looking back at him, cheeks blotchy and lips shiny, breathing heavily. Harry selfishly steals a moment just to stare, to take it all in, before he asks, “Wanna get out of here?”

Louis is nodding before Harry even finishes his sentence, slipping his hand into Harry’s. “Let’s
Harry can faintly hear the sound of Liam whooping as he and Louis exit the club together, and if he were to say he feels bad leaving Liam’s bachelor party early with Louis glued to his side, he’d be lying.

Louis’ hotel room is pitch black when they stumble in together, Harry panting against Louis’ neck, biting and sucking, Louis whining in the back of his throat. Harry keeps on hand on Louis’ ass, the other along the wall, working his way around the room by touch. He’s close enough to Louis to feel that he’s and pressed up against his jeans, and when Harry pushes forward, dragging their hips together, Louis let out a frustrated groan that had Harry’s heart racing.

He slides his mouth back up to Louis’ as he pushes him up against the first empty wall he can find, keeping his hands firm on the back of Louis’ head to cushion it, grinding his hips forward. Louis’ reaction is exactly what Harry was waiting for, his lips insistently against Harry’s, his hands gripping at Harry’s hair, his breathing sharp. The last time they were together, there was the same kind of heat behind it, but the anger overshadowed it. This time, Harry can feel the change between them. Less angry, more want.

Just want.

He pulls back slightly, dragging his hands to the front of Louis’ jeans, cupping him through the denim, watching him squirm. His eyes adjust to the darkness slowly, and the first thing he focuses on is the way Louis is staring back, eyelids drooping from the alcohol, but gaze still firm, irises deep and Harry’s forever favorite shade of blue.

“I wanna suck you off,” Harry murmurs against Louis’ lips. “You want me to?”

Louis’ hands scramble to grip at Harry’s shoulders. “Yeah, yes, fuck.”

Harry nods, searing his lips back to Louis’, touching him anywhere and everywhere. “You want me, right?”

“He’s shut up,” he whines, tugging at the hem of Harry’s shirt, pulling it over his head. “Yes.”

He reaches for the buttons and zipper on Louis’ jeans, pulling them down as quickly as his hands will allow him to, Louis hissing as the cold air from the AC hits his skin, goosebumps rising on his thighs. Harry licks his palm before he reaches down to jerk Louis off, rough, and Louis squeezes his eyes shut, hands dragging across Harry’s bare chest. Harry looks down to see red lines raising in the wake of Louis’ nails, like a signature.

He drops down to his knees, pushing Louis backward so his body is pressed completely flushed against the wall, and he locks eyes with Louis for only a moment before he closes his eyes, taking Louis into his mouth, sinking down carefully. Louis tries to push his hips forward but Harry has his hands tight on Louis’ hips, holding him in place, giving him no room to go.

Harry keeps up a rhythm that has Louis moaning, has him fisting his hands into Harry’s hair and holding on, and Harry would do anything to keep these reactions all to himself. He slides his lips down the length of Louis’ cock, stopping when his nose his Louis’ stomach. He knows his voice will be shot in the morning, but it’s worth it, so worth it for Louis to be whimpering out Harry’s name like he can’t help himself.

He presses his teeth just under the head, knowing Louis will jerk into it, and he does beautifully,
exhaling harshly. Harry does it again before he drags his tongue up and down the length of it, pulling off to momentarily collect himself.

“Love you like this,” Harry murmurs against Louis’ thigh, voice rough, just before he swallows him back down again. He has so much more to stay but keeps quiet.

“Shit,” Louis gasps, “I’m already so close.”

Harry doubles his efforts, bobbing his head up and down, doing his best not to gag when he feels the head of Louis’ dick touch the back of his throat, but that’s what helps Louis get there, chest heaving, nails digging into Harry’s scalp. Harry’s eyes are watering and his knees sting and his neck aches and it’s so worth it to hear the broken noise Louis makes as he comes without much warning, legs shaking. Harry keeps sucking until Louis pushes him away, hissing.

He stands up on wobbly legs, pressing the heel of his palm against his own dick, hard and in desperate need for Louis’ hands, mouth, anything. Louis’ eyes follow the movements of Harry’s hand, still breathing deeply.

“How?” he asks breathlessly.

Harry doesn’t answer, just kisses him instead, thumbs drawing circles across Louis’ cheekbones. “Yes,” he says simply against Louis’ lips. “Yes you.”

Louis nods, doesn’t look away when he works at Harry’s jeans, and Harry lets him, kissing his neck, sliding his hands up and down Louis’ sides. He knows all the spots that make Louis like putty underneath him, but Louis knows exactly how to work Harry, too. It almost feels like a competition - a competition in which they have to prove who knows whom better - and based on the way Louis is looking at him, touching him, Harry would gladly forfeit.

Louis pushes Harry’s jeans down, immediately gripping his dick, using the precome to help with the slide, and Harry holds onto Louis to anchor him. He breathes deeply through his nose, biting at Louis’ shoulder, doing his best to ward off his orgasm, but the alcohol is doing nothing to help his stamina. Combine that with the expert twist of Louis’ hand and the look in his eyes and Harry thinks he could scream.

“You’re so fucking hot,” he whines, unable to hold it in, hips stuttering into Louis’ grip, “you do this so well.”

Louis doesn’t answer, just flicks his thumb over the tip, palm warm and drag ridiculously good. Harry’s eyes fall shut as he evenly thrusts into Louis’ hand, groaning at the feeling, at the way he can feel Louis’ breath against his chest. It doesn’t take more than two minutes of the steady pressure and Louis’ mouth back on his for Harry to let go, his release feeling like it’s being slammed out of him. He holds his breath as he comes, nearly going dizzy with it, shoulders slumping when it’s over.

The idea of leaving is excruciating. All he wants to do is climb into Louis’ bed, hold him, never leave this damn room ever again. And he opens his mouth to say that, ignoring the fact that they’re both half naked and panting stupidly over one another, but Louis beats him to the punch.

“You should go back to your room and shower. The foam and glitter is everywhere.”

Harry exhales, nodding. “Sure, yeah.”

“Great.”
His mind is fuzzy when he zips his jeans back up, when he grabs his t-shirt, when he makes his way back to his room, when he kicks off his boots and slides into bed.

Everything is crystal fucking clear, though, when he catches the look on Louis’ face just before Harry closes the door behind him, extremely evident that he didn’t know Harry was still looking.

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**DAY FIVE | TUESDAY**

Harry wakes up the next morning feeling on edge, satisfied, antsy, sated, still covered in glitter, and hungover. Mostly hungover. Mostly all of it.

Every time he thinks about Louis grinding up against him in the club, Louis clinging onto him back in his hotel room, Louis’ pink cheeks and red lips and watery eyes and Louis, Harry has a hard time focusing on anything else, has to remind himself that they’re not actually together and that Louis isn’t actually his.

But it felt like Louis was his for a little bit, and that is completely fucking Harry up. Honestly, this entire trip is fucking Harry up, and he’s counting down the hours until he’s back in Denver, far away from any and all of this. It’s been so easy to slip, and last night was a major setback; following Louis back to his hotel room was obviously not for the benefit of the wedding - just for the benefit of drunken, sexual needs - and though it helped significantly with their tension, he’s not dumb enough to think that all their problems are solved. If anything, this probably made it worse.

Instead of letting himself dwell on it more, Harry climbs out of bed, showers quickly, breathing in the steam from the spray, and when he steps out, he slips into a bathing suit and joins the rest of the wedding party on the beach, trying his best to be ready and positive for the day. The sun is warm, the sand is soft, and the ice water doing wonders for his migraine. Today is already better than the past few days have been, and it’s not even noon yet.

That is, until he catches the curve of Louis’ back framed by his navy blue bathing suit, skin somehow impeccably tanned and gorgeous, and Harry has to clench his fists, his jaw, to keep from doing or say something horribly, terribly stupid. He’s been outside for barely half an hour and he’s already embarrassingly stressed out.

If anyone catches on to the shift in their mood, no one says anything. There’s still blatant hurt between them, but now there’s confusion with a little bit of relief mixed in. When Harry asks Louis to pass the sunscreen, he doesn’t whip it at him like he would have done on the first day, or roll his eyes, ignoring him entirely. He’s a little softer, a little quieter, and Harry relaxes into his towel at the subtle change.

He does, however, make the mistake of joking to Louis around lunchtime, “Gee, if I’d known a blow job was all it would take to get you to unclench, I would have done it on the plane.” He points to the bruise on Louis’ neck. “Nice hickey, too. Who’s it from?”

Louis looks at him like he wants to hit him. “I wish I could fucking drown you in the Goddamn ocean.”

“I’m kidding! I’m just trying to be funny.” He sighs. “Lou.”

“Yeah, well, keep trying.” He saunters off toward the water and Harry’s shoulders slump.
Time. They need more time to figure out how to be around each other. Maybe one day.

Harry watches as Louis rolls his shoulders before making his way into the clear water, hand on his hip, other hand shielding the sun from his eyes, and Harry desperately wants one day to be right now.

The rest of the day is about the same, considering Louis spends barely any time around Harry unless Liam or Annie are around. He doesn’t make much of an effort to act like he’s enjoying himself, regardless of who’s looking, and about four margaritas in, Liam pulls Harry aside to ask him.

“Did something happen with Tommo? I’ve been dreaming of a quiet Louis since I was, like, 12 years old, but now I’m just concerned.”

Harry snorts, pushing his sunglasses back up the bridge of his nose, watching Louis jump in and out of the waves with a couple of the bridesmaids. It reminds Harry of the way he plays with his siblings, almost, and it makes him smile. “Dreams do come true. He’s finally mute.”

Liam laughs. “For real, though.”

“I dunno, really,” he lies. “Maybe he’s still feeling shitty from all the drinks last night. Speaking of,” he points to Liam’s hand, “how the hell are you still rallying?”

“Um, have you tried one of these?” Liam shoves the drink into Harry’s face. “Drink it. I don’t know what the hell is in this but, dude. I’m leaving Annie for the bartender.”

He laughs, pushing Liam away. “I’m good. Really.”

“Fine. Can you just make sure Lou is? I figured after you two basically ran out of the club last night, he definitely would have been good today, if you know what I’m saying.”

Harry’s cheeks heat up. “Yeah, I think everyone here listening knows what you’re saying.”

“Yup, could’ve been a little more subtle for the sake of the children,” Steph says, shaking her head, eyes closed as she relaxes in her beach chair.

“What children?”

She points to Niall. “That one.”

He makes a face. “Excuse you. I am not a child. Now would you please hand me my shovel. I want to dig a hole.”

Harry joins Louis by the water a few minutes later, flinching slightly as the waves lap at his ankles, temperature cooler than he was expecting it to be. He wades in, Louis turning when he hears Harry approaching, and sinks down further so just his head and shoulders are visible.

“Can I help you?”

Harry stares down at is toes, in awe that the water is clear enough to see all the way to the ocean floor, to see his toes wiggling into the sand, soft like powder. “You were alone.”
“By choice.”

“You sure you don’t want to come back up to the beach with the rest of us? It’s quiet up there without you.”

Louis smiles briefly at that. “I bet it is.”

“So… No?”

“Water is nice,” he sighs. “I’m good.”

Harry stares as the water drips off of Louis’ collarbones, rolling down his chest and into the water below. Water is nice, indeed. “Alright, well, we’re probably gonna be heading in for dinner soon. I think Annie said they booked us at a place a mile or so away from the resort.”

“Okay.”

He keeps staring, can’t help himself, and doesn’t bother to try to stop, not when he knows his eyes are hidden behind his sunglasses. “Hey, uh, sorry for the joke earlier. You know I get uncomfortable when there’s tension.”

Louis waves his hand around. “I know. I’ve just had a terrible headache all morning. Took it out on you, I guess. Ugh, why did you let me drink so much last night?”

Harry fails to hide his smile; this is a familiar conversation. “Hey, I turned around for, like, three minutes, and in that amount of time you’d somehow managed to suck down about 800 shots.”

“Not sure it was actually that many but my head would beg to differ.”

“What about your feet?”

“What about my feet?”

“I seem to recall you going barefoot at some point inside that club.”

“What the hell, I would never do th—” Louis pauses, horrified look on his face. “Oh my God, you’re right. I did do that. Harry! What if I have diseases now?!”

Harry laughs, shaking his head. “I’m sure you’re fine.”

“Sure isn’t positive! No, Christ, I totally walked through a puddle of diseases! I can’t believe I forgot about that until right now!” he cries out, splashing his hands in the water. And then he’s screaming, a blood curdling one, and Harry rolls his eyes.

“Louis, oh my God, if anything, all you did was walk through someone’s backwash. I think you’ll survive, drama queen.”

“No, Harry, fuck!” He’s screaming louder now, yanking off his sunglasses and Harry is surprised to see tears in his eyes. “My foot!”

“Wait, are you serious? What’s wrong?” He takes a step forward in the water, panicking when he realizes Louis is shaking. “Louis, you’re scaring me, what’s happening.”

“I don’t know, oh my God, my foot, it hurts so much, help me.”

“Baby, I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what’s wrong.” Harry hears the term of endearment
slip out before he can do anything about it, and he winces at himself, hoping Louis doesn’t notice, but then Louis starts to cry harder, reaching out for Harry’s hands. Harry grips back instantly.

“I need to get out of the water,” he pants, squeezing Harry’s fingers so hard that it hurts. “Something bit me, or stung me. I don’t know. Fuck, shit, what the fuck .”

“Oh, come here, I’ll help you out. Do you want me to carry you?”

Louis makes a face. “No, I’m not that pathetic, I can walk.” But then he takes one step closer to the shore and instantly cries out. “No, no, I am pathetic, I can’t, it hurts too much. Harry .”

“Do you want to get on my back or do you want me to carry you, like, bridal style?”

“Which is less demeaning?” he groans.

“I don’t care , just pick one because I need to take care of you.”

He squeezes his eyes shut. “I’ll get on your back. That’s not as mortifying.”

“Great.” Harry bends down far enough for Louis to hoist himself up, his foot brushing against Harry’s side, and just that slight stimulation has him crying out again.

“Shit, sorry,” Louis chokes out. “Just, careful, please.”

Of course,” he promises, doing his best to go slow, afraid to do anything that’ll draw that heart wrenching noise out of Louis again. He heads up through the sand steadily, the rest of their group laughing when they see Louis holding onto Harry for dear life, yelling how whipped Harry is, but their expressions change the second they can actually read the situation.

“Wait, what happened?!” Liam asks. “Tommo, what happened to your foot?!”

“I don’t know,” he moans. “I didn’t get to look at it yet. I think something got me in the ocean.”

“Yeah, I’ll fucking say. Harry, put him here.”

Harry nods, crouching down so Louis can slide off, helping him keep his balance off his foot. And when he looks down to get a look at Louis’ foot, he almost vomits.

“Oh, God, Lou,” he murmurs. “Jellyfish sting. For sure.”

“What makes you a fucking expert?!” Louis snaps. “Goddamn, this hurts .”

He guides Louis down onto Liam’s beach towel, eyes glued to the angry red marks slashed across the bottom of Louis’ foot, twisting up and around his calf. It looks like lightning struck him, and the closer he looks, the more he’s sure that there are pieces from the jellyfish’s stingers stuck in his skin. “I’m not an expert,” he says calmly, “but I’m not sure what else it could be.”

Louis looks down and winces. “Was it a fleet of jellyfish?! Look at it!”

“Okay, Lou, you stay here. I’m gonna head back to the room really quick to grab us some dry clothes and then we can head to the hospital,” Harry instructs. “Don’t move.”

“Wait, Harry, you don’t have to go to the hospital,” Niall says, pushing himself up and out of the ridiculously big hole he’d managed to dig for himself. When did he have time for that, and, just. Why. “You gotta pee on him.”
“Do you honestly think that works?” Annie asks incredulously. “For fuck’s sake, no, take him to the hospital.”

“Yeah, Niall, get back in your hole,” Steph scolds.

“Even if it did work, I’m not peeing on Louis in front of you people,” Harry says, searching for Louis’ room key in his bag. “That’s disgusting. And probably traumatizing.”

“Wait, do you pee on him not in front of us?” Liam asks slowly.

“Oh my God, everyone shut up.” Harry finds the card and grabs his shoes. “I’ll be back in five.”

“Do you want anyone else to go with you, Louis?” Annie asks. “I can help.”

“No, it’s fine,” he says through gritted teeth. “I just want Harry.”

Harry exhales sharply, nodding. “I’ll be quick.”

He runs through the resort so quickly that by the time he gets back to the beach with an armful of mismatched clothes, he has actual droplets of sweat dripping down his face and rolling off his nose.

The doctor in the emergency room confirms the injury is from a jellyfish, explaining the excruciating pain was due to the jelly’s stingers stuck directly into Louis’ heel, just like Harry assumed. Louis grips onto Harry’s arm while they remove the tiny pieces, leaving crescent shaped indents in Harry’s skin. Harry doesn’t say anything, just stands there, stoic, and lets Louis take out his frustrations.

“That sucker really got you,” the doctor says as she examines the back of Louis’ calf. “Were you out deep in the water?”

Louis shakes his head slowly, lazily, the pain medication working wonders. “Nope. Just up to my chest, I think.”

“I guess that was deep enough. Scale of 1-10, ten being the highest, what’s your pain right now?”

He closes his eyes, scrunching up his face. “A four? Maybe? Yeah. A four.”

“Great,” she says softly. “Much better than how you came in here.”

Louis hums. “Much better.”

“And you’re sure you got all those horrible stingers out?” Harry asks. “Positive?”

“Yes, crazy concerned boyfriend,” the doctor teases. “He should be fine, and will be okay to walk on it within the next hour or so. I want to keep you for another hour, just to make sure there’s no reaction to the meds. Sound good?”

Harry nods from his spot in the chair next to the bed. He puts his hand on Louis’ thigh, rubbing his thumb back and forth. “Lou? Good?”

He hums again. “Yes, ma’am.”
“Perfect. I’ll be back to check on you.” She exits the room, leaving the two of them alone, the steady sound of the beeping machines annoying, comforting.

Harry keeps his thumb moving steadily across Louis’ leg, skin scratchy from leftover sand, and Louis’ eyes are still closed when he mumbles, “Crazy concerned boyfriend. She nailed that one right on the head, huh? Always have been.”

His heart threatens to beat right out of his chest. “You scared me. I couldn’t help it. Jesus, I’ve never seen you in pain like that before, I hated it, boyfriend or not. Fuck the jellyfish. Fuck all the jellyfish. Look so cute when they’re behind glass but not so much when they’re electrocuting you in the ocean.”

Louis cracks one eye open. “Hey, c’mere.”

“Where? On the bed?”

“Mhm.” He moves over an inch or two, as if that’ll be enough room to share, but Harry gets up, anyway. He’ll make it work.

He’s careful not to tug on the IV line, or to bump into the sores scattered across Louis’ right foot, and pulls Louis up against him, wrapping his arm around Louis’ shoulder, taking a second just to breathe in, breathe out. He didn’t realize how tense he’d been until this moment, and Louis smells like sunscreen, sun, sand, sweat.

Louis taps Harry’s knee. “Do you think I stepped in something at the club that stuck to my foot and that attracted the jellyfish?”

“Oh my God,” Harry snorts. “How are you still thinking about that?!”

“How are you not?!” Harry, I was fucking barefoot at a disgusting club.”

He laughs, letting his head fall to Louis’ shoulder. He’s so tired and Louis is so warm. “Wanna sue the club?”

“Probably.” Louis sighs, resting his head against Harry’s. “Thank you for taking care of me.”

Harry nods, vision going slightly blurry, and he tries to wipe the tears away before Louis catches on, embarrassed that so few words got to him so quickly. “You’re welcome.” It’s his voice that gives him away, though, shaky and unmistakable.

“Styles, are you crying?” Louis asks, laughing. “Fucking pitiful. I didn’t even cry.”

“Yes you did! In the water!”

“Okay, that wasn’t by choice. It snuck up on me.”

“Obviously. And I’m clearly choosing to cry right now.”

“Exactly.”

Harry rolls his eyes, pulling himself together, pulling Louis in closer. “Hey,” he whispers, “do you know what this reminds me of?”

Louis pauses. “Shut up.”

“You do, don’t you?”
“I told you to shut up.”

He laughs, pinching Louis’ thigh. “Talk about a crazy concerned boyfriend.”

“Whatever,” he says, but Harry can hear the humor behind it.

“You know it’s been almost two years since then?”

“Mmm. March, right?”

“Yup. Not cold enough for snow, but cold enough for ice.”

“And that was the problem, wasn’t it.”

“It was.”

Goddamn black ice; it had covered their entire apartment complex parking lot in a thick layer, and Harry left for his 8 AM class early enough that maintenance hadn’t taken care of salting the pavement yet. On his way to the car, he completely wiped out, and he knew he’d broken his wrist the second he heard the crunch, the pain shooting up his left arm, numbing, taking his breath away.

He drove himself to the hospital that morning, not bothering to wake up Louis to ask to bring him, and he didn’t tell him where he was until after he’d had X-rays, which confirmed his wrist was, indeed, broken. And in three places, too. Impressive, said the doctor.

Louis was just as shrill and borderline psychotic over the phone when Harry told him what was going on as he’d expected him to be, and even when he made Louis swear not to show up in the emergency room, he braced himself for his whirlwind boyfriend, anyway, knowing him well enough to assume he’d show up within the half hour.

“Oh, my boy worries about me a lot,” he warned the nurse tending to him, “and he is very protective. He may cause a scene. Just so you know.”

Louis strolled in 21 minutes later (predictable timing, Harry thought) with blotchy cheeks, hair a mess, sweatpants way too big, and upon further examination, Harry realized they were his.

“Baby, I told you not to come,” he sighed.

“No, shut up,” Louis ordered, bottom lip quivering. “Move over.”

They laid there together, squished on the tiny hospital bed, Louis gently tracing over the bandages holding Harry’s broken bones in place, sniffling when Harry winced at the doctor’s too rough hands.

“You don’t have to cry,” Harry laughed. “I’m fine.”

“You’re hurt and I hate it,” Louis countered, frowning. “And I’m going to sue the fuck out of our maintenance man. Watch me.”

“Great, I’m glad you’re thinking logically.”

“I am. Never had such clarity before.”

Harry had teased Louis for his over the top behavior for weeks - months, even - but today, watching the nurse bandage Louis’ foot and calf, Louis hissing at the pressure with his eyes squeezed shut, Harry’s heart aches for all the times he made fun of Louis for caring too much. He
They miss their fancy dinner reservations with the rest of the group. Liam offers to reschedule so many times that Harry eventually stops answering the phone, and instead, they enjoy a delicious meal consisting of pudding and popsicles, courtesy of the cart parked outside of Louis’ hospital room. The food was definitely not meant for Harry to be snooping around in, but what the nurses don’t know won’t hurt them.

It’s one of the best meals Harry has had in months.

They pull back into the resort just as the sun is setting, and Harry is surprised when Louis takes him up on his offer to watch the sky’s crescendo from the beach. They take a seat beside one another in the sand, Louis careful not to dirty the bandages, and this time, Harry thinks, the quiet between them isn’t uncomfortable.

“I’m sorry I was so obnoxious the first few days here,” Louis says after a bit, breaking the silence, dragging his fingers through the sand. “And for the past few months, really. I was mad. And hurt.”

Harry scrunches up his nose. “Yeah, I couldn’t really tell.”

“I’m apologizing and you’re going to be an asshole?”

“Sorry.” He sighs. “Apology accepted. This isn’t an easy vacation. And the past several months haven’t been, either. I get it.”

Louis snorts. “Fuck. Some vacation. Stuck with my ex on an island, pretending we’re together so the groom doesn’t lose his mind and jump into a volcano. And just got attacked by Queen Jelly herself. So. That’s nice.”

Harry laughs, shaking his head. “I know. It blows. But think of how much smoother this would all be going if you weren’t actively hating me.”

“But it’s what I do best.”

He smirks. “True. Really, though. Think we can both force this a little better? I’m so tired, Louis.”

Louis licks his lips, staring at the horizon, clearly stalling. “It’s just easier to be mad. I’m, like.” He sighs. “I feel like I’m always mad.”

He squints through the remainder of the sun’s rays, finally starting to set over the sea. “I know. All of this sucks.”

“Understatement.”

“I’m sorry.” He doesn’t know why he’s apologizing, but he feels like he needs to keep saying it. “I’m so sorry.”

“Harry, it’s… You don’t have to, like.” He waves his hand around, not bothering to finish his sentence, hoping Harry will catch on. He does.

“Just until Sunday, right? Then we, uh.” Harry clears his throat, forcing out the words. “Then we can really be broken up. And don’t have to do this anymore.”
Louis digs his fingers into the sand, nearly clawing at it. “Can’t wait.”

Harry doesn’t mention the sarcasm dripping all over Louis’ words, nor does he call him out on the way his voice shakes, just slightly, something only Harry would be able to notice from spending the past several years together, learning and memorizing every detail he could. Instead, he puts his hand on Louis’ knee and squeezes, reassuring, and Louis doesn’t tell him to move it.

The sun sets and there they remain, just the sounds of their breathing, the waves crashing, and a party going on behind them to keep them company. They have no reason to keep sitting there, no more words to be said, but today is the most Harry has been allowed to touch Louis this way in so long, no one watching, and God, he knows this is a slippery slope, but he can’t bring himself to give it up.

Louis stays silent as the beach darkens around them and Harry can tell he’s thinking. He doesn’t bother asking, though. He has the feeling they’re on the same page, minds most likely mirroring one another, just like always.

The breakup was a build up over several months, a slow, gradual unraveling of sorts, and by the time they realized what was happening, they both silently agreed that it couldn’t be salvaged, no words to be said to save it. Harry was the one who forced himself to walk away first, doing his damn best not to turn back and look at who he was leaving behind.

The start of the year was promising, tremendous things happening for both of them. Louis was accepted into med school halfway through January, and shortly after, Harry was offered a position to teach photography classes. It was a cause for celebration, and they splurged on an expensive meal downtown, both in suits and ties, sharing a bottle of champagne throughout the evening and raspberry cheesecake for dessert. They were more than tipsy by the time they climbed back into Louis’ car, which resulted in doing their best to sober up from the backseat, Louis laughing hysterically every time Harry slammed his head against the roof of the car as he shifted around to get comfortable. It turned into a lost cause, both of them seeming to get drunker, somehow, with each passing minute, so they abandoned Louis’ Hyundai in the parking lot and hailed a cab, drunk and stupid and falling over one another with wandering hands. Much to the dismay of the driver, Louis wouldn’t stop touching Harry in the back of the cab, Harry never asked him to cut it out, and by the time they got back to their apartment, Harry was itching to get Louis out of his suit and jacket, to get his mouth on every inch of skin he could reach.

The first week of February, Harry heard back from the newspaper he’d applied for just after Christmas. They said they adored his portfolio and wanted him to come on part time, to write for their political column. Harry was shocked, absolutely floored that they wanted him to be a part of their team with so little experience, just some freelance writing here and there, but Louis patted him on the back, biting back a smile, and said, “They clearly know what they’re doing in there. You’re incredibly talented, Styles. You’re going to take over that damn paper. Congratulations, babe.”

And take over, he did. Whenever he wasn’t teaching or planning or prepping, he was researching for the paper, eyes glued to his computer screen, pen between his teeth, excited to dig up new information about the ongoing campaign, ready to write about it with a new twist, a fresh spin. It was hard, but it was a challenge that he loved, and his editor could clearly see the dedication he was putting in. Impressed, even.

“You won’t even believe how shocked I was when Lisa called me into her office to tell me that they’d never had a new writer transform so quickly, Lou,” Harry said in between bites of Chinese food, some of the rice flinging off his fork and onto the floor. “They actually like me. They said if I keep it up, I’ll have my own section by next year. Not just a column. A section.”
Louis laughed, stuffing lo mein into his mouth, legs crossed, elbows resting on the coffee table from his position on the floor. “Kinda sounds to me like they hate you.”

“Don’t jinx it, I’ve somehow tricked them into thinking I’m amazing.”

He smirked, twisting his fork around in the noodles. “Hey, I, uh, heard back from that internship I applied for. At the hospital.”

Harry’s head snapped up at that. “And?”

“I’m in.”

“Shut up! Are you serious?!”

Louis nodded, smiling. “Yeah, I’ll be shadowing Dr. Hargraves for a while--”

“Is that the pediatric doctor? The one you met a few months ago?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. I’m not sure what all the details are yet but they only choose nine applicants a year and…” He blushed. “This is kind of big, Harry.”

“Good God, why did you let me ramble on about the fucking paper for, like, an hour?!” Harry scoffed, pushing his plate off his lap and settling on the floor next to Louis, grabbing his face. “Do you have any idea how proud I am of you?”

“I’d love to hear it, but I’d also kind of prefer to eat, get off of me.”

“No.” Harry gripped him harder. “You’re smart, baby.”

Louis batted Harry’s hands away. “I know, I’ve been saying this since we met. I’m phenomenal.”

“Like, a genius, probably.”

“Could most likely beat you in a round of ‘Trivial Pursuit,’ that’s for damn sure.”

Harry shook his head, smiling. “But yet, you’re stupid enough that I was able to trick you into falling in love with me.”

“Who said anything about love? You pay half the rent, kid.”

“Nice.” Harry pressed a kiss to his jaw, lingering for a beat too long. “Speaking of rent…”

“Is this your way of trying to turn me on because, I gotta say, you seem to have lost your touch.”

He snorted and sat back. “Are you going to be able to work still? School and a crazy internship?”

Louis nodded, taking a sip of his drink. “Yup. Gonna be exhausting but I talked to Danny and he said he can switch my hours so I can go into the restaurant later and close up instead of my usual early shift. And I talked to my professor and she said as long as I’m still logging into class ten hours a week, I should be on enough to get all the new material. I’ll have time to do it all.”

“Wow, you’re really Wonder Boy, aren’t you?”

“That’s me.”

“And when did you actually find the time to sort all of this out? Seems like you have it all figured
“Out and ready to go.”

“Uh, yeah.” He looked up, licking his lips. “I talked to my professor about it yesterday and Danny and I discussed changing my hours on Thursday.”

“Thursday? That was… Like, five days ago.”

“I heard back from the hospital on Wednesday.”

“Oh.” Harry mindlessly picked up the egg roll, then set it back down without taking a bite. “Why didn’t you tell me when you found out?”

He shrugged. “I dunno. I wanted to tell you in person and I haven’t actually seen you since late Monday, I think.”

“That’s… true. How is that possible? We live together.”

“Do we?”

Harry knew it was meant to be a joke but it fell flat. “Okay, I know I’ve been insanely busy with the paper and with class and you’ve been up to your ears in schoolwork, but I’ve seen you, Lou.”

“Not longer than a minute or two. I’ve been working or in class and you’ve been at the college or in the library. When I get home, you’re already passed out in bed, and when I wake up, you’re already gone for the day. We haven’t even had time to watch The Bachelor together.” Harry knew Louis wasn’t saying it to be hurtful, he was just being honest. And that was somehow worse.

“Well, yeah, because that’s a two-hour long, soul sucking show.” He shook his head. “That’s besides the point. I’m taking you out on Saturday to celebrate. Drinks at Marco’s.”

Louis paused. “Okay.”

“What…”

“Nothing. Just.” He made a face. “That’s where Liam and Niall took me when I told them about the internship. But it’s good. I like it there. We can go again.”

Harry frowned, his heart sinking. “Liam and Niall already know?”

“Yeah, well, I wanted to talk to someone about it and you haven’t been around, Harry.” He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Look, it’s not your fault, okay? We’re both trying to find a schedule that works best for both of us. We’ll figure it out.”

He swallowed. “Right.”

“Are you mad I told them before you…”?

“No, God, no. Just wish I could’ve helped you celebrate, you know?”

Louis rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah, I would’ve liked that, too.”

They both fell silent, the TV turned on in the corner of the room the only noise to be heard. Harry couldn’t think of anything to say; that was a first with Louis, and he most definitely didn’t care for it, stomach turning and mind racing with an endless string of thoughts. He looked over at Louis to flash him a weak smile, but Louis was staring down at his hands in his lap, lips pursed together.
Later on, long after Harry had taken care of the Chinese leftovers and Louis had washed the dishes, Harry was hovering over Louis, thrusting and pushing into him impossibly slowly, slowly enough for him to feel the drag of Louis’ fingernails across the back of his neck, for him to catch the change in Louis’ breathing when he changed his angle without warning. It was torturously good, the same way it always was, but the change was there and it was evident. He kissed Louis like he was saying *I’m so sorry* and Louis rubbed in between his shoulders blades like he was saying *It’s okay*, and by the time they’d both come, Harry couldn’t pull Louis into his arms fast enough, desperate for him to know how much he loved him. Louis breathed into it, sighing, but he never said a word.

It was the first and last time either of them fully attempted to sort through their mess.

And that was the start of the end.

There was no drama, no argument, no big blow out. That, alone, made it about a thousand times worse. Whenever Harry thinks back on it, there isn’t an exact point he can pinpoint when the transition from *relationship* to *strangers* began. And that makes his chest hurt, every single time. It was an “adult breakup” for “adult reasons,” but that doesn’t mean Harry was able to put on a brave face, able to pick up his shit and move forward. He was a nervous wreck, could barely force himself to get out of bed the first few weeks, everything tasteless and meak. Day six of moving out of their apartment, Harry was standing in the bread aisle of the grocery store, staring at loaves of whole wheat for God only knows how long, completely spaced out. Eventually, he grabbed the kind he knew Louis preferred, the kind perfect for BLT sandwiches. And then, right there in that damn aisle, he started crying.

So much for their “adult breakup.”

The months leading up to the inevitable split ticked by steadily, as did the planning for Liam’s wedding, most of it done through a thread of texts and emails, none of them able to find a time that they were all free to get together, Harry and Louis taking the majority of the blame for that. Their schedules were unfairly hectic, Louis picking up extra shifts at the restaurant in between hours at the hospital, on campus, online, and Harry staying late at the college to get grading done, to write for the column. The deeper into their careers they fell, the more time they spent apart, and for the first time in over five years, Harry didn’t feel secure in his relationship with Louis. It’s as if they’d both silently chose their futures, and those futures included very few room for each other. Exciting jobs first, crumbling relationship second. Realizing that hit him like a ton of bricks, and he struggled for a way to reach out and fix it. They’d never dealt with something to this magnitude before; they never had to. This wasn’t, “How could you forget to pick up Prudence’s medication at the vet?!” or “Did you seriously think it was okay to delete last week’s episode of *The Walking Dead* before I watched it. Seriously.” This was, “I feel like we’re not on the same page anymore and I’m completely panicked that I’m losing you.” Every time Harry felt the words bubbling on the tip of his tongue, ready to burst, he chickened out, not ready to face the fact that his best friend and love of his life was suddenly out of arm’s reach.

Neither of them did anything to mend it, skirting around the fact that in the few moments they were alone together in the apartment, it was filled with awkward tension, both almost afraid to bring up anything with weight to it. Instead, they sat down for silent dinners, Louis often times taking his
food to their bedroom to eat alone, claiming he needed to go over more notes. Harry wasn’t sure which hurt more, the fact that Harry had no idea what Louis was studying for, or the fact that he didn’t think Louis was actually studying. Rather, he was hiding. Harry honestly couldn’t blame him.

It shouldn’t have been that hard, shouldn’t have felt like walking on eggshells, but Louis couldn’t look him in the eye anymore and their bodies never quite touched under their down comforter when they slept. Harry did his best to ignore it - an immature resolution, he knew all along - and threw himself into his work even more, spending his nights away from the apartment, away from Louis. And of course, things from then on only got worse. It was a repetitive cycle, one he didn’t know how to step out of.

By the middle of June, it occurred to Harry that it had been months since the last time he and Louis had gone out on a date, weeks since they’d slept together, and worst, he couldn’t remember the last time they’d even laughed together. They’d lost the spark, the fun that had always been there, relationship and otherwise, and Harry was positively aching missing it, missing Louis. To say he was afraid to bring it up was an understatement; he was terrified to hear an answer he wasn’t ready for, but he worked up the courage to call Louis late one Friday night, expecting Louis to answer in a hushed voice from the library, or letting it go to voicemail if he was still at work. Harry practiced his rehearsed words on his tongue while the phone rang, mumbling and gritting his teeth and repeating to himself, “Can you come home? We have to talk. I miss you.” But when Louis picked up after several rings, all Harry could hear in the background was the sound of heavy music playing and voices yelling all around him.

“Lou? Where are you?”

“Harry? I can’t hear you! I’m out with Niall!”

“You’re not at the restaurant?”

“Dan let me out early so I called up Niall. Wanted to blow off some steam!”

Harry dragged his hands across his face. *And you didn’t think of me?* “You know I’m free Friday nights, right? Why didn’t you ask me to go with you?”

“Sorry, I can’t hear you, Styles. We can talk when I get home!” *Click.*

He stared at the phone in his hands for far too long, watching the time change. 10:41 PM. 10:59 PM. 11:37 PM. By the time 1:06 AM hit, he forced himself to climb into bed, ready to admit defeat, stomach in knots, but he was still awake when Louis slid in beside him a few hours later. His movements were jerky and breathing a little too loud, telltale sign of Drunk Louis. Typically, Harry would have made fun of him for it. Now, he pretended to be asleep, even though he was pretty sure Louis knew otherwise.

Harry forced himself to try again on Sunday, making Louis’ favorite Italian dish for the two of them, setting the table with wine glasses and a single candle in the center. The table looked comically out of place in their disaster of an apartment, much too nice considering the piles of laundry that needed to be folded on the couch and about 18 pairs of sneakers lying by the front door, but he was hoping Louis would look past it and focus on the main gesture instead.

Louis walked in the door just after seven, backpack slung over one shoulder, eyes wide in surprise at seeing dinner already on the table.
“What’s going on here?”

He looked over his shoulder, smiling, before he went back to cutting garlic bread. “Just thought it would be nice to treat you to dinner.”

Louis whistled, taking a seat at the table. “Wine and everything?”

“Wine and everything,” Harry confirmed.

“No special occasion?”

“Nope.” He joined Louis at the table, handing him the cheese grater. “Tell me about your exam. I know you had one coming up.”

Louis paused, pursing his lips together before slowly saying, “Alright. Yeah. My exam.”

It was the way their nights together should have been, not tiptoeing around one another, apprehensive to say the wrong words, embarrassed that they both seemed to have let their relationship slip through the cracks, and after they’d both had seconds of the meal and the wine, after some tension had been relieved with jokes and laughter, Harry could finally spit it out.

“We’ve been so fucking off lately, Louis. What are we going to do to fix it.”

He raised his brows, looking down at his lap. “We’re not off.”

Sure . “Come on. This is the first real conversation we’ve had in decades.”

“Bit of an exaggeration.”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t,” Louis argued. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Harry pushed his dish out of the way, putting his elbows on the table. He really wanted to reach over and grab Louis’ hands in his own, but based on the way Louis was looking everywhere but Harry, he knew that wouldn’t be the best idea. Not today. “Louis, we have to talk about this. I see you once, maybe twice, a week. We don’t go out together, we don’t make time for each other when we’re both home…” He swallowed the lump in his throat, hating how Louis still refused to look in his direction. “It’s like we don’t have anything in common anymore.”

Louis shrugged, pushing around his leftover food on his plate, still silent.

“Is it all in my head?” he asked quietly.

Louis shrugged, pushing around his leftover food on his plate, still silent.

“Is it all in my head?” he asked quietly.

Louis pushed his hair out of his eyes, speaking to his lap when he said, “Yeah. It’s all in my head.”

Be the bigger man, be the bigger person, Harry chanted to himself. Louis is stubborn, isn’t going to admit something is wrong. He’s going to keep playing the “strong” card. Fight for him. He’s worth it. This is all worth it. “I begged my editor to push back my deadline to have this dinner with you,” he murmured. “I made time to talk to you about this because it’s important to me. To save us.”

“I didn’t fucking ask you to do that, Harry.”

“I know, just--”
“And there’s nothing to save. Don’t be a hero.”

Harry stopped at that, felt like the wind was knocked out of him. “Nothing to save,” he echoed before he blew out the flickering candle. “Yeah. Maybe you’re right.”

The rest of the summer went by painfully slowly. Denver’s weather ridiculously hot but somehow, Harry and Louis’ apartment felt icy cold, frigid. After Harry’s weak attempt at trying to figure out how to put their relationship back on track, he didn’t bother trying again. He was still waking up with his heart in his throat every morning, nausea threatening to take over if he dwelled on their situation too much, but Louis remained stoic, uninterested, and Harry had no way of getting through to him. To keep himself busy - busier - he threw himself into his classes, picking up a fourth class for the summer, writing and researching at every spare chance he got.

And photography. He sat behind the lens of his camera more in those sticky, humid months than he ever had in his entire life, desperate for a new point of view.

He took late night strolls through the city, finding abandoned buildings to capture, people in the windows of bars and diners who posed without knowing, the moon and constellations acting as his favorite subject, always there, always beautiful. He went out on his lunch break, photographing traffic and buildings and small cafes. He ventured out at dusk almost everyday, loving the silhouettes of the trees against the quickly blackening sky. Harry forced himself to stay active, to find beauty around him, to keep up their Sunday coffee shop tradition alive, even if he was the only one taking part in it.

The last Sunday of August, after picking up the week’s photos, he traipsed down to his usual spot for coffee and a bagel, alone, his new ritual as of the past six or so weeks. It was significantly less satisfying sorting through photos by himself, no one to help him point out which pictures turned out best, which ones should have been blown up and framed, which ones needed to be trashed immediately. He picked at his bagel, appetite mostly nonexistent, doing his best to block out the buzz of the patrons around him.

It wasn’t until he reached the bottom of the last stack of photos that he realized Louis wasn’t in a single photo, and hadn’t been for about a month.

Not one.

Harry started to believe he was the only one affected by this, the only one stressed, the only one deeply hurt and struggling to sort through the mess in his mind. But then he’d catch Louis slamming the utensil drawer, kicking books and DVD cases and Prudence’s toys out of the way with much more force than necessary, cursing loudly when he couldn’t find his glasses right away, breaking down into tears in the shower, thinking the sound of the spray was covering up the sounds of his shaking sobs. He was wrong, though, and Harry heard it all, just out of reach from the other side, unable to do anything about it, unable to find a way to mention it.

Louis was frustrated, hurting, playing it off like he was fine for a reason Harry couldn’t quite understand.

Louis cared.

Or, at least, that’s what Harry convinced himself.
By the end of September, they were going through a breakup before either one of them had actually initiated it, and Harry was so, so tired. They spent the entire summer avoiding one another, pretending and acting for the better part of 12 weeks, Harry completely exhausted at the way Louis seemed to think Harry was crazy for bringing any of their issues up, brushing him off like it was nothing. It had escalated further than he ever thought it would, past the point of no return, and the first time he secretly searched for studio apartments in the area, he could only get through one listing before he was crying so hard, he couldn’t see the computer screen.

He called his sister, knowing she’d be honest, wouldn’t sugarcoat anything, and at that point, that’s what he needed. He needed someone to tell him exactly what to do, no matter the sting, and Gemma was the best place to start.

“Did you ever think there might be a reason why he won’t talk about it with you?” she asked through the phone. “That boy loves you so much. He would die if he knew how much you were hurting.”

Harry closed his eyes, breathing deeply. “I don’t know. Neither of us are the same as we used to be. It’s like we can’t communicate and all I want to do is fucking fix it, but on the other hand, why bother, because he’s never made a single attempt. Not one.”

“Harry, normal people can balance jobs and relationships. Hell, Zach and I just moved in together while we’re both going through major changes at work. He got a huge promotion and I just started at a new company. It doesn’t have to be this big of a deal.”

“You don’t think I know that? It’s like… We both unintentionally picked our careers instead of picking each other. Instead of working through that, we fell short. And just accepted it. And now it’s been seven months of complete bullshit.”

“You can have both. You can write and he can get his fancy degree and you can still have each other.”

He put his phone on speakerphone while Gemma talked, scrolling mindlessly through his photo album, through his texts. He went to Louis’, heart sinking when he realized they hadn’t texted in eight days. And even then, it was about rent. “Yeah, but the thing is, I don’t think he wants me to have him anymore. And I’ll never fucking know because he won’t talk to me. He’s been silent for months. Like, this isn’t the Louis I fell in love with. That Louis is gone. And I know something is wrong, I know it, but for the first time, I can’t read his mind and he won’t let me in. I’m, like.” His eyes hurt, his throat, his back. “I am so tired of missing him. I’m so tired of pretending. I can’t do it anymore.” He set the phone down on his desk, leaning back in his chair. “I love him so much, but when does that stop being enough?”

Gemma was silent, long enough for Harry to think the phone cut out. “I don’t think you need to explain yourself anymore, Harry. I think you need to get out.”

He didn’t bother to hide the tremor in his voice. “But what if it’s a mistake. What if it’s even worse when I don’t have him at all anymore?”

“It might be. But you’ll figure it out. You always do.”

Months later, that’s all Harry could think of his first night alone in his tiny studio apartment. It was
too cold, the heat busted, but he refused to unpack the blankets because if he did, that meant he actually lived there.

He didn’t have Louis anymore, and he had no idea how to figure it out.

The final straw came the last day of September. Harry came home from class with a massive headache, desperate for tea and maybe a movie. Maybe a movie with Louis. He hummed to himself at that exceptional possibility, imagining they’d pick out something they both loved, something comfortable. That could be an easy place to start.

*Please let tonight be a good night.*

He walked into the living room with his bag slung over his shoulder, ready to sink into the couch, smiling slightly when he caught a glimpse of Louis sitting on the floor surrounded by a pile of papers and textbooks, mug steaming on the coffee table in front of him. He looked determined, dedicated, studious, so ridiculously gorgeous that Harry’s cheeks felt hot.

But then he realized that Louis wasn’t alone. Someone Harry had never seen before was perched on the couch, his own textbook in his lap, flipping back and forth through the pages. Harry stared for a minute, waiting to see if either of them heard him come in or noticed he was standing there.

Silence.

He cleared his throat, dropping his bag to the floor, and at that, Louis and the blonde guy both looked up.

“Oh, hey,” Louis said, eyes immediately going back down to his textbook. “We’re just getting some more studying done before the exam tomorrow morning.”

“No problem,” Harry replied, shifting awkwardly from his left foot to his right. After a beat, he rounded the corner of the couch and stuck his hand out. “I’m Harry, by the way.”

The blonde guy shook. “Travis. Nice to meet you.”

“Shit, sorry, I suck,” Louis said with a forced laugh. “Harry, this is my lab partner. And Travis, this is my roommate, Harry. Don’t worry about him. He won’t bother us.”

Harry smiled weakly. “I’ll get out of your hair.”

“See? Told you.”

He left them alone and moved to the kitchen just long enough to make his tea, eyes nearly closing with pure exhaustion, stress. It wasn’t until he was in their bedroom with the door closed and his boots kicked off that he realized Louis had introduced him as his *roommate* and not his *boyfriend*, and Harry wasn’t sure which was worse: the fact that Louis didn’t do it to be spiteful, the fact that Harry hadn’t actually caught it at first, or the fact that technically, that’s all they really were.

The next morning through a series of choked off sobs and shaky hands, Harry told Louis he was moving out. He wanted to explain more than that, but the look on Louis’ face said he didn’t need to. Louis’ eyes were glassy when he crossed his arms across his chest, whispering, “Okay,” and just like that, it was over.
It took four hours into their relationship to kiss, two weeks to sleep together, 10 weeks to exchange *I love you*’s, five months for their first real fight, two and a half years to move in together, four years to sit down and discuss a serious future together, and seven months for all of that to come crashing down as if it had never existed in the first place.

After that, time stopped making sense.

Or rather, Harry stopped counting.

Harry was the one who ended it, and fuck, if the universe - if Louis - won’t let him forget it.
Louis vividly remembers the first time he thought he loved Harry. It was in a platonic way - their relationship didn’t transform into more until ten months later - but Louis recalls how safe he felt, how much he enjoyed Harry’s company, how very right it felt to be sitting in the passenger’s seat of Harry’s beat up old sedan, like they’d been friends all along.

They’d just gone out to a crappy Italian restaurant just off campus, Louis claiming he needed a meatball sub with extra provolone cheese, and once they were back in the car, Louis mindlessly tapped his fingers against the armrest to the beat of the music, humming.

“So glad I don’t have any studying to do tonight,” he said out loud, more to himself than to Harry. “Feels fucking good.”

Harry laughed. “Wish I could say the same.”

“What’ve you got to do?”

“I have an exam first thing in the morning for my business class.”

“Wanna head back, then? So you can get some studying in?”

Harry shrugged. “Dunno. It’s nice to drive around. And you’re decent company.”

Louis faked a gasp. “Decent? I’m wounded, Styles.”

“Your ego doesn’t need to be much bigger.”

“True.” He changed the radio station, settling on a pop rock station. “I can help you study, if you want.”

He laughed, stopping at a red light. “I’ve watched you study before. It’s a process. Your attention span is nothing to brag about.”

“Excuse you, who just got a 94 on their last exam, hm?”

Harry bit back another smile. “Alright, fine. We’ll head back.”

“Good. Take a left. That’s the fastest way home.”

“Okay.” Harry smirked as he took a right, and they spent another 40 minutes in the car, laughing at terrible jokes, Louis shrieking mericlessly when Harry almost swerved into oncoming traffic, and it was mostly a non-eventful hang out, but that was when Louis decided that yes, he loved that boy. He never once doubted it, not for a single day, not even during their past year together.

Whenever Louis looks back on the past several months, he feels like he’s watching a movie of someone else’s life, not his own, not the one he built with his best friend. It’s like he’s yelling at the people on the screen to say something, do anything, but they both stayed silent, walking around on eggshells until one of them inevitably broke.

The first one was Harry, and Louis couldn’t blame him.

He knew he was stubborn and impossible to deal with. He watched the way Harry tried to break their cycle and he resisted, in complete denial that they were slipping, that they weren’t, in fact,
unbreakable. And he tried for months to come up with the words to say, to tell Harry that he hated it, hated all of it, missed him even when he was in bed beside him, but the fear nearly ate him alive.

Louis loved Harry in a way that was fierce, palpable, demanding, and for every ounce that Louis put into it, Harry loved him just as much, just as hard. There was never a moment that Louis questioned how they felt about each other, always felt secure. It’s why their destruction was slow and aching. It took time for Louis to get in his own head about it, to fight with himself instead of taking it out on Harry. But as the days ticked by, the chaos in Louis’ head, combined with the resistance in Harry’s demeanor is what got to Louis. He’s not proud of the way he panicked and turned away, and all he can do is blame it on the suffocating panic that enveloped him.

*What if Harry wanted out. What if everything had changed too much. What if, what if, what if.*

Fear makes for crazy, irrational behavior. It’s the reason Louis spent his nights holed up at the library instead of going home to talk with Harry, to figure it out one day at a time. It’s the reason he took on extra hours at the restaurant even when he was already splitting 80 hours a week between school, his internship, and his job, just so he didn’t have to think. It’s the reason he pretended to be asleep when Harry got up before him. He didn’t know what to say, anyway.

He knew, deep down, that Harry would have done anything to save them, but Louis let his own mind get the best of him, and by the point he was ready to face it, to admit there was a problem, Harry was packed and out the door, obviously and understandably worn down.

Louis didn’t do anything to stop him, pit in the bottom of his stomach, brain screaming *You should have known, you should have prepared.* And after that, Louis shut off completely, pushing Harry away at every chance he could get, no matter how hard Harry tried, no matter how much Louis wanted to break down.

“It’s just easier to be mad,” he admits on the beach, Harry staring at him so intently, Louis feels like he might burst. “I feel like I’m always mad.”

And the way Harry nods, demeanor softening, telling Louis he’s sorry, he’s so sorry, makes Louis’ shoulders slump. He believes him. He believes he’s sorry, believes he wants all of this to be over. It’s easy to trust him; *everything* has always been so easy with Harry. Even these past few days in paradise when this entire situation should have been horrible and uncomfortable, it’s felt natural and genuine. And that's the problem, isn't it.

Louis has loved Harry every day since that night in the car, loving him as simple as breathing. Now if only he could figure out how to make it stop.

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**DAY SIX | WEDNESDAY**

Louis wakes up the morning after the hospital trip feeling less agitated than he’s felt in days - months, even. Other than the ache in his heel and calf from the jellyfish sting, he’s feeling better about the upcoming week. He’d been dreading this trip since the day Liam announced he was engaged, the dread only growing as his personal life plummeted, but now that he and Harry have silently called a truce, he feels significantly more relaxed.

He tried *so hard* over the past few days to push Harry out of the way, to not be affected by their current situation or the way Harry’s been staring at him and touching him. It feels too comfortable, too normal, and that’s a bad sign. He keeps having flashbacks to the way Harry looked on his knees in front of Louis in his hotel room, desperate to get Louis off, to prove something, everything, and Louis has stopped trying to pretend it didn’t happen. He’s crumbling quicker than
he thought he would, and what’s worse is that he doesn’t care. He’s weak, he’s losing, and he’s ready to brace himself for the inevitable impact when he hits rock bottom all over again.

How can someone continue to break when they’re already completely shattered?

Louis changes the bandage on his foot with a round of cursing under his breath, and once he’s in the shower, he twists his leg out of the spray to avoid the sting. He looks ridiculous, he’s sure, half of his body out of the tub to keep the bandages dry, and when he accidentally drops the shampoo bottle onto his functioning foot, he swears loudly, an impressive string of curse words leaving his mouth for the second time that morning. But today is Spa Day - which he’d initially teased Liam mercilessly for - and the idea of doing absolutely nothing for the next several hours sounds so appealing, he’s willing to hobble on his useless feet the entire way there.

The group is waiting for him in the lobby of the resort, Moriah instantly reaching out to ask how his foot is, a nearly devastated look on her face.

“I’m fine, God, you don’t have to coddle me,” he says, rolling his eyes.

“Yeah, don’t coddle him, he’s brave and hardly cried at all,” Harry says.

“Okay, rude.”

Liam and Annie start to lead the group out the door, Louis trailing in the back, but stops short when Harry grabs his elbow.

“For real, how are you doing?”

Louis bites back his smirk, almost breaking at how concentrated and serious Harry looks. “So much for not coddling.”

“I’m just making sure.” Harry looks down at Louis’ calf and winces. “I hate how that looks.”

“It’s mostly bandaged…”

“Yeah, well, I don’t like the bandage.”

Louis snorts. “You’re fine. I’m fine. Let’s go sit in a sauna for two hours.”

“Human prunes. Let’s do it.”

They don’t head to the sauna, but instead, Liam shoves them off in the direction of their couple’s massage. Louis makes a face, groaning.

“This is so cheesy, Liam. When have I ever voiced that I’ve wanted to get a couple’s massage?”

Liam shrugs. “Maybe they’ll be able to work on your tight ass personality.”

“Funny.”

Niall snorts. “I thought so.”

“Anyway,” Liam says, smirking, obviously pleased with himself, “you and Harry are up first. And
then you two have reserved time in the salt caves. It’s supposed to be great for your skin.”

“Great, because I’m so into skincare.”

“Can you not be sarcastic for, like, six seconds?!”

Louis smiles. “Probably not.”

He and Harry venture toward the changing rooms, slipping into the most plush and comfortable robe Louis has ever worn. It must read all over his face because Harry sighs.

“Don’t even think about it,” he scolds.

“What?!” Louis asks.

“We’re not stealing the robes.”

“I would never,” he fake gasps.

“Louis.”

“I mean, I’m not entirely opposed…”

“Jesus,” Harry says, rolling his eyes. “Have you no morals?”

“It’s a really nice robe, Harry.”

“They’re gonna blacklist you from this spa.”

“When am I ever going to come back here?”

“Not the point,” Harry laughs. “C’mon.”

They make their way down the hall together, Louis trailing behind Harry, and when they reach the room, Louis somehow already feels relaxed. The combination of the dimmed lighting, scented candles, and soft music is cheesy but working, and Louis can’t wait to have the tension physically pushed out of his shoulders.

A masseuse makes her way into the room and directs them to undress and hang up their robes on the back of the door. “When you’re ready, you can pick a table and lay face down under the sheet,” she instructs.

“Great, thank you,” Harry says, and when the door closes behind her, he turns to Louis, raising his brows.


“Go on, get undressed.”

“Not with you staring at me!”

Harry puts his hands on his hips. “I’ve seen you naked, like, several thousand times.”

“Very different scenario.”
“I saw you naked two nights ago,” he continues.

Louis crosses his arms across his chest. “Can we not?”

“Think we already did.”

“Don’t be cute with me.”

Harry smirks. “You think I’m cute?”

“Ugh.” He groans. “Get under the damn sheet.”

He scrunches up his nose, clearly doing his best not to smile, and failing at it. “Yes, sir.”

Louis licks his lips when Harry turns around, pulling his robe off, followed by his briefs, and Louis does his best not to watch the way Harry’s back muscles roll as he moves. Harry climbs up onto the table, laying down on his chest.

“Okay, your turn,” Harry says, his face in the hole. “Hop to it.”

Louis rolls his eyes. “Don’t look.”

“I’m staring at the Goddamn floor, Louis.”

“Whatever.” He undresses quickly, taking a selfish moment to steal a look at the way Harry is sprawled out on the table, sheet pulled up to his waist. He looks like he always does first thing in the morning, asleep on his stomach and taking up most of their bed. Louis exhales loudly as he climbs onto his own table, arranging himself so he’s comfortable, putting his face in the hole.

They’re both quiet, waiting for the masseuses. Louis wiggles his hips around, antsy, pretty sure the meditation music is on repeat. It’s starting to get annoying.

“Hey, Lou.”

Louis taps his fingers against his bare thigh. “Yes?”

“Was the last time you had a massage the time I almost killed you?”

He bursts out laughing, wasn’t expecting that. “Fuck, I think it was.”

“I still swear it wasn’t my fault,” Harry says, laughing, too.

“Sure, sure.”

“Do you really want to have this argument again?!”

“Yes. I do.”

“Louis, it’s been six years!”

Louis laughs again, staring at the floor, trying to keep it together when someone knocks on the door. “It doesn’t feel like it’s been six years, though,” he whispers when the maussesses enter.

“No, it doesn’t,” Harry whispers back.

Probably because they’ve talked about it so much, retold the story so many times. And it always ends with Louis saying, “How did you not know?!” and Harry fighting back with, “When would
that have ever come up?!”

They’d only been dating for about two months, just long enough for Louis’ final semester at school to pick up, and he spent the majority of the first week of December obnoxiously complaining about his workload, convinced his professors were out to kill him. Harry offered to help him study almost every night, but Louis pushed him away, saying he needed to do it alone.

“You’re too stressed,” Harry said on Wednesday night from Louis’ bed. “What can I do to help you relax?”

“Cancel my next six exams.”

“I don’t think I can do that.”

“Okay, then nothing. Just keep sitting there, looking pretty, eating French fries in my bed.”

Harry smirked. “Okay, then.”

By Friday, though, Louis was at wit’s end, ready to pull his hair out or scream or both, needing just an hour of nothing, and unfortunately, he knew that wouldn’t be happening anytime soon. He had a weekend packed with plans to study until his brains turned to mush, telling Harry he wasn’t available to hang out, and when Harry protested, telling Louis how he hated how stressed out he was, Louis replied over the phone with, “Christmas break is soon. Then I’m all yours.”

And he really thought Harry was listening, was obeying Louis’ wishes, but then he walked into his apartment bedroom to find Harry standing there, smug, candles lit around the room.

Louis dropped his backpack on the floor, rolling his eyes. “What the hell is this.”

“I didn’t want to wait until Christmas to get you to myself,” he answered with a shrug. “Figured a massage would be nice. You’re a walking stress ball.”

“Harry, I don’t have time for this. I have so much work to do…”

“I know. Just 30 minutes. Please?” Harry cocked his head to the side, gesturing to an array of lotions on Louis’ desk. “I made lotion!”

Louis snorted. “You made lotion?!”

“Yes.”

“You’re pleased with yourself, aren’t you.”

“Yes.”

He laughed. “Okay, 15 minutes. But then I really have to study. Deal?”

Harry smiled. “Deal.”

Louis pulled off his sweatshirt, leaving his chest bare, and as he climbed onto his twin sized bed, he mumbled against the comforter, “Honestly, weirdest human I’ve ever met, begging to massage me.”

“I’m doing this for my own sanity,” Harry replied from behind him, the mattress sagging under his weight. “You’ve been miserable and I’m starting to hate you. I’m hoping that I’ll be able to rub the tension out of you.”
“You know sex usually works for stress relief, too, right.”

“Yeah, but I really wanted to try out the lotion.”

“Oh my God,” Louis snorted. “Alright, kid, your 15 minutes starts now.”

“I’m admiring the view first.”

“You’ve been admiring the view for about a year. It’s nothing new.”

Harry put his hands on Louis’ ass and squeezed. “I like to ogle.”

“You’re losing time, Styles…”

“Okay, sorry.” He straddled Louis, sitting on his ass, and Louis could almost hear the smirk when he said, “Perfect seat.”

“You’re annoying.”

Harry rubbed his hands up and down Louis’ back, humming. “Nice back, baby.”

“Thanks, I grew it myself.”

He laughed, starting to work the lotion into Louis’ skin, pausing slightly. “Okay, you’re right, we should have just had sex.”

“Too late. Keep rubbing. I’m into this now.” He sighed, letting his eyes slip shut. “And I admit defeat.”

Harry pushed his palms flat in between Louis’ shoulder blades. “With what?”

“Life. Whatever you want from now on, just take it.”

He snorted, pressing his hands down harder. “This good?”

“Ridiculously.”

Harry worked his hands up and down Louis’ back silently, sliding easily from the lotion, working meticulously on a knot on Louis’ left shoulder. And Louis tried three times to tell Harry that the time was up, but then Harry would press his thumbs at the bottom of Louis’ spine or rub that spot just under his neck and it felt so good that Louis couldn’t be bothered to pretend that he cared about his exams.

Louis lost track of time, melting like putty under Harry’s touch, but then, suddenly, he was hot. Really hot. Unnaturally hot.

“Harry, I’m hot,” he complained. “My whole back is hot.”

“Your everything is hot,” Harry answered, voice hushed. “Never wanna take my hands off of you.”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying.” Louis wiggled his hips, urging Harry to get off. “Fuck, my back is on fire.”

“What?” He climbed off, hands still on Louis’ back. “What’s wrong?”

“Is my back red?” Louis asked, sitting up, wincing.
“Yeah, but I’ve been rubbing it for the past half hour.”

He rolled his shoulders, skin stinging. “Fuck. My entire back feels tight. And itchy.”

Harry bit down on his bottom lip, staring. “Actually, now that I’m really looking…”

“What?” Louis twisted around to try to get a glimpse, groaning.

“Lou, it looks like hives.”

“Hives?! What’s in that lotion?!”

Harry dragged his hands through his hair, frowning. “I dunno. Water, cucumber, coconut oil–”

“No! That’s the scent. Smells good, right?”

“Harry.” Louis took off in the direction of the bathroom, silently praying that he had some

Benadryl on hand. “I’m allergic to cucumber.”

“What?!” Harry followed him. “Are you serious?!”

“No, I’m kidding, and these hives just magically fucking appeared.”

“Louis! You never told me that!”

Louis started digging in the medicine cabinet, checking each pill bottle. “When was I supposed to

naturally bring that up?!”

“I don’t know! We’ve been friends for over a year! I thought I knew everything about you at this

point!”

“Well, apparently I’m full of wonderful surprises. Help me find Benadryl.”

Harry nodded, eyebrows knit together. “Is this, like, a life or death situation? Should I call for an

ambulance?”

He snorted, shaking his head, still rummaging through the cabinet. “No, it’s just really

uncomfortable. Christ, fuck, it itches so much.”

“Baby, I’m so sorry,” Harry pleaded. “I had no idea! Oh my God.”

“You’ll be forgiven once I’m medicated.” Louis successfully pulled out a bottle of Benadryl -

shockingly not expired - and popped three into his mouth before he leaned into the sink, drinking

directly from the faucet to wash them down. He looked up at Harry, immediately bursting into

laughter when he saw the look on his face. “I’m fine. I promise. I’m not mad. You didn’t know.”

“But your back,” he mumbled, smoothing his thumb across the crinkles in corner of Louis’ eye. “I

feel so bad.”

“Don’t.”

Harry nodded, dropping his hand to his side. “Do you want me to go get anything?”

“Like what?”
“I don’t know. Get aloe vera or something. Or tea. Isn’t that supposed to help? Like a tea bath? Or an oatmeal bath? I’ll get a cold compress. That’ll work, right?”

Louis blinked slowly. “Anything else?”

“Do you want me to pick up some dinner? Pizza from that place you love?”

“You hate it there.”

“Doesn’t matter.” He pursed his lips together. “Pepperoni?”

He shook his head, smirking. “It’s hives, Harry, not the bubonic plague.”

“But--”

“Thank you for the massage.” Louis stood up on his tiptoes and pressed a kiss to Harry’s temple, effectively shutting him up. “You’re… one of the best things in my life.”

He watched as the blush crept up Harry’s neck, onto his cheeks. “Yeah?”

“Mhm.” He wasn’t usually as honest or candid with Harry, still learning how to accept similar compliments from Harry over the past several weeks himself, but the look on Harry’s face was pitiful and Louis needed Harry to know that he was falling for him, absolutely crazy about him, even if it took him a little longer to get there. “I don’t think anyone cares about me as much as you do.”

Harry scrunched up his face, trying to hide his smile. “I’d say you’re right about that.”

He paused, rubbing his hand across his jaw. “You wanna kiss me?”

“I always do.”

“Go for it,” Louis said, cocking his head to the side, letting Harry pull him into a kiss. And it had taken some time to get over the weirdness factor of being kissed by his best friend, but now, that was the last thing on his mind. Harry stroked his thumbs across Louis’ cheekbones as he deepened the kiss, pushing in further, and Louis let him, still in disbelief that Harry was able to figure out exactly how he liked to be kissed in that hallway two months ago, and on the very first try.

He pulled back after a moment or two, Harry dropping his forehead to Louis’, and he sighed. “Why am I only one of the best things in your life? Shouldn’t I be the best?”

Louis stepped back and shrugged, relieved that the sting in his back was finally dying down some. “My mom is. She’d never try to poison me with cucumber.” He patted Harry on the head. “Don’t worry, babe, you’re a close second.”

Now, six years later, Louis is happy to let a professional take the lead, eyes closed as she rubs the tension out of his shoulders and lower back, the oil slick and warm. She kneads at a knot, and he hums contently, doing his best not to laugh just thinking about the way Harry had looked when he honest to God thought he’d almost just killed Louis, death by cucumber.

The 90 minutes go by faster than Louis imagined it would, and he sits up carefully, slightly dizzy, body sagging. Harry looks just as disoriented, hair a mess and flying in every direction. He smiles when he catches Louis staring at him.

“You look relaxed.”
Louis nods. “I feel like I could take a six-hour nap.”

His masseuse laughs lightly. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.” She points to two glasses of ice water on the table. “We’ve left behind some water for each of you. It’s important to rehydrate after a massage. So take your time getting dressed, and we’ll meet you in the lobby to lead you down to the salt cave.”

“Thank you,” Louis says before she steps out, and the second she closes the door behind her, Harry nearly snorts from trying not to laugh.

“Lou, oh my God.”

“What?” He follows Harry’s gaze. “What’s so funny about a glass of water…”

“Do you see what’s in the water?”

“No? What is it.” Louis climbs off his table, dragging his sheet behind him, and peers into the glass. “For fuck’s sake, is that cucumber?”

Harry lays flat down on his table, nearly shaking from laughter. “We’ve come full circle.”

Louis starts laughing so hard that he can barely grip the glass to hand off to Harry, and it feels so good to laugh, so good to laugh with Harry.

As long as he doesn’t make it a habit, he’ll make it out alive.

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That first Christmas together was one of Louis’ favorites. He’d been cursed with a shitty birthday - Christmas Eve - and it was typically very difficult to round up any number of people to celebrate with him due to the holiday, but that year, Harry made it a priority, happily agreeing to spend the week at Louis’ house with him and his family. He tagged along as soon as finals were over, hopping into Louis’ passenger seat, tossing his duffel bag in the backseat.

“You sure you don’t mind not being with your family for Christmas?” Louis asked as he turned the heat up. “I feel bad. You were just saying the other day how you hadn’t seen them in months and missed them.”

Harry shook his head. “Nope. I’ll head there January 2nd. I want to be with you this week.”

“I won’t feel bad if you back out. I swear.”

“Okay, do you not want me to come?”

Louis looked over at Harry. “I just want to make sure you’re comfortable with it.”

“Since when have you ever cared about making sure I’m comfortable with stuff? Last week you slept on my arm the entire night and every time I tried to move it, you growled.”

He smirked. “Yeah, so?”

“And a few months ago, you printed out a picture of my bare ass and hung it up around my dorm for everyone on campus to see.”

“I didn’t do that…”

“You signed it.”
Louis put the car into drive. “And not *everyone* on campus. Just the people who happened to check
the bulletin boards in your hall.”

“Actually, I don’t want to come. You can drop me off back at my dorm.”

He laughed, leaning over to squeeze Harry’s cheek. “You’re a good sport.”

Harry grabbed Louis by the wrist, holding it tight, and pressed a quick kiss to the back of his hand.
“You’re just lucky you’re hot.”

“Flattery will get you anywhere.”

Over the past year, Harry had met Louis’ family a couple of times, but never for anything longer
than a conversation or two in passing. This was the first time he’d be spending any real time with
them, but Louis wasn’t nervous. One of Harry’s most frustrating qualities is that everyone seemed
to like him, regardless of the circumstances or situation. His personality radiated positive energy,
and no matter who he was talking to, he tended to form connections and relationships with them.
At first, Louis found it endearing, in disbelief that Harry could put his all into everyone and
everything, but as time went on, Louis decided it was more obnoxious than anything.

“You don’t have to be jealous,” Harry teased as he dropped his bag in the entrance of Louis’ home.
“You know you’re still my number one priority.”

“I am not jealous,” he scoffed. “I’m annoyed that everyone thinks you’re so fucking fabulous.”

“Aw, baby.” Harry nudged him with his elbow. “Maybe one day you’ll be on my level and
everyone will love you as much as they love me.”

“Ew, I hate you.”

“You’re the only one. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m about to go charm the pants off your mom.
Again.”

“She didn’t like you last time. She told me.”

Harry raised his brows, smirking. “I think your pants are on fire.”

“Fuck off.”

And Louis could pretend all he wanted that he was annoyed by Harry cleverly winning over Louis’
entire family in a matter of minutes, but how could he actually be? Harry wasn’t putting on an act.
He was always genuine, being nothing but himself, and when Louis’ mom pulled him aside after
dinner and said, “Harry is even more lovely than I remember him being,” all Louis could do was
nod along and say, “He’s incredible.”

It was an understatement, but Louis was overwhelmed that he got to experience Harry firsthand,
watching him chase his sisters around the house, and he didn’t know how to adequately voice how
fortunate he felt to have his best friend beside him, absolutely crazy about each other.

How had Louis never seen it before? Harry hadn’t been shy in the past few months about how
much he’d wanted Louis, how it felt agonizing watching him date other people, and Louis felt *stupid* for being so blind to it. Last year, Harry begged Niall to trade for Louis in their group Secret
Santa, and when Louis found out, he’d just thought it was funny, never thinking Harry had an
ulterior motive or that it meant Harry wanted to give him a heartfelt present, something meaningful. Over the spring, Louis had a nasty cold, and Harry spent the weekend hunkered down with him in his apartment, layering him in blankets and attempting to make a pot of homemade chicken noodle soup before eventually calling it quits, ordering sandwiches from the shop down the street. And then in August, Louis introduced his date Jack to Harry at the bar the first weekend back to school, and Louis couldn’t figure out for the life of him why Harry’s smile had dropped the second Jack held out his hand to shake.

But now that he knew, he wasn’t going to take it for granted. He wanted to keep Harry all to himself, regardless of all the other people who seemed to love Harry just as much as he did. And God, did he love him. He hadn’t said it yet - Harry hadn’t, either - but he knew it, he could feel it in his bones every time he so much as looked at Harry, creeping up on him and knocking him down before he knew what was happening. And it was painfully obvious they’d begun omitting _love you_ from casual conversations, something that had been present in the past, because now it had new meaning. But Louis welcomed it, was so excited to be a part of it. Their transition from best friends to _this_ had been a seamless trade, and Louis wasn’t sure how it worked so well, but he felt impossibly lucky. No, it didn’t take long at all for Louis to fall for Harry completely and entirely, all consuming, and now that he’d reached this point, he couldn’t believe it had taken so long in the first place.

He spent his birthday surrounded by his family, Harry doting on him to embarrassing measures, and when he blew out his candles, his sisters clapped, his mom kissed him on the cheek, and Harry squeezed his leg, whispering, “Best Christmas Eve.”

Louis agreed.

Long after everyone else had gone to bed and Louis and Harry helped Santa sort out the presents under the tree, just the two of them remained in the kitchen, Louis licking the frosting off his finger from leftover cake, swinging his legs back and forth from his position on the counter. Harry sipped mindlessly at his coffee as he leaned against the cabinets, blowing the steam from the mug.

“You’re never going to go to sleep if you drink all of that,” Louis said.

Harry shrugged, taking another sip. “Caffeine is necessary to keep up with this family.”

“Very true.” He took another bite of cake, looking at the clock. 1:18. “The little girls wake up super early on Christmas morning. Like, five o’clock.”

“Yikes.”

“Think you’re ready?”

“Think we might as well just stay up.”

Louis laughed, nodding. “I think you’re right. Oh, hey. By the way.” He motioned for Harry to take a step closer to him, and he obeyed immediately, setting his mug down on the counter beside Louis. “Thank you for being so good with them.”

“Who? Your sisters? It’s impossible _not_ to be good with them. They’re amazing. I got a glimpse of it last time they visited you at school but now that I’ve had some actual time with them, I can really tell how incredible they are. Your whole family, actually.”

He placed his hand on Harry’s shoulder, giving him a firm squeeze. “My mom basically said the same thing earlier to me about you.”
Harry smiled. “That’s good to hear.”

Louis pulled him in closer, sliding his hand up into Harry’s hair. He twisted the curls around his fingers. “You’re in my mom’s kitchen.”

“I am,” he agreed.

He played with Harry’s hair for another moment or two, Harry’s gaze unwavering, before Louis pulled Harry in between his legs, wrapping both his arms around Harry’s shoulders. “I’m really happy you’re here.”

“Likewise,” he agreed.

“C’mere.”

“Yeah,” Harry whispered, slipping his own hands down Louis’ sides, holding his waist as their lips slotted together. He tasted like coffee and felt pliant under Louis’ touch, and Louis couldn’t believe his boy was here with him, kissing him like he’d been missing him. He was the first boy Louis ever brought home, and when Harry dragged his hands up to cup Louis’ jaw, brushing his thumbs across Louis’ stubble, Louis vaguely thought about how he wanted Harry to be the only, the last.

He pulled back after a minute or two, pressing his forehead against Harry’s. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the Christmas tree lights twinkling, an array of colorful wrapping paper beneath it, and Louis felt so warm, even with the cold marble countertop under him.

He closed his eyes as Harry touched Louis’ bottom lip, kissing below his ear, hands sliding back down to Louis’ thighs. He let Harry work for a moment, then: “Harry?”

“Lou,” he whispered back, breath hot against his neck.

Exhale. “I’m in love with you.”

Harry jolted back instantly, but his hands remained firm on Louis’ legs, holding on impossibly tight. “Can you say that again?”

Louis smiled, doing a miserable job at holding it back. “I’m in love with you.”

Louis watched Harry’s throat move as he swallowed heavily. “Did you know,” he whispered, “that I’ve been trying to imagine what those words would sound like coming out of your mouth for about a year?”

He could feel the blush rising up his neck, onto his cheeks. “No, I didn’t know that.”

Harry shook his head slightly before he murmured, “You have no idea how much I love you.” His voice was too quiet next to the steady hum of the refrigerator, his smile crooked and just for Louis, and when Harry kept looking at him in a way that Louis had seen hundreds of times over the past year or so, Louis was in disbelief that he somehow never caught onto what the look meant.

Louis didn’t know what else to say - didn’t think Harry needed more words, either - and when they kissed again, he mentally kicked himself for wasting so much time together, for being so oblivious. But then Harry’s hands were in his hair and his lips were against his jaw, whispering words that made Louis’ stomach pull tight, and he was pretty sure nothing before this moment existed, anyway.

Nothing mattered but this.
After Spa Day is over, the group have a quiet dinner before retreating back to their rooms for the night. Liam trails behind them, and when he stops at his door to unlock it, he makes eyes at Louis and Harry.

“Good night, boys,” he says, “don’t forget we share a wall.”

“Oh. Right.” Harry looks at Louis. “Because this is my room, too.”

Louis sighs. “Yup. Come on in.” He pushes the door open, letting Harry slip past him before he follows. Just before he lets it shut behind him, he hears Liam mumble to Annie, “That was weird.”

They stand there awkwardly for a minute, Louis shifting his weight from his left foot to his right, waiting for the sound of Liam’s door closing before he can shoo Harry away. He looks up to see Harry already staring back.

“Today was fun,” Harry says.

He hums. “I especially liked the chocolate covered fruit they kept forcing us to eat.”

“I figured that was your favorite part. Remember that Valentine’s Day that I ordered a dozen chocolate dipped strawberries for you and they sent you 12 dozen instead? Took me, like, three months to pay that off.”

Louis smiles, looking down at the floor, making a face at the sheer volume of clothing strewn across the carpet. It’s been less than a week; how. “Yeah, uh. You’re probably good to go back to your room now.”

“Oh. Yeah, of course.” Harry shrugs. “See you in the morning.”

“Yup.” He grips the doorknob and pulls it open, peeking into the hallway. “Coast is clear, Styles.”

“Alright. Sleep well.” He pushes by Louis quickly, their arms brushing together, and as Harry makes his way down the hall, Louis refuses to watch him walk away.

**DAY SEVEN | THURSDAY**

Thursday morning is hot. Louis can tell it’s going to be an unbearable afternoon on the water before he’s even fully out of bed, grimacing at the way the sunlight nearly pierces his eyes. He gets dressed quickly, shaking the leftover sand off of his red bathing suit, slipping into a tank top and grabbing his sunglasses before he’s out the door.

Harry’s, surprisingly, waiting for him at the end of the hall in a green bathing suit with his sweatshirt draped over his arm, holding a banana in one hand, apple in the other. He holds them both out, a silent question.

“This isn’t as good as the waffles, you know,” Louis teases lightly, reaching for the banana. “Also, standing at the end of the hall like this is very *The Shining* of you.”

“That was my goal.”

“Why didn’t you just meet me out on the beach?”

Harry shrugs. “Would’ve been weird if we showed up separately, no?”
“True, I guess,” he replies, mouth full of banana, coughing.

“That’s hot.”

Louis snorts, taking another bite. “Shut up.”

They walk down to the beach in silence, and they find the rest of the group easily. Everyone is already out there waiting for them, including Liam’s parents, which Louis is happy to see. All week, they’ve mostly kept to themselves, so he’s glad to see them chatting amongst Annie’s brothers, obviously comfortable and happy to be here. Liam’s dad perks up when he spots Louis and Harry heading toward them and pats Louis on the back when he gets close enough.

“ Heard about the jellyfish,” Geoff says, shaking his head. “Nasty creatures.”

“Eh, it’s alright,” Louis replies, holding up his leg. “Doing much better.”

“That’s good to hear. Wouldn’t want you to miss out on the yacht or jet skis!”

His eyes go wide at that. “Oh, for sure. Hey, Liam.”

Liam looks over from his conversation with some of the other groomsmen. “What’s up?”

He grabs him by the elbow and pulls him aside. “What the hell,” he whispers, making sure Geoff can’t hear him. “A yacht?”

Liam shrugs. “When in Rome.”

“Okay, but this isn’t Rome. Liam, I don’t mean to sound distasteful but when did you start crapping money?”

He laughs. “Courtesy of my parents. We wouldn’t let them pay for much of the wedding so they obviously found a way around that.”

“You are such a spoiled brat.”

“You’re about to be, too. Food and drinks and a day on the sea. Don’t even pretend you’re annoyed by it.”

Louis scoffs, but he has to admit, it sounds incredible. “Hope you have Dramamine, though.” He gestures to Harry behind him without giving it a second thought. “You know how seasick he gets.”

He nods, pointing to his backpack on the ground. “Already thought of it. Plus sunscreen.”

“What a good mom you are.”

“I try.”

Louis situates himself in between Harry and Niall on the boat, the deck filled with the rest of Liam and Annie’s family and friends, and the Payne’s certainly outdid themselves. Louis is completely out of his element, the yacht lavish and ridiculous, Geoff handing out drinks as if he’s the Goddamn captain himself. And then he puts on a captain’s hat and Louis can’t help but laugh.
They take off toward the horizon slowly, all chatting amongst each other easily, and after about 30
minutes, Louis can’t stand the way the breeze keeps whipping Harry’s hair around and into Louis’
face. He bats it out of his eyes, nudging Harry away from him, and he can tell Harry is rolling his
eyes from behind his sunglasses.

“Can you relax, please?” Harry says. “It’s hair, it’s not gonna kill you.”

“It’s annoying. Just put it up, Harry.”

“It’s basically a giant knot at this point. Not much I can do about it now.”

“Ugh.” Louis reaches for the elastic permanently on Harry’s wrist and pulls it off. “Turn around. I
can’t have your hair flying into my mouth all day.”

Harry obeys instantly and shrugs, tipping his head back slightly. “At least it’s clean.”

“That’s not the point.” He works Harry’s hair up into a bun quickly, fingers getting caught in the
tangles, Harry wincing, and he ignores the way Niall is snickering from behind him. “Shut up,
Horan.”

“You are truly whipped,” he says, “the both of you are.”

“Shut up, Horan,” Louis repeats, but this time, Harry says it at the same time.

And the rest of the day goes pretty much the same.

Louis is doing his best to convince himself that the small details mean nothing, that they’re for the
eyes of everyone else around them, anyway, but as it turns out, the tiny things are what’s getting to
him the most. Harry doesn’t ask him before he grabs him a beer, pulling Louis’ favorite kind from
the cooler, sitting back down beside him with his hand resting comfortably on Louis’ knee. And
it’s not something that anyone would bat an eye at - it’s just a beer - but that’s the problem. It
doesn’t seem out of place. It’s something Harry has done hundreds of times, as if he’s moving on
autopilot. It’s almost like they’re playing house, Louis thinks, that’s all it is. That’s all it is. He
tries not to let his mind cloud with thoughts that would encourage his already overwhelming urge
to jump off the side of the fucking boat, but so far, he’s failing miserably.

By lunchtime, he and Harry have put on a show that no one really seems to be too interested in
other than Niall, based on his blatant staring and permanent smirk, the bastard. Louis lets Harry
brush the hair off his forehead, lets him drape his arm behind Louis’ shoulders, lets him take a
series of photos, lets him call him baby even when no one is really paying attention. And later,
when he can feel his back and shoulders start to burn from the sun, he makes a half assed attempt
at applying a second coat of sunscreen, but his arms can’t reach past his shoulder blades and he
gives up, frowning. Harry catches on quickly, though, and takes the sunscreen from Louis’ hands
and squeezes a liberal amount into his palms.

Louis lets his head hang forward and Harry smoothes his hands across his skin meticulously, the
sunscreen cool against his skin. It’s almost better than the message from yesterday, but he isn’t
about to admit that.

“Better,” Harry murmurs behind Louis’ ear. “Still gonna be pink tomorrow, though.”

Louis nods, chin still to his chest. “Thanks.”
They head out deeper into the water, clouds finally covering the majority of the sun, providing well needed coverage, but then the yacht picks up speed and the wind starts whipping like crazy. He rubs his hands together, ignoring the way his arms and chest are now covered in goosebumps.

“Seriously?” Harry asks, laughing. He drags his finger along Louis’ bicep. “The sun disappears and you start shaking like a leaf.”

“I am not shaking,” he snaps, more goosebumps popping up all along his thighs. “And I am not cold.”

Harry snorts, reaching under the seat beneath them, pulling out his bag. “Take it,” he says, handing his sweatshirt to Louis.

“No. We’re in Hawaii. I don’t need a sweatshirt.”

“Oh. Humor me.” He drapes it around Louis’ shoulders. “Just like the way you look in my clothes. It has nothing to do with the fact that you’re cold.”

Louis swallows, staring straight ahead at the horizon, can feel Harry’s eyes on him, anyway. “Right. Because I’m not cold. I just look nice in your stuff.”

“Exactly.”

He chews the inside of his cheek, tugging the sweatshirt tighter around him. “Thank you.”

“No problem.”

The sun comes back out just as they’re getting ready to take advantage of the jet skis, courtesy of the Payne’s. Louis carefully climbs down the ladder on the side of the yacht with his life vest tight around him - sans sweatshirt - excited to get moving. This particular jet ski is a two-seater - he and Harry will share - and he gets comfortable up front as Harry groans behind him.

“Wait, why do you get to drive?” he asks as he takes his seat. “Have you ever driven a jet ski before?”

“I don’t think it’s rocket science, Harry. I’m sure I’ll be able to figure it out.”

“Don’t you need a boating license to drive one now?”

“What’s your point.”

“You don’t have one.”

Louis looks over his shoulder. “And you do?”

Harry frowns. “I mean. No.”

“Great.” He turns around again, staring out at the rolling waves in front of them. “And I’m driving because I won’t be able to see over you if I’m in back.”

He snorts, putting his hand on Louis’ waist, sliding closer so they’re pressed flush together. “That’s fine. I’m very comfortable back here.”

“Yeah, seems like you’ve made yourself at home.”
Harry’s grip tightens. “You’ve got that right.”

Louis can’t think of anything to say to that, so instead, he works the throttle and takes off way too quickly, startling both of them, and once he has his heartbeat under control, he yells over the noise of the ocean, “I meant to do that.”

He laughs, hands gripping him even tighter. “Obviously.”

And suddenly, Louis can’t focus on anything other than the way Harry is laughing behind him, is sliding his hands down Louis’ forearms, is so close to Louis, he can probably hear his thoughts. He twists left through a wave, the spray drenching both of them, as if that’ll shock his brain into thinking rationally.

It doesn’t - now he’s just pissed off and soaked - and when he looks over his shoulder to get a glimpse of Harry, Harry is already smiling back, water dripping off his jaw and the ends of his hair, looking unfairly hot.

Louis counts to five under his breath before he can start moving again.

He isn’t sure if it’s the way Harry has been steadily pressed up against his back for the better part of an hour, if the heat is just really getting to him, if he’s just a complete and utter sap, or if he’s finally given up entirely, but about an hour after they got off the jet ski to have lunch back on the yacht, he ended up with Harry’s head on his lap, scratching his nails across Harry’s scalp, Harry’s eyes slipping shut. It took one pitiful look on Harry’s face - a look Louis has seen many times on planes, buses, and boats - for him to call out to Liam for Dramamine, get himself situated, and order Harry to lay down. Harry went willingly, face just the slightest shade of yellow and green, and he barely moved the rest of the afternoon into the evening, eventually falling asleep with his head on Louis’ thighs, breathing deep and even.

“It’s like putting a baby to sleep,” Louis jokes uncomfortably to Niall when he catches him staring, to which Niall responds with a suggestive look and a wave of his hand.

“At this point, the less I know, the better,” he says.

Louis looks down at his lap, at the mess of curls now undone from Harry’s bun. “There’s nothing to know.”

“Okay.” Niall cracks open another beer, sucking in his cheeks at Louis’ tone. “Sure.”

Harry doesn’t sleep much longer than that; he sits up a few minutes later, sheepish look on his face, grimacing when he rolls his shoulders.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to pass out.”

Louis shrugs. “It’s all good. Feeling better?”

He nods. “Yeah. We should be back on shore soon, though, right?”

“Should be,” he replies, confused when he sees Harry is staring at his chest. He absentmindedly touches his chest piece. “Something wrong?”
“No, just.” Harry sticks his hand out and drags his finger across Louis’ collarbone, pushing his sunglasses up on the top of his head, nothing to shield the way he’s staring at Louis’ face, eyes, unblinking. “Sunburned. I did a shitty job at reapplying earlier, I guess.”

He nods, clearing his throat. “And I forgot to give you Dramamine when we first got on. We’re even.”

Harry smirks, fingers still touching Louis’ skin. “Apparently.”

Louis feels frozen, opens his mouth to try to say something that isn’t complete nonsense, but Addy beats him to the punch.

“Oh my God, you guys,” she interrupts, groaning, “it’s been six years. It’s honestly disgusting.”

“What is?” Harry asks, finally ripping his eyes away from Louis, twisting to look at the rest of the group.

“The cute factor. It’s enough.”

Louis snorts. “Don’t look at us, then.”

“Believe me, I’m not trying to.”

Harry shrugs, lips quirked into a soft smile, gaze locking with Louis’ once more. “Kinda forgot she was here, to be honest.”

Louis sighs. “Kinda forgot anyone was here.”

“Yeah.” He moves in closer, hands uselessly dragging down the front of Louis’ chest, falling to Louis’ thighs and holding on. “Thanks for taking care of me.”

“You slept on my lap. I didn’t really have to do much.”

He presses his thumbs into the inside of Louis’ thighs, making him squirm. “Thank you.”

Louis bites down on his bottom lip, nodding. “Sure.”

Harry isn’t subtle about the way he’s staring at Louis’ lips, and Louis knows what Harry’s thinking, has seen that look thousands of times. He knows he should dismiss it, sit back, turn away, but he finds himself leaning in, instead, Harry meeting him the rest of the way, palms still hot against his thighs.

It’s a fleeting kiss, their lips just barely brushing together, but Louis thinks it feels the tiniest bit like relief, bittersweet nostalgia, thank you, I’m sorry. Harry tastes a bit like the spearmint gum Annie had forced him to chew to settle his stomach, exhaling sharply against Louis’ lips, and when Louis forces himself to pull back, his entire body tenses at the way Harry is looking at him, firm and unyielding.

“No, but seriously, you guys,” Addy says, “it’s enough.”

Liam laughs, Harry tries to hide his smile, and for the hundredth time that day, Louis has honestly forgotten that they’re not alone.

It’s dark out by the time they get back to shore and all Louis can think about is showering, washing
the ocean water off his skin, standing under the hot water until his thoughts are swept away.

The group trudges up the beach together, sand slipping beneath their feet, and when Niall grabs Louis’ shoulder, he stops walking.

“I keep forgetting you two aren’t actually together,” Niall mumbles. “You’re putting on quite the show.”

*Me, too,* he thinks. “Gotten better at acting, I suppose.”

“Could be. Or.” He shrugs.

Louis nods, sighing. “Yeah. Or.”

It feels awkward when he and Harry split to their own bedrooms for the night, feels like they shouldn’t be separating and Harry should be following him, complaining about the air conditioning being on too high or that he’s hungry and in desperate need of a second dinner. Instead, Louis shrugs out of his tank top, climbs into the shower’s spray, thinks about the way Harry looked at him on the boat after they kissed, thinks about how Harry had gripped him stupidly tightly from the back of the jet ski, and if Louis has to spend a little more time in the shower because of it, then no one needs to know.

It had been a shit day, this particularly freezing Denver day. Louis spent the morning holed up in the library cramming for an exam that he most definitely ended up failing later in the afternoon, he nearly got into a fist fight with that prick Alec from his three o’clock lab, and by the time he wrapped up work just shy of 9:30, he never wanted to look at another human again. The level of stupidity he’d dealt with all night was at an all-time high.

On his way to his car, his teeth chattering and hands shaking, he dialed Harry’s number, Harry picking up on the third ring.

“Hi, baby, are you on your way home?”

Louis climbed into his car, turning on the ignition and cursing when the vents blow out freezing cold air. “I need ice cream.”

“It’s, like, 17 degrees.”

“Thank you, weatherman.”

“And everything is closed.”

“Walmart has ice cream.”

“Okay, so, you’re gonna stop there on your way home? Hey, do you mind grabbing some paper towels, too? We’re out.”

Louis balanced the phone on his shoulder and rubbed his hands together. “Can you meet me there?”

“Why, did you forget where Walmart is? How tragic.”

“No,” he snapped. “I just want the company of the only person on this planet that I’m not actively
plotting to murder.”

“Bad day?” Harry laughed.

“Understatement.”

“Lou, I’m already in sweatpants and look like I haven’t showered in a week and I’m comfortable on the couch and it’s so cold outside…”

“Actually, I changed my mind. Your murder will be first.”

“Oh my God, the drama,” Harry said, laughing again.

“No. Bye.” He hung up the phone, Harry probably still making fun of him on the other line, and didn’t bother waiting for the windows to fully defrost before he backed out of his parking spot.

Grave mistake, he thought, as he drove directly into a parking meter.

His car was fine but it did nothing to improve his mood, leaving him extra irritated as he stormed into Walmart, slipping on the wet tile as he turned the corner for the freezer section.

He cursed under his breath, but stopped short in his tracks when he saw a certain someone with his head already inside the freezer, roll of paper towels under his arm. Louis walked over, shaking his head the whole time. “Um, excuse me, homeless man,” he said, tapping Harry on the shoulder.

Harry stepped back, letting the freezer door slam behind him. “I told you I looked like shit.”

“Yeah, what even are these clothes? This is low, Styles, even for Walmart.”

He laughed and held up a carton of ice cream in front of Louis’ face. “You sounded pitiful on the phone. Couldn’t make you shop alone. Surprised I beat you here, actually. You want rocky road, right?”

Louis tried to bite back his smile. “Maybe. I kinda want mint chocolate chip.”

“Sounds yummy. Especially since it’s the coldest day of the year so far.”

“Or death by chocolate.”

“More like death by holding a carton of ice cream in my bare hands in the middle of the winter.”

“And you call me a drama queen.” Louis cocked his hips, smirking. “Vanilla sounds good, too.”

“Nah. You’ve never been vanilla.”

“You’re right.” He backed up against the freezer door, the glass freezing against his neck, and Harry took a step forward, gaze unwavering. “What if I want all the ice cream?”

“Then I’ll get you all the ice cream,” he said seriously, playing along. “You want all the ice cream?”

Louis reached out to toy at the string of Harry’s sweatpants, the ugliest pair of sweatpants he had ever seen, for sure, and when Harry smiled, dimple poking out, Louis was positive he had never loved a single soul more than he loved the man in front of him. “Rocky road will do.”
“My original choice.”

“You know me well.”

Harry leaned forward to brush his lips against Louis’, his nose cold. “I do.”

Louis didn’t bother with a bowl when they got home; together, they dug in, making a sizeable dent, and when Louis shoved the carton away to let Harry attach his mouth to his collarbones, lips and tongue freezing, he had trouble remembering why today was so bad, anyway.

The little things.

The first week of the breakup, in typical stubborn Louis fashion, he pretended he wasn’t bothered by it, acted like it was business as usual. He didn’t want Harry to win; he’d already won too much. Instead, he pushed himself to the limit. He added even more hours to his already hectic work schedule, he joined a gym, he bought three gallons of light blue paint to make some changes he was actually in control of, to get rid of the yellow wall in the kitchen that he complained about for over a year, that Harry begged him not to alter.

“It’s such a happy wall,” he’d argue. “It’s like our kitchen is saying, ‘Good morning.’”

“It looks like pollen,” Louis would say back, “and if you think our kitchen walls are greeting you before work, maybe you should get some more sleep. Or stop drinking in the morning.”

“I don’t drink in the morning…”

“This conversation proves otherwise.”

By day 11, Louis caught himself slipping before he knew what was happening, was over acting like he wasn’t fazed by his current situation. He’d turn on Harry’s favorite movie, just because it felt safe, because he could almost hear Harry laughing beside him. He’d order pizza from that place down the block that Harry liked best but Louis hated - thin crust with arugula, olive oil, and bacon - and he’d already have plates and napkins out for two people before he realized what he was doing. He’d hang up all his shirts and sweatshirts on the right side of the closet, leaving ample room for a second wardrobe on the left side, even though there was no need for that anymore. It’s like he was subconsciously going through the movements of his relationship all by himself, and Christ, he thought the past six months were lonely, but they didn’t hold a candle to how it felt to come home to an empty apartment, no trace of Harry anywhere.

And then Harry showed up to collect the rest of his things. His eyes were swollen, his hands were restless against his sides, his movements proving to Louis that he, too, was unbearably uncomfortable. It should’ve made Louis feel better that they were in this together, but instead, it made him feel worse that they were going through it alone. He doesn’t remember much of that night, just being so irrationally angry and on edge and sad that he shut down, refused to talk, refused to listen. He couldn’t stand the way Harry was looking at him, the way his lips were cracked and chapped, the way his hair was pushed up into the messiest, frizziest bun Louis had ever seen. He wanted to fix everything, erase the hurt from Harry’s face, erase the sting in his own chest, but all he could come up with was, “I’ll box up the rest of your stuff and put it in the hallway when I’m done. Just go.” And that was it.
Louis spent a lot of time cleaning that first month, needing something to do with his hands that wasn’t reaching for his phone and calling the number he’d had memorized since his junior year of college. He had the carpet in the bedroom professional vacuumed, he polished the tiles in the kitchen, he rearranged the entire living room, he cleaned out the freezer and the medicine cabinet and the closet by the entryway three times over, doing his best not to flinch when he came across something of Harry’s. And it was a decent distraction, as if purging the apartment would cleanse his mind, but then every night, he laid there, staring at the ceiling, the queen sized mattress too big for one person.

*It’s 2:18 in the morning and I miss you more than ever.*

*It’s 2:43 in the morning and I miss you more than ever.*

*It’s 3:37 in the morning and I miss you more than ever.*

He didn’t get much sleep those first several weeks - or the weeks after that, to be frank - and he was pretty sure he looked like shit most of the time, dark circles under his eyes, whites bloodshot. Niall clearly took pity on him, dropping by multiple times a week.

“You good, Tommo?” he asked one Tuesday night. “Your fridge is nearly empty.”

Louis shrugged. “I’m good. I usually get breakfast to go and then a late lunch and so I don’t have to bother with dinner.”

“Alright, great.” Niall pursed his lips together. “You’re as shitty at lying as Harry is.”

He sucked in his cheeks, looking up at the ceiling. “Can we not? Please?”

“Yeah. Sorry.” He pointed to the TV. “Wanna watch a movie? Or play a video game, maybe?”

Louis didn’t say anything, just walked over to the couch and settled in, waiting for Niall to follow. He gestured toward the remote control. “Have at it.”

“Which one? Movie or video game?”

He stared ahead at nothing for a moment or two, swallowing. “What’s he lying about.”

“Huh?”

“Harry. What’s he lying about.”

“Oh.” Niall scratched his jaw, taking a seat beside him. “About doing okay.”

“He’s not?”

“What do you think, Lou. He’s an absolute mess.”

Louis pulled his knees up to his chest. “Fuck, shit,” he muttered under his breath. A part of him so badly wanted Harry to be as fucked up as he is, thought it would help, but hearing it just made his stomach hurt.

“Louis…”

“No. I don’t need you to lecture me, or, like.” He paused, pushing his hair out of his eyes. He can’t remember the last time he got a haircut. “Just tell me he’s okay so I can be okay.”
Niall nodded, reaching for the video game controller, unable to make eye contact. “He’s okay.”

“Thank you.” Louis picked up controller number two, holding down the on button. “And you think we’re bad at lying. Couldn’t have been a little more convincing than that?”

Louis never ended up repainting the kitchen. The cans remained unopened and the rollers and brushes stayed wrapped up in plastic. It felt like too much at once to get rid of it, and the more he stared at it, the more he decided he didn’t actually hate it as much as he thought he once did.

The yellow walls stayed.

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**DAY EIGHT | FRIDAY**

It’s rehearsal day and Louis is positively dreading it. The past year of planning has lead up to the next 36 or so hours, and he knows Liam is probably a basket case in the room next over. If anything goes wrong, Louis is going to be a dead man.

He starts off the morning by sending a bottle of champagne and French toast to their room, and he gets a call from Liam about half an hour later.

“Do you and Harry not discuss things ever? He just sent us the exact same breakfast. How did you manage to make separate calls from the same room without knowing?”

Louis scratches his jaw, making a face. “Guess he must’ve called when I was in the shower or something.”

“I’m not complaining. We’ve got two bottles of champagne now. Happy wedding weekend to us.”

And thank God for that champagne; by the time Louis gets to him about an hour later, Liam is nearly buzzing out of his skin.

“Maybe he should have had a drink,” Louis mumbles to Annie.

“He had half a bottle and he’s still this wound up.”

“Christ,” he laughs. “Should we try to sedate him?”

Annie rolls her eyes. “Yeah, good idea, let’s mix alcohol with pills. Smart thinking, Doctor.”

“Okay, shut up, I’m not a doctor yet.”

“I should hope so. I was there for the jellyfish sting. It’s like you lost all knowledge of any and all things medical and just… went limp.” She laughs. “And then cried.”

“Well, I won’t be working on myself when I'm a doctor.” He frowns. “Go away.”

She smirks. “You have to be nice to me. It’s wedding weekend. And then this hell is all over.”

Louis nods, looking over Annie’s shoulder, eyeing the way Harry is laughing with a few of the other groomsmen. “Yeah. Hell.”
It’s hot today, unusually hot, even for Hawaii. The rest of the week now seems laughably mild compared to the sun burning on Louis’ face and chest, shirt stuck to his back. He fans himself with his hands, which does next to nothing to cool him off, and gets in line to walk down the makeshift aisle to the altar.

“Why do I even have to practice walking in a straight line,” he asks out loud to no one in particular. “Believe it or not, I’ve been doing it pretty well for over 20 years.”

From behind him, Harry snorts. “What about the time we were leaving that bar and you swore you didn’t need me to hold your hand and then you almost walked into traffic?”

Louis puts his hands on his hips. “What’s your point, kid.”

“That you aren’t that good at walking in a straight line and maybe you do need the practice.”

“I was hammered! If I recall correctly, that night I also climbed over the bar and drank rum directly from the bottle!”

Harry laughs and wraps his arms around Louis’ shoulders, holding him up against his chest. “And then we were asked never to return.”

Louis squirms out of Harry’s grip, doing his best not to laugh, heart threatening to beat out of his chest. It’s the heat’s fault. “You should’ve been paying more attention to me. Could’ve prevented our names from being blacklisted.”

“Paying attention to you is all I’ve been doing for six years, baby,” he says simply.

He blinks up at Harry, can feel the blush rising up the back of his neck. He tries to come up with something to say that won’t cross the line, but Liam interrupts his thoughts from his position at the end of the aisle, standing next to the wedding planner.

“Yo, lover boys, look alive. Time to rehearse.”

Louis holds his hand up to his forehead to shield his eyes. “This is dumb and I’m hot,” he yells back. “And hungry.”

Liam scoffs and calls out, “If you quit whining, I’ll buy you a drink with lunch.”

“As long as it’s not rum,” Harry says under his breath and Louis chokes out a laugh.

“Stop talking, Styles,” Liam reprimands. “It’s time to walk down the aisle.”

He scrunches up his face when he smiles. “‘kay.”

They line up in pairs, Louis beside Annie’s college roommate Alice, Harry in front of him next to maid of honor Jenny, Annie in the back beside her dad, and when the music starts playing, Harry goes first, arm linked with Jenny’s. They listen to the wedding planner’s instructions as they go, and once they’re situated up front, Louis and Alice are ordered to go next, Louis’ feet slipping under the sand.

“Hopefully we’re gonna have an actual runway tomorrow,” he calls out to Liam and the wedding planner. “This shit is impossible to walk in.”

“Don’t swear during my wedding ceremony!” Annie yells from the back.

“It’s not your wedding ceremony yet, I can say whatever I want!”
And *obviously* it isn’t the actual ceremony; Liam is in sandals, the chairs aren’t set up yet, and Louis is pretty sure that tomorrow, Annie’s brother won’t be in bathing suit bottoms, but it’s still a *lot* to be here, watching his two best friends get married when he’s pretending to not be completely and utterly heartbroken. As he continues to make his way down the aisle, he keeps his eyes focused on the ground, staring at his feet, and the wedding planner calls out, “Louis, eyes up here!”

Louis looks up for a brief moment to see Harry’s gaze trained on him and he has to look back down. “Sun’s too bright,” he says, vision a little blurry.

“*Or,*” Liam says, laughing, “he’s already crying.”

“I am *not* crying, you asshole.”

“Fine, tearing up, then.”

“Shut up.”

Alice nudges him. “Really? At the *rehearsal* ?”

“You’re all just robots with no emotion, fuck off.”

She pats him on the head before taking her stance at the altar. “It’s endearing.”

“It’s pitiful,” Liam corrects, smirking.

Louis itches his nose with his middle finger as he stands beside Liam. “Just wait until it’s my wedding and *then* we’ll see who’s laughing.”

“Gonna be the second best wedding of all time,” Liam says, “now *shh*. You’re ruining my wedding.”

He doesn’t argue - again - that it’s not the actual wedding, just sighs when Harry reaches down and slides his hand into Louis’, palm damp. Louis links their fingers together with no hesitation, still looking down at his feet, and Harry squeezes twice before he lets go.

They stand up there for another half an hour, listening to instructions and making minor adjustments, but Louis is having trouble focusing on any of it, hand itching to grip Harry again, still. And based on the way Harry keeps looking over his shoulder back at Louis, expression grim and his own eyes a little watery when Liam and Annie give pretend vows, Louis has the feeling he’s not alone.

The group splits up after that, planning to come back together for dinner, and Louis ends up on the beach with Harry, Niall, Steph, Alice, and her date - a painfully obvious triple date of sorts. He lounges under a cabana, drink in his hand, dismissing Steph when she tries to drag him into the water.

“I promise, there are no jellyfish out there,” she says. “You don’t have to be scared.”

“I’m not scared,” he scoffs. “I’m just happy to sit here with my drink.”

“You seem kind of sweaty.”

“It’s not sweat. It’s a glow.”
“Sure, sure.”

She takes off toward the water, leaving Louis behind, and he sighs, wiping the sweat dripping down his brow. He hems and haws for a minute or two, only managing to stay under the cabana in the sweltering heat for another five minutes max, and he finishes off his drink before he makes his way to the edge of the water, letting the foam lap at his feet. He puts his hands on his hips when Harry gestures for him to join the rest of them, all wading up to their shoulders, and he shakes his head, digging his toes into the sand.

“Come on, Lou,” Harry calls out. “The water is clear. We can see through it.”

“It was clear last time, too,” he yells back. “I’m good, thanks.”

“Nope, nuh uh.” He traipses out of the ocean, shaking the water from his curls. “Louis.”

Louis licks his lips, looking up to meet Harry’s gaze, doing his best to not focus on Harry’s stomach muscles. “Styles.”

“You’re being a wet blanket.”

“Rude.”

“Steph keeps asking why I haven’t dragged you in with me yet.”

“Why haven’t you?”

“I didn’t think you’d want me to.”

“As if that’s ever stopped you in the past.”

Harry smirks. “Good point.” He points over his shoulder. “It’s our last real day in Hawaii, Lou. Tomorrow we have the wedding all day and then we go home. Enjoy it. It’s, like, four degrees in Denver.”

Louis shrugs. “I’m having a good hair day. Don’t want to wreck it.”

“You do look gorgeous today,” he replies, nodding, completely serious, and Louis squirms. “I’ll hold your hand.”

“I don’t need you to hold my hand, I’m in my twenties.”

“You said the same thing leaving that bar that one time.”

“We just had this conversation, like, two hours ago.”

Harry stares for a moment, and Louis can’t tell what he’s thinking. After a beat, he sighs. “Okay. I’m going back in if you need me.”

“Great.”

“Enjoy your drinks.”

“I will.” He watches Harry step back into the waves, the water splashing up to his waist, and he joins the rest of their friends, wading out until water is up to his shoulders. Louis kicks the ground with his heel, the sand swallowing around his toes. He stares at his group, Harry’s back muscles tightening as he puts his arms in the air for whatever reason, his ridiculous laugh heard even from
Louis’ position on the shore.

It’s the last day Louis has to pretend. Last day he gets to pretend.

He wades into the water slowly, feeling absolutely ridiculous that he had to be coaxed into the ocean by two separate people, and when Harry hears him sloshing around behind him, he grins, his dimple deep rooted.

“Oh, look who’s decided to join us,” Niall chirps from behind Harry.

Louis rolls his eyes, looking down through the water, exhaling when he sees it’s clear. “Stop.”

“Aw, baby,” Harry murmurs, and Niall snorts. “Glad you’re conquering your fears.”

He flinches when a piece of seaweed brushes up against his right calf. “I’m fucking fine, you guys.”

“You definitely are,” Harry agrees, nodding. He eyes Louis’ collarbones, not subtle at all.

“Jesus.” Louis wades in an inch or two deeper, relaxing now that he’s cooling off some. The water feels incredible. “Keep your pants on, Styles.”

“When has he ever done that before?” Steph laughs, waving her hand around, and Alice pretends to gag from beside her.

“She’s right, you know,” Harry murmurs. He doesn’t ask when he steps behind Louis and wraps his arms around his frame, resting his chin on his shoulder. His chest feels warm against Louis’ back, and when his hands slide down to Louis’ stomach, he wonders if Harry can feel his entire body simultaneously relax and tense up beneath his touch. “Always lose my cool around you.”

*Understatement of the year.* “Should probably work on that,” he chokes out.

“Yeah, I’ll say,” Niall says under his breath.

Louis splashes him directly in the face as a response, hoping Niall doesn’t notice the way he leans his head back against Harry’s chest, sun hot on his face. Niall doesn’t say anything else, and neither does Harry, but the way his fingertips graze against Louis’ bare skin, soft, possessive, is answer enough.

One more day, and Louis can’t decide if he’s relieved or terrified.

Several hours later, the entire wedding party - including Liam and Annie’s parents - sits around a lengthy table in the center of the outdoor restaurant overlooking the water. It feels intimate, even though there are about 15 people all chattering at once; the glow from the twinkling lights and the open fire along the edge of the restaurant casts soft shadows across the space, and every so often, a wave will crash in the distance, reminding Louis that they’re actually outside, just covered by a trellis with vines and flowers wrapped around. It’s beautiful, and it feels like the best place to unwind after the past week of constantly moving and planning. They’re at the finish line.

The table shares calamari and shrimp cocktail appetizers, they talk about tomorrow’s nuptials, they laugh at terrible jokes, they pass around drinks and say *cheers* to the bride and groom. It feels so achingly familiar to the way Louis, Harry, Annie, and Liam celebrated the engagement a year ago, back when everything was different, but right now, feels the same. Louis tips his head back as he
swallows the rest of his wine, the bitterness going all the way down.

Harry keeps his hand on Louis’ knee throughout most of the meal, rubbing his thumb in methodical circles like a subconscious move, and Louis does his best to ignore it. But the drinks are potent and the atmosphere is heavy and the lanterns surrounding them are warm and it all makes Louis want to lean into Harry, whisper all of the thoughts on the tip of his tongue. He doesn’t, just keeps working on his swordfish, tries not to crumble when Harry orders a slice of peanut butter cheesecake to share for dessert - Louis’ favorite dish.

“You didn’t have to get that,” Louis says once the waiter walks away. “I know you don’t really care for peanut butter.”

“It’s alright,” he says, shrugging, palm still warm against Louis’ knee, now sliding up his thigh, not daring to go too far. “I don’t like it as much as you do, exactly, but I like it.”

“Well, no one likes it as much as I do.”

“You’d put it on anything.”

“Probably.”

“Like on a burger. Or a shoe.”

Louis laughs, rolling his eyes. “Actually, on a burger sounds really good.”

“God, no.”

It’s nearing 11 o’clock by the time they all wrap up and split the bill, and as they’re pushing in their chairs, gathering their things to head back to their rooms, one of the waiters approaches them, pointing toward the ocean.

“Just so you all know, every Friday night, there’s a firework display over the water. It’s set to start in about five minutes. If you make your way down to the beach, you’ll have a fantastic view.”

Everyone collectively says thank you, eager to watch the show, and just as Louis steps onto the powder soft sand, the first cascade of lights streaks across the sky with a loud pop and crackle, brilliant golds and greens shattering against the black backdrop. It fizzles out, smoke taking its place, but then another one takes off across the sky, this one smaller, yet louder. The vibrant red explodes, nearly blinding, followed by a series of blues and purples. It reminds him so much of the Fourth of July celebrations back at Harry’s hometown, surrounded by his entire family, everyone drinking and passing around grilled hot dogs and wings like it was their job. It’s a typical American tradition, nothing out of the ordinary, but Louis has a lump in his throat, regardless, just thinking about the way he’d been welcomed into the Styles family instantly, treated like he’d been there all along, clinking his beer bottle against Harry’s sister’s, the sky illuminated above them.

Louis looks over at Harry to see him already looking back, smiling sheepishly, pushing his hair out of his eyes. And Harry doesn’t make an attempt to say anything, doesn’t do anything with his hands, just stands there staring, gaze suddenly a bit too serious. Louis knows no one is looking, knows they don’t have to play the part right now, knows there’s no logical reason for him to push himself into Harry’s arms, but right now, he’s vulnerable and selfish. He needs to lean against Harry’s chest, hear his heart beating, feel his hands on his back. There’s no hesitation on Harry’s part, he just holds onto Louis, his arms strong and body warm, no questions asked.

They don’t speak, don’t move, just watch in silence as the sky bursts in a series of flashes and neon fire. He’s not proud of how needy he feels, how badly he wants Harry to make promises that don’t
hold any weight anymore, but he clings on tighter, anyway, his arms wrapped around the small of Harry’s back. He isn’t even watching the fireworks anymore, too wrapped up in the way Harry is holding him, the way he can feel him breathing. He can hear the bang and pop overhead, but it’s not loud enough to erase the endless loop of the desperate thoughts, screaming in his own head.

He can tell it’s the finale; the crowd is clapping and whistling, the fireworks seem to be firing within nanoseconds of each other, and when Louis looks up at Harry’s face, he can see the color reflecting off him, the teals and turquoises and oranges dancing across his jaw, his cheekbones, his eyes. The relentless booming intensifies, causing him to jerk slightly in Harry’s grip, and Harry rubs his back in small circles, soothingly, cautiously. Louis rests his cheek against Harry’s collarbone, his entire body slack, and with Harry’s arms around him, he’s suddenly very aware of the fact that he can’t remember the last time he hugged someone. Sure, Liam’s dad patted him on the back yesterday afternoon with one arm around his shoulder, and he’s been fighting off Niall all week with a stick, lost count of how many times he’s now said, “I’m okay, Horan, you can let go of me now,” but a real hug, where he’s felt safe and warm... He can’t remember.

Louis doesn’t give it a second thought as he readjusts himself in Harry’s grip, needing just a little bit more than he’s already taken. He reaches up and wraps his arms around Harry’s neck, pulling him in close, pressing his face against Harry’s sternum so he doesn’t have to make eye contact, afraid he’d be able to see what Harry was thinking if he got a good glimpse of his expression. But then Harry’s arms are back around him, tighter than before, one hand pressed in between his shoulder blades, the other at the bottom of his spine. Louis’ breath hitches when Harry digs his fingertips in, not hard enough to hurt, just enough to prove something that Louis doesn’t want to think about why Harry’s trying to get him closer, can’t think about it. And he thinks Harry might ask Louis if anything is wrong, or why, but he keeps quiet, just moves his hands steadily up and down his back. Louis has never been more grateful for the silence between them; he’s tired of talking, tired of thinking. Just needs a piece of this, a piece of Harry, to feel sane again, to feel like himself, even if they’re both backtracking toward dangerous territory.

He’s not sure how long they stand there for - long enough for the fireworks to end and for the smell of the smoke and sulfur to cloud the air - and after a few moments of quiet chatter from their group several yards away, Liam calls out, “Are you guys gonna head back with us?”

Harry squeezes Louis tighter. “Yeah, in a sec.” He presses his mouth to Louis’ forehead, lingering. “You ready?”

Louis shakes his head against Harry’s chest. “No.”

“Good. Me, neither.” His hand moves in circles, palm warm enough for Louis to feel the heat of it through his shirt. “Feeling okay?”

“I think so,” he says, voice muffled.

“Alright.” Harry doesn’t ask him to elaborate, just sighs. “Can’t believe how gorgeous it is out here.”

Louis hums in response. “Stunning.”

“Also can’t believe Liam is getting married tomorrow.”

He smiles at that, is pretty sure Harry can feel it. “I know.”

“Know what else I can’t believe?”
Louis finally feels like he can pull back. He drops his hands to his sides, feels a thousand times better, should feel embarrassed, but he isn’t. He looks up to see laughter in Harry’s eyes, his smile bright, his hands still steady on Louis’ back. “What else.”

“That you pushed me off a cliff and into a fucking waterfall.”

“Oh my God,” Louis snorts, bursting out into laughter. “Seriously?”

“Yes, you seriously pushed me into a waterfall.” He shakes his head as he drops his hands, but he’s laughing, too.

“I’m not sorry.”

“I didn’t think you were.” Harry drags his hands across his face, laughing again, almost sounding slightly hysterical. “Okay, ready now?”

Louis nods, still smiling. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

Harry walks him to his room, stands with him in the hallway outside of Louis’ door, and Louis can’t help but thinking that this is the first time in months he’s felt genuinely safe, happy, not so alone. And that is a massive problem. He’s let down his guard so many times over the past seven days, and he knows it’s his fault, but it’s become too much, so overwhelming he feels like he can’t breathe. In the weeks leading up to the trip, he’d prepared himself to keep his distance, to interact as little as possible, to be ready to go home and face the fact that they were finally over. He wasn’t supposed to be 36 hours away from returning home and feeling like his heart could burst from his time spent with Harry, unable to look away from him at every turn. Goddamnit, he should’ve known that he’d be leaving this island feeling more broken than he had when they’d arrived just one short week ago.

Massive problem, one he’s not sure he can undo. Not sure he wants to.

Harry keeps touching Louis’ elbows, his forearms, tracing along tattoos without even so much as glancing down, just knows them by heart, and his eyes are trained on Louis’ with such force, Louis isn’t sure he’d be able to look away if he tried. He’s telling Louis a story about something Liam did earlier in the day at the rehearsal (Louis would be a liar if he said he was actively listening), and though his voice is unhurried, his eyes are wide, his hand gestures are ridiculous, his entire being impossibly animated. Louis couldn’t retell this story if his life depended on it, but he would have no problem reciting the way Harry’s smile got kind of crooked when he was about to get to the funny part, the way he scrunched up his nose when he tried to imitate Liam’s mom, the way his hands squeezed tighter around Louis’ arm when he really wanted him to pay attention.

As if his attention hasn’t wavered once in the past six years. He has Harry memorized.

Something has changed in the past few days. There’s still hurt - agonizing pain Louis hasn’t found the courage to sort through yet - but it’s slowly fading into something else. It feels like bittersweet nostalgia, almost, or hope. Hope that they can get past this, hope that they can find an even balance, hope that Louis can snap out of this and remember why they’re broken up, that this is all pretend.

But Harry’s eyes are locked on Louis, irises bright green under the flourescent lighting of the hallway, and Louis can’t stop staring back, squirming under his stare. Harry’s hands aren’t anywhere near him, but they might as well be all over him with the way Louis can’t stand still, can
practically feel the ghost of his fingertips across his jaw, hips, thighs.

Louis is stubborn, but he’s not stubborn enough to fake that he isn’t going out of his mind with how badly he wants Harry, even if it’s just for right now.

He wants to tell Harry to stay with him. He wants Harry to follow him into his room, to fall into bed with him, to undress him and touch him. He wants Harry hover over him, prove that with all the complete and utter bullshit between them, they can still do this. He wants to take Harry apart, piece by piece, wants Harry to do the same to him. He doesn’t want to think, just wants to have, wants to forget about everything with Harry’s mouth on his as the best distraction from the hurt, even if it is entirely counterproductive. He wants to wake up beside him, legs locked together, hair messy and begging for fingers to thread through it, will want to go for round two, both of them pliant and so, so warm first thing in the morning.

The last time they slept together was too rushed, too angry, too spiteful. He needs to stop thinking about it, wants to erase it with something better.

*Just one more time.*

He licks his lips, trying to force the words out, Harry’s eyes locked on Louis’ mouth and jaw. Louis’ fists clench and unclench by his sides. He tries to open his mouth to say it, a simple plea of *Please don’t leave me*, but nothing comes out and he feels frozen. It feels like a small eternity of Harry’s eyes on him, numbing, almost, and when he finally feels like he can spit out the words, Harry looks down at the ground and takes a step backward.

“I should go back to my room. Get some sleep. Big day tomorrow, or something like that.” He shrugs. “Rumor has it, we’re the best men.”

Louis smiles weakly, entire body feeling like it’s being deflated. “Minor details.”

“Don’t let Liam hear you say that.”

He nods. “Otherwise I might not live to see tomorrow.” Which honestly sounds like the better alternative at this point, he thinks.

“Exactly.” Harry smiles, taking another step back. “Good night, Lou.”

“Night.” He rubs the back of his neck as he watches Harry walk away, turning the corner and disappearing out of sight. When he slams his head against the wall behind him, the ache is mild, and he has to resist the urge to turn around and punch a hole through it.

That might help.

Louis walks into his room - alone - and slips into the most comfortable t-shirt he’d packed. It’s a little worn with a hole in the collar and it rubs against the sunburn on his shoulders, but he doesn’t have the strength to search through his luggage to find the aloe vera he knows is hidden in there somewhere. Instead, he climbs into bed, not bothering to get under the sheets, and he restlessly tosses and turns until the shadows in the bedroom start to disappear, a hazy, muted light spilling in from behind the curtains, bringing the room to life once more.

It's wedding day.

The night Louis and Harry took Liam and Annie out to a restaurant downtown to celebrate their engagement, it was snowy, icy, windy, and overall, conditions were not the best to be heading into
town for a very expensive dinner. And expensive was truly an understatement; the venue was definitely out of their league - and budget - but the look on Annie’s face when they had lemon meringue pie delivered with their names written in thin cursive on top after their filets were cleared from the table was worth it.

“I didn’t even see this on the menu,” she said in between bites. “Jesus, it’s good.”

Harry smirked. “That’s because it wasn’t on the menu. We knew it was your favorite so we brought our own. The staff thought it was a weird celebratory dessert but.” He shrugged. “The heart wants what it wants, I guess.”

“Liam, I changed my mind,” Annie said, expression serious. “You can have Jenny as your best man. I’m taking Louis and Harry as my maids of honor.”

“You’re trading my best men for your little sister?” Liam asked, laughing.

“Yeah, I don’t think she loves me like they do.”

Louis held his glass up. “Cheers to that.”

They stumbled back to their apartment late, the moon high in the sky, the stars blinking. The January weather was biting, making Louis shake as he took the steps two at a time up the stairs from the parking garage, and every time he exhaled, his breath came out in puffs, swirling and evaporating like smoke. The alcohol from dinner kept him warm in the restaurant, but now, all he could think about was sliding under the covers beside Harry, heat turned up, Harry’s hands all over him.

And Harry seemed to be on the same page. His own teeth were chattering, even after they made it into their bedroom, and he stripped out of his clothing quickly, climbing into bed next to Louis. Louis trembled as Harry hovered over him, a combination of the freezing air, a combination of the look in Harry’s eyes.

The kiss was biting, Harry’s mouth insistent against Louis’, and Louis savored the touch of Harry’s bare skin against his own. Five years into this and he still couldn’t wrap his mind around how much Harry wanted him, loved him. Louis ground his hips upward, eliciting a small groan from Harry, exactly like Louis wanted.

Harry pulled back to kiss up and down Louis’ neck, his jaw, and murmured, “Can’t stand how gorgeous you are.”

Louis gripped Harry’s back, using the leverage to push his hips up again. “You think you’d be used to it by now,” he said, closing his eyes when he could feel Harry smirk against his neck.

“Yeah, you’d think. You know what else I can’t stand?”

“What,” he hissed as Harry bit down on his collarbone.

“That Liam beat us to an engagement.”

Louis burst out laughing, body going slack against the mattress. “I know. I know. I hate that you’re talking about Liam right now but I know.”

Harry laughed, too, sitting back, still straddling Louis’ thighs. He dragged his hands down Louis’
chest, settling at the dip above his hipbones. “I really didn’t think he had it in him.”

Louis ogled the tightness of Harry’s muscles, toned and so sexy, he could barely take it, knowing he didn’t have to share. “Maybe we should elope right before their wedding next year,” he said, watching the way Harry’s lips quirked up into a smile. Louis pushed his pinky into the dimple, soft like always. “Piss Liam off. Steal his thunder.”

“Mature.” Harry twisted his head to kiss the inside of Louis’ wrist. “No eloping, though. I wanna marry you in front of everyone and embarrass the hell out of you.”

“Why, what’re you planning on doing…”

“It’s a surprise.”

“You’re telling me you already have a surprise planned for our nonexistent wedding?”

“Yes, I’ve thought about it extensively.”

“You’re really not gonna tell me?”

Harry shook his head, curls bouncing. “No way.”

“Should I view this as a challenge to get it out of you somehow?” Louis asked, cocking a brow.

His grip tightened on Louis’ hips. “You won’t.”

“Okay,” he hummed, pushing Harry off of him. “Mind grabbing me my sweatshirt on the chair?”

“What? Why?”

“I’m cold.”

“But.” Harry frowned, gesturing stupidly at his lap where he was tenting slightly in his briefs. “I want you.”

Louis snorted. “Subtle.”

“Don’t get dressed.”

“No, this is how I’m challenging you.”

“By withholding sex?!”

He rolled his eyes. “You’ll be fine.”

Harry’s pout deepened, and he climbed off of Louis entirely. “You’re such a brat.”

“Your brat.”

He smirked at that, reaching out to drag his knuckles across Louis’ chest. “Mhm,” he hummed.

Both of them caved less than an hour later, tension and energy still built up from before, limbs intertwined and hands restless. Harry kissed Louis’ neck, hands sliding down to palm at his ass, Louis lolling his head to the side and dragged his nails across Harry’s abdomen, pink lines stretching across his tattoo. Louis didn’t care about the game anymore, not with the way Harry’s
breathing quickened at the sight of Louis’ naked body, not when he was kissing Louis like that, not when Louis knew how good it felt to be manipulated and fucked by Harry, strong and careful and voice deep as it whispered secrets meant for Louis only.

Harry pulled Louis up against him, holding him tight, tighter, as he rocked into him. Louis pushed back into it, wincing at the sting, and Harry mouthed helplessly at the back of Louis’ neck.

“So glad you gave in, baby,” he murmured, thrusting in hard. “Wanted you all night. Looked so good at dinner.”

“It’s hard not to give in when you’re crawling all over me, you fucking nympho,” Louis grit out, throwing his head back. “Gave in to shut you up. Gonna torture the wedding surprise out of you later.”

“Okay, whatever you want,” Harry agreed senselessly, hips merciless.

Louis’ stomach muscles tensed up, the pounding too much and too perfect and he couldn’t hold it back much longer, not with Harry’s hands all over every inch of skin he could find. He came with Harry’s name on his tongue, curling up into himself at the intensity of it, legs trembling as he breathed through it. Harry’s thrusts sped up, sloppy and rhythm gone, and when Louis wrapped his arm up behind Harry’s neck, digging his nails in, most likely leaving behind crescent shaped marks, Harry’s movements jerked and stuttered. He pushed himself deep into Louis, as far as he could go, arms trembling. Louis held onto him as he shook, his own breathing labored. When Harry pulled out, the drag hurt, Louis’ body oversensitive, but Harry sensed it, kissed his shoulder, his neck, squeezed his hips, murmured, “I love you.”

Louis nodded, twisting around to face Harry. “I love you, too.”

They laid there quietly and Louis let Harry trace his fingers across Louis’ cheekbones, his jaw. His eyes darted between Louis’ lips and eyes, quirking up into a brief smile every so often, like his body couldn’t help it, couldn’t keep it in. Louis was tired, so tired, had a million things to do the next day and knew he needed to get to sleep, but this was worth it. It always was, with Harry.

Harry brushed the hair out of Louis’ eyes, his breathing finally evened out. “My boy.”

Louis smirked. “Gonna be calling me that forever?”

“Probably.”

“When we’re 90?”

“When we’re 90,” he confirmed.

“Good,” Louis hummed, sinking further into the pillow. “You know what?”

“Mmm. What.”

“We’ve come a long way.”

Harry smiled lazily. “We have.”

“Can’t believe we live together. And have a baby.”

“To be fair, she doesn’t require much. Seeing as she’s a cat.”

“Still.”
“Still,” Harry echoed, voice quiet. He breathed in slowly a few times, then: “I remember feeling like it wasn’t gonna happen,” he said, his voice a whisper.

“What? Prudence?”

“No. Us. I would watch the way you were with Casey and Tim and Olivia and whoever else, and all I could think was, ‘Jesus, he’ll pick just about anyone over me.’ And then, like.” He paused to smile. “Wasn’t afraid to tell you after a while. I was ready. I knew if I said it, you’d come around. I could just feel it.”

Louis swallowed. He’d heard all of this before, but never like this, with Harry touching him so carefully, his gaze unbreakable. “You were just that confident I’d admit defeat?”

“Nah. Just that confident in us.” He pressed a kiss to Louis’ temple. “Just knew you that well.”

“Mmm,” he agreed. It was true. Christ, Louis loved him. “So, like, when we elope and ruin Liam’s happiness, does that mean I don’t get to propose? Does an engagement still happen if there’s no elaborate wedding?”

Harry laughed. “I don’t think there are any rules.”

“We can make our own.”

“Exactly. Wait. Why do you think you’re proposing?”

“Because I want to,” Louis said flatly. “And I get what I want.”

“No, not in this case. I get to do it.”

“Why on Earth do you think that?”

Harry frowned. “I already have a perfect idea for it.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. Got the ring and everything.”

Louis squinted, staring for a beat too long. “You’re lying.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Still lying.”

“And why do you think that?”

“Don’t you think I would have found the engagement ring by now if you had one?”

Harry snorted, rolling his eyes. “Okay, fine, I don’t have the ring, but I do have an idea for the proposal.”

“You gonna keep it a secret just like your wedding surprise that I’m pretty sure is nonexistent?”

“It exists! Stop being a pain in the ass!”

Louis laughed, burrowing his face against Harry’s chest. “It’s a moot point, because I’m proposing first.”
Harry wrapped his hand around the back of Louis’ neck, squeezing gently, thumb rubbing in circles. “We’ll see about that.”

**DAY NINE | SATURDAY**

Louis wakes up just shy of eight o’clock with a knot in his stomach. It’s a combination of wedding day nerves - not even his own wedding, for fuck’s sake - and the fact that he can see, even with the curtains still partially closed, that it’s completely overcast outside, a gray haze hovering over the island. It looks gloomy, like a storm is definitely brewing.

Fantastic.

He takes a minute to wake up his body, doing his best to put last night’s feelings out of his mind, the knot in his stomach tightening when he remembers the way Harry had held him so close, eventually sauntering off to his own room without any closure, just leaving him with aching, lingering thoughts. He stretches and groans, then freezes when he hears the unmistakable sound of thunder rumbling in the distance. He almost laughs, because it feels like a perfect storm of sorts, all the pieces of the past week - past 365 days - coming together to crash down on them at once in one epic crescendo. The rain starts to spit against the windows then, the glass foggy, and Louis wants to scream. If Mother Nature can’t hold it together, he shouldn’t be expected to, either.

There’s a knock on the door a moment or two later just as another clap of thunder shakes the walls inside, and Louis climbs out of bed slowly, reaching for his glasses on the nightstand.

“I’m coming,” he calls out when the person knocks again, stumbling over a damp towel on the floor, nearly falling face first. “Jesus.”

“No, it’s not Jesus,” the person says from the hallway, “it’s Harry.”

Louis snorts - as if he couldn’t tell from the terrible joke and painfully deep voice - and pulls open the door. “Happy Liam and Annie’s wedding day.”

“Happy Liam and Annie’s wedding day to you, too.” Harry raises his brows, biting back a smirk. “I like your t-shirt.”

He looks down, touching the hem. “Thanks?”

“You look good.”

“Okay…”

“Really good,” Harry confirms, still eyeing the shirt.

“What are you…” It dawns on him, then, that the shirt he has on is Harry’s, one he “forgot” to pack back in October after he’d separated their things. “It’s mine,” he lies.

“I didn’t say it wasn’t.”

“Exactly.” Louis knows that makes no sense, and he can feel the blush creeping up the back of his neck, onto his cheeks. “Why’re you here.”

“To get my shirt back,” he smiles.

“Alright, first of all, fuck you,” Louis says, and Harry laughs, “and second, I look better in it than
you ever did, so.”


“If you have to.”

“What a host you are, thanks.”

“No problem.” Louis sits on the edge of his bed and Harry makes himself comfortable across from him on the desk chair. “Okay, Styles, why are you in my room so early.”

Harry rubs his hands together. “Alright, so, any chance you think Liam won’t notice it’s essentially a monsoon out there right now?”

He snorts. “The entire ceremony is outside. And the reception. And all the pictures. They’re gonna be pissed if they have to move everything into the hall in the resort.”

“I know. I would be, too. I was looking at the weather channel earlier and it looks like there’s a possibility of it passing through quickly, but.” He shrugs. “Not likely.”

“Is this our job, somehow, to take care of this?” Louis drags his hands across his face. “I really have no idea.”

“I don’t, either.” Harry rubs his hands up and down his thighs, frowning. “Annie and Liam slept separately last night. Liam’s still next door, but Annie’s in a suite somewhere on the other end of the resort. I’ll go grab her and meet you back in Liam’s room. And maybe between the two of us, we can convince Liam not to cry, and that this isn’t the worst case scenario.”

“But, like.” He peers out the window, wincing when he sees the resort’s palm trees violently whipping back and forth. “It kind of is worst case scenario.”

Harry sighs. “Maybe I can convince them that this isn’t the worst case scenario, and you can just sit there silently, looking pretty.” He smirks. “In my t-shirt.”

Louis picks up his shoe off the floor and whips it at Harry in response.

It takes about 13 seconds after the four of them are sitting together in Liam’s room for Liam to become completely hysterical, hands fisted in his hair so hard, Louis is afraid he’s going to be standing at the altar, saying his vows, sporting two enormous bald spots.

“No, don’t tell me to calm down,” he nearly shouts, voice shrill. “Louis, our entire wedding is outside. This was the whole point of coming here. To get married on that Goddamn beach.”

Louis purses his lips together. “Really? I thought maybe you picked a venue over 3,000 miles away from home because of the convenience factor, or maybe because you just really liked this particular hotel…”

“Louis, cut it out,” Harry says, squeezing Louis’ shoulder, and Louis bats him away. “Guys, it’s not the end of the world,” he continues. “I promise. I already talked to Maggie and she said the resort has no problem moving everything inside. They prepare for this. That’s why they never book more than one wedding at a time, even if one wants to be inside and one wants to be out.”

“You talked to our wedding planner before we did?” Annie asks. “How’d you even get her
“Please, as if Liam didn’t send us an Excel spreadsheet eight months ago with a list of phone numbers and addresses, listed in order of importance,” Louis says, shaking his head. “Maggie’s number was listed first. Before yours, Annie.”

“Not surprised.”

“Anyway,” Liam says, voice curt, “we don’t want to be married in some hall reserved as backup. We want to be outside, in the sand, in the sun…” He trails off. “Fuck this.”

“It’s not your fault,” Harry says, voice gentle. “And no one could have predicted this. They’re saying they haven’t seen rain like this in almost a year. It came out of nowhere.”

Liam looks like he could cry. Or throw up. Or both. “Why does Honolulu have the shittiest meteorologists alive?! They should have predicted this! They should have known!”

“Okay, but what would you have been able to do, really?” Louis asks. “It’s not like you could have stopped it from raining. Unless you happen to know a very convincing rain dance but to my knowledge, you don’t.”

“No, but if we had some sort of notice or warning, we could moved the wedding to next weekend. Avoided the weather. Another seven days in paradise. Problem solved.” He tries to smile but it comes out like a grimace. “We could still do that, you know.”

Louis snorts. “Because that’s realistic.”

“Can you not be sarcastic for one fucking second?! Please?! And Annie, you could chime in at any point with something helpful, I’d really appreciate that.” His shoulders slump, and he looks absolutely defeated. “I guess for better or for worse starts right now.”

“For worse, is right,” she mutters, eyes wide, frozen. “My hair is going to be fucking massive from the humidity.”

“How was that helpful?!?”

“Okay, stop, listen.” Harry puts his hands up. “No fighting on your wedding day. You just have to embrace the rain at this point.”

“Sure, right, okay, I’ll embrace it,” Liam says, mocking. “Let’s see how this conversation goes when your wedding turns into a giant fucking mess. Louis is even more dramatic than I am.”

Louis coughs awkwardly. “Well, we’re not even engaged, so no need to worry about that, I guess.”

Liam throws his hands in the air, groaning. “Christ, I wish I was drunk.”

“That makes two of us,” Louis grumbles.

“Good fucking grief.” Harry stands in between both of them. “Maggie said that while it’s not your ideal situation, we can still have the reception outside. The staff can set up everything under the covered trellis, that place where we had dinner a few nights ago. She said because the guest list is so small, it won’t be too crowded in there for both dinner and dancing. The actual wedding itself will have to be inside, but,” Harry continues, not letting Liam or Annie interrupt, “the room is absolutely gorgeous. I checked it out on my way to grab Annie from her room. So many flowers and no one will trip walking through the sand.”
“Amen to that,” Louis says, and Liam cracks a smile. Finally.

“It’s not when you envisioned,” Harry says, shrugging apologetically, “but we’ll make it work, okay? Annie will be stunning, even with hair the size of Connecticut, and one day you’ll look back on this and laugh. I promise.”

They’re all quiet enough for Louis to be able to hear a cart rolling by their room in the hallway. His gaze darts between Liam and Annie, waiting for one of them to say something, or maybe implode, but instead, Annie just sighs, slumps down onto the bed, and puts a pillow over her face. Liam pats her on the leg and looks out the window, expression borderline pathetic.

“I was hoping Harry lectured us long enough for it to stop raining, but. Nope.”

Harry stares blankly at nothing for a moment or two before he inhales sharply and turns to Louis. “It’s like in one ear and out the Goddamn other.”

Louis laughs, slapping him on the back. “Good effort, but what’d you expect, honestly.”

“I don’t know. But I’m gonna go shower and I’m never coming back.”

“Good choice.”

Maggie ends up being more convincing than Harry and Louis were, showing off the room for the ceremony with more enthusiasm and positivity than either of them were able to muster up. Liam and Annie still don’t seem entirely thrilled with the last minute location change, but the resort takes pity on them and offers to pay for the charge of the open bar at the reception. That seems to improve everyone’s moods significantly.

“Okay, so now that we’ve got all that squared away and I know you’re not going to lay down in traffic,” Louis starts, “can we actually start the wedding day festivities? I was promised a huge celebratory brunch. And drinking. Lots of drinking.”

Liam rolls his eyes. “Is this your wedding or mine?”

“Are you seriously saying no to a buffet and an endless round of champagne?”

“Absolutely not, let’s do it.”

All the groomsmen - plus Annie and Liam’s dads - settle in together, marveling at the spread put out by the resort. Louis stacks his plate with various breakfast meats, pastries, quiche, and as he’s starting to mix granola and chocolate chips into his yogurt, Harry comes up behind him and laughs.

“You think you wanna save some for everyone else?”

“I think I’m going to put in an order for some steak, too, and I don’t want to hear a word out of you.”

Harry smirks, gesturing at the kitchen doors. “I already asked.”

“Wait, for real?”

“Yeah, I figured you’d want it eventually.”

Louis dips the ladle in front of him into the container of maple syrup and generously drizzles it
over his pancakes, essentially drowning it, just so he has something to do with his hands. “Thank you.”

“No problem. Should I also request another batch of pancakes? You know, so you have something to go with the syrup?”

He looks down at his plate and realizes his syrup to pancake ratio is now not even close to even and he makes a face. “I just really like syrup.”

Harry smiles again before he squeezes Louis’ hip. “I bet you do.”

Louis ends up chugging his entire flute of champagne before Geoff even finishes his toast, and by the time they’re passing their plates off to waiters, he’s dizzy from the alcohol, dizzier from the way Harry can’t seem to keep his hands to himself. And when Harry leans in to whisper something, close enough for his lips to brush against Louis’ ear, Louis’ entire body tenses. Harry sits back in his seat and Louis has absolutely no idea what the secret was.

Between the storm, his ex-boyfriend, and the panicked groom, this is bordering on being the longest day of his life, and it isn’t even noon yet.

The groomsmen keep themselves separate from the bridesmaids, all the women getting ready together in Annie’s suite on the other end of the resort, and Liam asks Louis to go check on Annie six times before Louis finally pinches his cheek hard enough for Liam to shriek.

“She’s fucking fine, Liam, leave her alone.”

“I just want to make sure she isn’t stressed and everything is going well so far,” he says, rubbing his cheek. “And you’re my best man. You have to do what I say.”

Louis snorts. “Better ask the nicer best man, then. Because when have I ever listened to you.”

“I asked him first but he ignored me, too.”

“What made you think if Harry said no to something, that I would? He’s way more tolerable of you than I am.”

“Gee, thanks. Is that gonna be in the best man speech?”

He shrugs. “Something like that.”

Even with the less than desirable weather, the ceremony is still set for four o’clock on the dot, and by 3:30, Liam is slouched on the hallway floor, breathing into a paper bag, sweat forming on his brow, looks like he might vomit at any second. Louis crouches and slaps him on the back, squeezing his shoulder.

“Right on time, Payno. Figured we wouldn’t get through this thing without at least one breakdown.”

“I’m not breaking down,” Liam says, voice muffled inside the bag.
“Oh, right, you’re just sweating half your bodyweight out for fun.”

“Can you not? At least for right now?”

Louis kneels down on the ground beside him, hand still grasped around his shoulder. “I’m just trying to joke you out of it.”

“Yeah, well.” Liam clenches the paper bag in his fist. “It’s not working.”

“Okay.” He fixes the flower in Liam’s lapel. New tactic. “You look good. Flower’s a bit crooked but you look really nice.”

“I’m taken.”

Louis snorts. “I bet Annie looks flawless.”

“Obviously.”

“You’re not nervous to marry her.” It’s not a question.

“No, I’m not,” he confirms. “I’ve been waiting to marry her since the day I met her.”

“I know.” Louis smiles, catching Harry walking out of Liam’s hotel room out of the corner of his eye. He gestures for him to join them. “I also know you’re panicking only because you want everything to go perfectly for her. You haven’t been a lunatic over the past 12 months for nothing.”

Liam breathes in and out three times before he nods. “I love the hell out of her.”

He laughs, because that much is obvious, and looks up when he hears Harry next to them. It’s the first good glimpse he’s gotten of Harry since they’ve all finished getting ready, and he knows the way he’s staring isn’t subtle, but he can’t find it in him to care. His curls are still loose, but tamed, framing his jaw, and his suit fits like a glove, his body lean and toned. He’s gorgeous. If Harry catches Louis blatantly ogling, he doesn’t mention it, just takes a seat on the ground beside them, eyes going wide when he looks at Liam.

“Whoa, Payno, a little sweaty there, my man.”

Liam shoots him a face that’s bordering on murderous. “Both of you suck at this. Help me.”

Harry bites back his smile, reaches for Liam’s arm and squeezes, the same way Louis had. “She’s excited. I just went up to their suite to make sure they were almost ready. She can’t stop smiling.”

He exhales at that. “Yeah?”

“Mhm. She’s definitely more level headed than you are.”

“Absolutely,” Louis agrees, winking at Liam, and Liam mindlessly tugs at the knot in his tie, not answering otherwise.

Harry drops his hand to his lap, chewing on his bottom lip. He pauses for a moment or two, taking his time. “I’m gonna be a wreck the day I get married,” he murmurs. “Gonna be the most stressed out I’ve ever been, I bet.”

Liam frowns, shoulders slumping. “Why?”

“Same reason you’re about to sweat through your suit right now.” Harry smiles, a little crooked,
and Louis watches as Harry’s eyes dart back and forth between his hands, the floor, Louis. “Just want it to be perfect, you know?”

“Exactly. I don’t want anything to go wrong.”

“You know she’d marry you no matter what, right? Regardless of your vows or what you’re wearing or if there’s a monsoon outside…”

“Yeah, but, like--”

Harry holds up his hand, stopping him. “That’s what I tell myself whenever I think of how scary the future can be. It’s intimidating, thinking about a marriage. The wedding, too. It’s a big, tremendous gesture to get up in front of so many people and be so vulnerable. But I’m positive he’d marry me no matter what, you know? He’s gonna be up at that altar, smiling, probably crying…” Harry trails off, twisting his hands together, furrowing his brows. “He’s gonna be so happy to marry me back, no matter the circumstances. And that outweighs all the fear and nerves. Even if everything else goes wrong, that’ll be the one thing that won’t.”

Louis feels frozen, can’t look anywhere but Harry’s profile, watching the way his throat bobs as he swallows. Harry smiles softly when he murmurs, “And it’s the same for you and Annie.”

Liam nods, sighing. “I know. You’re right. You’re completely right.”

“She did?”

“Yes. She said it’s ‘perfectly imperfect,’ especially now that she knows her hair doesn’t look too frizzy.” He smirks. “You have nothing to worry about, Liam.”

“You sure?”

Harry nudges Louis’ shoulder. “Lou, tell him he’ll be fine.”

Louis feels like he can hardly swallow, never mind reassure Liam, not when he can barely calm his own racing thoughts. He shakes his head, still staring at Harry. “You think about that? About your wedding day? And how you’d feel at the altar?” He can’t bring himself to ask if he’s the he in this scenario, nor can he ask if Harry still thinks about it, but Harry seems to get Louis’ angle.

“Yeah. All the time,” he replies without hesitation, brushing his thumb across the back of Louis’ knuckles, just once. “It’s a nice thought.”

His chest hurts, his eyes hurt from trying not to cry, and he can’t make this about him and Harry, not anymore than he already has. He looks at Liam, waits for him to focus. “Liam, you’ll be fine. Today, and everyday after.”

Liam nods. “I think it’s the ‘everyday after’ part that’s making me panic, and not the actual wedding. I don’t want to ruin anything once we get home and all of this is said and done.”

Louis knows what that’s like; the concept of ‘everyday after’ has been the recurring issue in his own life for the past 12 weeks. “You really think you’ll let that happen?”

He pauses, shaking his head. “Not really, no--”

“Then stop. Nothing is perfect. But you two have the most promising future, and you’re the closest
thing to perfect that I’ve ever seen.”

Harry smirks. “Perfectly imperfect.”


Liam appears to be visibly more relaxed, and for the first time in over half an hour, he’s actually smiling. “Louis.”

“Let’s go get you married.”

He closes his eyes for a moment, still smiling. “Okay, yeah, let’s do it.”

All three of them get off the floor together, Liam’s energy back as he starts to take off down the hall, already ordering Louis and Harry to catch up. Harry squeezes the back of Louis’ neck.

“He’ll thank us later.”

“Maybe.”

Harry laughs, reaching into his coat pocket and pulling out a small, silver flask. Louis eyes it as Harry unscrews the top. “Here’s to making it a full year without killing our best friend,” he says, “and here’s to staying on our toes up until the very last minute. He panicked on purpose, I’m pretty sure. Just to test us.”

Louis grabs the flask, tipping his head back as the alcohol goes down. Gin. “I’ll drink to that. Also, here’s to getting off this fucking island in one piece.”

“Amen. Oh, and.” He reaches for the container again, taking it from Louis’ hands. “Here’s to how stunning you look. Can’t believe I get to stare at you all night.”

“Jesus.” Louis looks down at the floor. “Think either of us are gonna be able to walk in a straight line in about ten minutes?”

“Gonna try.”

He’s about to argue that he stopped trying a while ago, has essentially given up and given in to just about everything that he’s been hit with over the past several days, but instead, he just agrees, stealing the flask one more time. “Yeah. Me, too,” he mumbles, finishing the last of it.

The room turned out gorgeous. It’s soft and romantic, exactly how Louis always imagined his own wedding would look like: not too over the top or flashy, just intimate enough for the 50 or so guests to feel included but not intrusive. Liam obviously agrees based on the way he whistles when they step foot at the end of the aisle.

“Okay, I know I was such a pain in the ass all morning about not being able to be on the beach, but this is…”

Louis smirks. “Maggie did good.”

“Better than good. This is incredible.”

“It is.”
And it’s amazing, really, that the past several months of planning has seemed to drag painfully slowly, especially the past few days, but now that they’re here and it’s happening, it feels like a whirlwind and Louis barely has time to take a breath before he’s lining up alongside the other groomsmen and bridesmaids, seats in the audience filled. Liam is already situated up front when the music starts playing, signaling Harry and Jeny to start walking, and Louis watches them go, slowly, steadily. His eyes are already a little watery when he and Alice take off behind them, but unlike the rehearsal, no one teases him for it. Instead, he notices that almost everyone else is on the same page, including Harry and Liam.

He’s so, so happy to be a part of this, to witness it, to watch as everyone stands up at their seats and turn as Annie starts to make her way down the aisle, and the tears streak his face when she reaches the altar, smile plastered to her face, mirroring Liam’s. They pledge their vows, they slip wedding bands onto each other’s finger, and Louis’ eyes burn for a different reason. He feels like an asshole, like complete and utter shit for being unable to stop his eyes from welling over, the whole time thinking, *it should have been us*.

He catches the slight tremor in Harry’s movements, his shoulders shaking when Liam and Annie are pronounced man and wife, and he doesn’t make eye contact with Louis when the newlyweds walk down the aisle together, the room applauding and cheering. He stays silent, his smile phony when the camera pans over to the groomsmen, and Louis can relate. He doesn’t bother trying to get Harry’s attention, nor does he mention it once they’re out of the hall and being herded into another room for the photos. Louis gets it.

Harry’s heartbroken, too.

It was around their third month of living together that they both stupidly realized that they weren’t playing house. At first, it felt like a game, both of them joking that they felt like grown ups, like legitimate adults, but as the days ticked by, the novelty of having an apartment to themselves worn off and the pressure of life stepped in, taking over. They had bills to pay, groceries to buy, rent to make sure was on time. They had to cut back from a lot of things, like eating out three times a week, and no more spur of the moment ski trips or concerts. Harry had to stop splurging on unnecessary camera equipment, and Louis had to be mindful of his own expensive hobbies, doing his best to avoid the guitar shop downtown.

“You already have a guitar,” Harry argued after Louis slipped into conversation that he’d lost control and found himself contemplating taking out a loan for yet another instrument.

“Yeah, but I want another one.”

“And I want heat in our apartment. You pick and choose which is more important to have.”

Louis pouted. “Put on a jacket.”

And Louis wasn’t *that* frugal; he knew he had priorities and responsibilities, knew he had to wait on anything that wasn’t a necessity, just added it to his birthday wish list, instead. It took its toll on them, though, the stress puncturing their solidarity, and for the first time in over three years, Louis and Harry were fighting, *really* fighting, an adult problem for their “grown up” relationship. It didn’t feel good to be arguing twice a week about money, and though it wasn’t enough to break them, the strain was there, pulling on them like an elastic band waiting to snap.

It snapped around month four.

Louis and Harry spent the majority of the day in an argument, something that started off small and
ended up spiraling, and by the time they both crawled into bed, Louis was annoyed, tense, and nothing was really resolved. He couldn’t even remember where the fight even started. His head hurt.

He woke up in the middle of the night with his throat scratchy and raw, Harry still asleep beside him. He laid there for a few minutes, willing himself to go back to sleep, Harry’s breathing even, comforting, but all he could think about was getting water from the kitchen, needed it. He crept out of bed slowly, the mattress sagging and squeaking under his weight, the floor cold against his bare feet.

He was in the middle of filling up his glass with water when he heard Harry pad into the kitchen, yawning. He was shirtless, pajama bottoms riding low on his hips, rubbing his eyes.

“Sorry if I woke you up,” Louis said, turning off the sink. “Didn’t mean to.”

“It’s okay. What’re you doing?”

He held up his glass. “Thirsty.”

“Mmm,” Harry hummed. He stared at Louis, lips pursed, and Louis could tell he was thinking. “Do you, um. Want to talk about it?”

Louis stared at the clock, stalling. “Right now? No.”

He nodded, didn’t press more. “Okay.”

They stood in silence for a minute or two, Harry drumming his fingers along the countertop, Louis drinking his water. He looked over the edge of his glass, locked eyes with Harry, and Harry sighed.

“I’m sorry. I hate fighting with you.”

“It’s the middle of the night.”

He ignored him and kept going, taking a step forward, just a foot in between them. “Yesterday was stupid. We were both being brats and you were stubborn and I didn’t want to be wrong but.” He shrugged. “I’m sorry. I hate going to bed mad at each other.”

Louis set his glass down. “I’m sorry, too.”

Harry smiled, just slightly, and gripped Louis’ arms in his hands, rubbing his thumbs across his skin. “We’ll talk about it more in the morning?”

He nodded. “Yeah. We can.”

“Okay.” Harry pulled Louis in closer, kissed at his jaw, lingering, and Louis could tell this had intentions behind it.

“Harry,” he whispered, his head lolling to the side, “it’s four in the morning.”

Harry kissed below his ear. “It’s four in the morning,” he agreed, “and I’m in love with you.”

Louis squeezed his eyes shut, asking, “Is this how grown ups fix an argument?”

“I don’t care what grown ups do,” he murmured, pressing his lips to Louis’ neck, already starting to get hard against Louis’ hip, “I care what we do.”
He wound his fingers up into Harry’s hair, tugging just slightly, angling their faces together. “I love you, too.”

They fell into bed together, Louis unable to keep his eyes open from the late hour, from how good Harry felt pushing into him over and over again, hands tight and voice deep. Neither of them lasted very long, Harry groaning into Louis’ neck when he came, Louis mumbling out a string of curse words when he finished moments after, and thank God the next day was a Sunday, Louis already too tired to function.

Harry’s arms were wrapped around Louis’ frame, his eyes closed, fingers moving on their own accord up and down Louis’ bare arm. He sighed deeply, voice quiet when he whispered, “I’m the luckiest.”

Louis was about seconds away from succumbing to sleep, but he couldn’t stop looking at Harry even though he wasn’t looking back. “Not possible,” he said, living for the way Harry’s lips quirked up into a smile. “I am.”

Once they’ve taken what feels like a thousand photos and the DJ announces their names one by one, the wedding party and all Liam and Annie’s guests join together outside under the trellis, protected from the rain. The tables are covered in a variety of tropical flowers, candles lit and silverware laid out precisely. It’s picturesque, even with the sound of the wind whipping across the water.

Louis settles in at the table at the front of the room, Harry taking the seat beside him, and Louis twists his fork around in his hand even though there’s no food on their plates yet.

“Beautiful ceremony,” Harry says conversationally.

“Mmm,” Louis agrees. “Liam didn’t even cry.”

“That makes one of us.”

He crosses his arms over his chest defensively. “It was emotional.”

“I know.”

“And the vows were really sweet.”

“They were,” Harry agrees.

“And it was just a lot of built up energy.”

“I think so, too.”

“And that’s all it was,” Louis concludes.

“Okay, then.”

He leans back in his chair. “Whatever. You cried, too.”

Harry shrugs. “I never said I didn’t.”

“You can’t make fun of me if you were doing the same thing.”

“I don’t think I made fun of you.”
Louis frowns. Harry’s right. Christ, he’s exhausted. “It’s definitely an open bar, right?”

Harry laughs, patting Louis’ knee. “Yes.”

“Thank God.”

He may or may not cry again when Liam and Annie have their first dance to The Beatles’ “Something,” his vision completely blurry as the two of them spin around carefully, happily. Harry hands him the cloth napkin off the table and Louis can’t muster up the energy to tell him he doesn’t need it.

“You have a best man’s speech to give in a minute, sweetheart. Think you can pull yourself together?”

Louis wants to punch him, also kind of wants to lay down on his lap. “I’ll be fine.”

“I’m sure you will be.”

Liam and Annie make their way back over to the table when the song ends, Liam taking a seat beside Louis, Annie beside Jenny, and once they get the attention of everyone else in the room, the DJ hands the microphone over to Jenny. Her voice starts off shaky as she starts her maid of honor speech, but she talks about her childhood and sisterhood with Annie, her voice warm and energy radiant, and by the time she finishes, most of the bridesmaids are in tears. She passes the microphone over to Louis, smiling, and he stands up, ready.

He clears his throat into the mic, making sure the group can hear him over the sound of the rain and the wind on the shore. Everyone turns to look at him, and he fumbles for his notes inside his jacket.

“Good evening,” he starts. “Beautiful day for a wedding.” They all laugh lightly and Louis relaxes, not one to typically be so tense in front of a crowd, but feels like he has something to prove this time around. He looks down at his messy scrawl, his thoughts written out in blue ink, smudged in some areas. It was his first draft, his only draft. “Both Harry and I are Liam’s best men, but I’m smarter so I’m taking charge on this one.”

Harry whines out a *hey*, and Louis smirks before he takes a deep breath and continues.

“I met Liam in middle school. We were in the same homeroom in seventh grade. And it took me about three minutes to decide I hated him.” He pauses to laugh, and the rest of the crowd joins in. “We had all our classes together, and he was the biggest teacher’s pet. God, such a nerd. Always the first one to answer a question, always the first one to offer to help the teachers clean the chalk boards or hand out worksheets.” He rolls his eyes thinking about it, about how much of a nuisance Liam was, about how the teachers ate it up. “We had absolutely nothing in common, and that’s probably why Mrs. Wheeler forced us to be partners for this giant project we had to do for our science class. To teach us a lesson, or whatever. Liam complained about it immediately. He fought for another partner, saying I was lazy and incompetent. Well, Payno,” Louis says, shrugging, “look who’s in med school.”

Liam bursts out laughing, nodding. “Okay, but to be fair, you slept through most of seventh grade, how would I know that you’d end up interning at the best hospital in the area?!”

“Shh, I’m still talking about how much I love you.”
“I don’t think I’ve heard anything about love yet.”

“Then don’t interrupt me. Anyway.” Louis’ gaze flits up to look around the room, pleased to see he hasn’t lost anyone’s interest yet. “Mrs. Wheeler told Liam that we could both learn from one another. She obviously knew what she was doing,” he says, smiling, “because here we are, like, 15 years later, and I’m giving the best man’s speech at his wedding. But at the time, we were both stubborn and annoying and fought every chance we could get. By the end of day three, we’d gotten absolutely nothing accomplished, except for getting banned from the library for screaming at each other, and the only thing we could agree on was to work separately from our own homes. The day of the presentation came, and it was, obviously, a major disaster. None of our notes matched up seeing as we hadn’t discussed them, we missed almost all the key points, and halfway through, Mrs. Wheeler had to stop and ask if we’d bothered to work together at all on it. She told us how disappointed she was in us. We got a D+ on it. It was Liam’s first D--”

“Not yours, though, and definitely not your last,” Liam interrupts, his wink exaggerated. “Keep it rated G, you jackass.” Louis smirks, his cheeks hot. “Like I was saying, it was Liam’s first D, and he ripped me a new one over it once we got out of class, saying I’d ruined his perfect grades, saying it was all my fault, saying if I hadn’t been so impossible, we could have actually worked together. And when I told him he needed to relax, that set him off all over again. He was so over the top angry, shouting and telling me I was going nowhere in life…” Louis laughs, shaking his head, not bothering to read the rest of the words from his notes. He knows what’s coming next. “I don’t actually remember the moment we called a truce. We were stuck together in classes for the next five years, and it’s not like we became best friends in a day, but over time, I think we both realized neither one of us was going anywhere. It took about a full year until we started to hang out outside of school - willingly - and in that time, we did learn from each other. He took my advice and relaxed, I took his and focused a little more… After all these years, we still teach each other so much. We balance out one another. We’re the dream team. We didn’t know that in Mrs. Wheeler’s homeroom, but we know it now.

“Then he met Annie. She’s intelligent and witty and can kick his ass in football.” Louis pauses to smile at her, Annie already smiling back. “She brings out the best in him, has been doing it since day one, and normally, I would be mad that someone stole my place as Liam’s best friend, but how could I be, when it’s her?

“She compliments him perfectly. She challenges him, encourages him, calls him out on his shit… Basically, she’s the female version of myself, which is probably why I love her so much.” He winks at her, and even though she rolls her eyes, Louis can see the slight glimmer building up. “They’re the new dream team. The better one. They’re positively meant for each other. I couldn’t come up with a better pair if I tried.”

Louis takes a deep breath. He’s almost done, but this next part is the hard part. He doesn’t make eye contact when he continues, just stares off into the distance instead, watching as the rain steadily falls against the sand, the ocean. “Liam has given me so much in all the time that I’ve known him. He gave me the passenger’s seat of his car all throughout high school, giving me free range to choose the music, to scream at him whenever he drove past the exit, which was often because he’s a terrible driver. He gave me a dorm room to crash in when I was drunk or bored or just wanted to annoy the hell out of him. He gave me supportive words and a shoulder to lean on when my grandfather died and I absolutely fell apart. He didn’t leave my side, not once. He, uh.” Louis pauses, swallowing heavily. “He gave me my boy, the absolute love of my life, the best thing that’s ever happened to me. Liam saw something in us before either Harry or I did, and the second we decided to give it a shot, it felt like the most natural, easiest thing in the world. We fit together like puzzle pieces. We still do. And, like.” He can’t look at Harry, but his eyes wander to
his right, anyway, locking in on Harry for a beat too long before he has to look away again. “Liam, you gave that to me. I hope you know how grateful I am for that, and for everything else you’ve done for me. You are one of the best people I know; you deserve the best in return. And that starts with today, the start of the rest of your life.”

He holds up his flute of champagne, everyone else in the room following suit. “I feel like all we’ve done this weekend is toast to my two best friends, but,” he says, his voice wobbling, “it’s warranted. One last time. To Liam and Annie. I love you. We all do.”

A collective “to Liam and Annie” is heard throughout the space, and after Liam pulls him in for a long hug, Louis sits back down in his seat. He can feel Harry’s eyes on him, and he doesn’t bother looking back. The blush creeps up the back of his neck, and he knows Harry can see it, too, still staring. Louis sighs and drags his hand across his face.

“What.”

“When did you…” Harry trails off. “When did you write that speech?”

He shifts in his chair, forces himself to look at Harry. “About a week after we broke up.”

Harry looks pained. “You wrote those things about us when we were already broken up?”

He nods. “Yeah.”

“Even when you hated me?”

“Christ, Harry, I’ve never hated you.”

Harry leans in closer. “I’m so glad I didn’t try to write anything.”

“Why not?”

“No way I could have competed with that.”

Louis snorts. “Thanks.”

He smiles softly, and slides his hands onto Louis’ thighs, licking his lips. “That was really beautiful… For Liam.”

“Yes.” He exhales. “For Liam.”

Harry’s grip on Louis’ thighs tightens. “Do you know I owe Liam my everything? For bringing you to me?”

Louis swallows, vaguely aware of the DJ making an announcement. He has no idea what it is, can’t focus on anything other than the way Harry is looking at him. “Don’t have to be so sappy,” he whispers, tries to make light of this, because suddenly it all feels too heavy, suffocating and crushing him. “Just some words.”

“Okay.” Harry nods, moving in close enough for Louis be able to see the faded scar on his chin, to hear him breathing over the noise of the music. “And this is just a kiss.”

He doesn’t have much time to process it before Harry’s mouth is on his, careful, slow, hands gone from his thighs in favor of cupping his jaw, holding him close. Louis doesn’t try to pull away, doesn’t want to, and pushes in closer, tasting Harry, missing everything about this so much, he thinks he could stop breathing. It doesn’t last as long as Louis wants it to, both of them aware that
they’re at the head table and just about everyone can see them, and when Harry rests his forehead against Louis’, Louis has to resist the urge to lean in again, touch him, not stop.

Harry’s smile is lazy when he leans back, hands still on Louis’ face, and he lets them slide down to Louis’ chest, grabs for his hands, lacing their fingers together. “Can I tell you a secret?”

*Please, no.* “Yes.”

“Been thinking about doing that all day.”

Louis exhales slowly, like he’s being deflated. There’s really no point in lying anymore. “Me, too.”

Harry’s smile grows. “I gotta say,” he says quietly, “this is probably going to be the most memorable wedding of my life. Might even top my own wedding.”

He laughs. “Probably.”

“Between the weather and the brief therapy session in the hall and.” He nods at Louis. “This.”

Louis doesn’t want to dive into this now. It’s not the place. He’s not ready right yet. Later. Maybe later. “This, yeah. And the weather, for sure. Wait.”

“Wait, what?”

He lets go of Harry’s hands, a plan forming, and he stands up, climbing past Liam to get to Annie. “Hey, Annie,” he says, “do you plan to change into dress number two soon?”

She nods. “I don’t want to be stuck in this thing all night. I’ll change out of this one in, like, 15 minutes.”

“Awesome. And Liam probably has another suit, right?”

“Yeah, he brought a few, actually. Wanted some nicer pieces for the honeymoon. Right, Liam?”

Liam turns at the sound of his name. “Huh?”

Louis smirks. “Excellent. Annie, think you can wait a little longer to swap dresses?”

“Why?”

“I have an idea.”

“What is it?”

“We’re gonna embrace the storm, like Harry said this morning.” He looks back over at Harry, who’s still curiously watching him. “Hey, Styles. Go grab your camera.”

The four of them sneak out onto the beach while the salads are being passed around, no one so much as even batting an eye when Liam and Annie slip by, miraculously. Harry’s camera hangs around his neck, pocketing the lens cap.

“No guarantee these will come out good, considering it’s still pouring.”

Louis shrugs, slipping out of his shoes just before they start trudging through the sand. “Just
shoot.”

Harry nods, smiling. “I can do that.”

All of them are soaked to the bone in a matter of seconds, the rain relentless, pummeling, angry. And it’s suddenly very funny, the idea that they’re out here, taking wedding photos of a newlywed couple in the wind and torrential downpour. But Harry snaps away, anyway, yelling over the noise of the waves crashing to direct poses and positions, and Louis watches him, has always loved Photographer Harry, loves how serious he gets from behind the lens, regardless of the scenario. He’s not sure how Harry is managing to actually keep a straight face right now, seeing as he has rain dripping down his forehead, off his curls, his suit nearly painted on at this point. And Louis isn’t much better off. His hair was styled perfectly - it took him 20 minutes to get it the exact way he wanted - but now it’s flat and lifeless, falling into his eyes, and his jacket feels heavy, weighted down from the rain. He still isn’t sure if this is actually a good idea, if it makes any sense, but both Liam and Annie are hysterically laughing, squinting through the weather, and Harry nudges Louis’ shoulder.

“Already 1,000 times better than the stiff ones we took inside earlier. I swear.”

He blinks the rain away, pleased. “Good.”

“And you’ll help me pay for a new camera if this one shits the bed after this, yes?”

“In your dreams.”

They don’t stand out there much longer, maybe another ten minutes or so, just long enough for Louis to reposition Liam three or four times, telling him, “Not everyone can be a model, it’s okay that you don’t know how to take a decent photo.” And though the rain is still coming down in buckets, the sun makes a brief appearance, peeking out from behind a dark cloud, lighting up the beach for no more than a minute and a half. It makes everything look softer; luminous, almost. It’s the magic hour, Louis thinks, and he hopes that Harry got some solid pictures of them under the glow of the sky. He looks over his shoulder and sees that Harry has his finger pressed down on the capture button, face pressed up against the view finder.

The camera isn’t pointed at Liam and Annie, though.

Louis knows the pictures came out great; he doesn’t need to look at them to know Harry managed to capture the goofy, comfortable, free side of their newlywed best friends. He always does his best work when he’s in unconventional locations, like the terminal waiting for their bus in South Boston, at the hospital visiting Harry’s stepdad after he had surgery, at the mall on Black Friday as Louis fights to the death in the Apple store. He’s able to preserve real life in a way that floors Louis, without fail, every time. And as he changes out of his soaked suit and slips into his last clean pair of dress pants, realizing his hair is definitely a lost cause, he tries his best not to think about how Harry not so secretly aimed the camera at Louis in between shots of Liam and Annie, tries not to think about the way he stared at Louis on the beach with his brows furrowed and his bottom lip between his teeth, tries not to think about Harry’s mouth on his, all too tempting and forever the single greatest thing in Louis’ life.

He can feel Niall’s eyes on them when they make it back to the reception, settling into their seats at the front table without an explanation as to why they’re all in different clothes and with sopping wet hair, and when Louis digs into his crabcakes, out of the corner of his eye, he can see Harry biting back a smile unsuccessfully. It feels like a secret, a good one, for once. Louis breaks, too.
“No, but seriously, where did you guys just go?” Niall asks from his seat a few chairs down the line, looking back and forth between Louis, Harry, Liam, and Annie.

Louis shrugs, stuffing his mouth with half the crabcake. “Sorry, my mouth is full, rude to talk, tell you later.”

Dinner is delicious. Liam’s incessantly obnoxious planning over the past year clearly paid off, and Louis enjoys an array of seafoods, indulging in calamari and shrimp cocktail and fresh tuna. He looks over at Harry’s plate, which is stocked with scallops and salmon, and he barely even opens his mouth to ask for a taste when Harry is handing over his fork, sighing.

The drinks come slowly; they all clink wine glasses together, filling and refilling, and by the time cake is being served, Louis is seriously buzzed, vision slightly blurry as he looks for the bartender to order a round of shots. Harry’s one step ahead of him, though, somehow balancing six shots in his hands. Louis peers over the top of them, raising his brows.

“Kamikaze?”

“The official sponsored drink of the Payne wedding.”

Louis smirks. “Bottoms up, then.”

They drink.

The line between *seriously buzzed* and *face red, limbs heavy drunk* happens nearly instantly. Everything seems funny, feels warm, and when Harry holds out his hand with a shy look on his face to lead Louis to the dance floor, Louis doesn’t question it, just *goes*. He’s holding on for dear life, holding onto the way Harry keeps his hands steady on the small of his back, to how weightless he feels, to this feeling of comfort and familiarity and closeness. It’s all he wants, to give into this moment, and he’ll deal with the repercussions later. Right now, he lets Harry wrap him up into his arms, press a kiss to the top of his head, spin him around in slow circles. Louis is vaguely aware that this isn’t a song for slow dancing - it’s a remix to a Bruno Mars song, for God’s sake - but they stay locked up together, swaying close enough for Louis to be able to hear Harry breathing, his heart beating fast, faster.

Louis looks up to see Harry already staring back, and Louis can’t believe after six years, he’s still stunned by how gorgeous Harry is. His eyes have always been one of Louis’ favorite things - rich and always so intense - and Louis has a hard time looking anywhere else, too focused on the way Harry is unblinking, gaze piercing. He feels like his entire body is wound too tightly, his brain somehow both foggy and clear when he slides his hands up Harry’s chest, winding his arms around his neck, pulling himself up onto his tiptoes. He’s sober enough to know that this is a bad idea - again - but he’s drunk enough to not care, and he’s short of breath before Harry’s even lips touch his, just a graze, just enough for Louis to lean into it, craving more. Harry cups Louis’ jaw with his hand, the other still gripping at his back, and Louis loses track of time, lost in the way Harry pulls Louis flush up against him, the way his curls keep getting tangled in Louis’s fingers, the way he drags his thumb across Louis’ cheekbone. It’s the most simple thing that’s happened all weekend, Louis thinks, and that, in itself, is dangerous territory. This shouldn’t feel so normal. Not anymore. And yet, he encourages it to go a little deeper, go a little slower, needs it like he needs to breathe.

Harry’s the first to pull back, his eyes still closed when Louis sticks his finger in Harry’s belt loop, holding on, keeping him close. He takes a deep breath, exhaling, and when he speaks, his voice is rough, like he’s just woken up.
“It should have been us.”

Louis frowns, dropping his hand. “What should have been?”

“This. It should have been us,” Harry repeats, his eyes searching Louis’ face frantically, reaching out to grip at Louis’ waist. “It should have been our wedding.”

He nearly laughs; it's like their brains are wired together, processing and working side by side. He can hardly stand the look on Harry's face, or the way he's holding on like he can't let go. He swallows, trying to joke his way out of it. “You mean, you wanted to drive all our family to the brink of insanity and force them to spend thousands of dollars on a destination wedding?”

Louis watches Harry swallow, shaking his head, obviously not in the mood to play along. “Instead, it got all fucked up.”

It’s too real. The lights are too bright, the music is too loud, the alcohol feels like it might come back up. Louis takes a step backward, stumbling over nothing. “Please, just, not now, okay? We’re at Liam’s wedding.”

Harry sucks in his cheeks, looking down at the ground. “I’m not going to be able to do this forever, Lou. Not after this past week. I have so much I…” He trails off, looking up. “Okay, you’re right. We’re at Liam’s wedding.”

Louis pushes his hair out of his eyes. “Liam’s over-the-top, expensive, ridiculous, rainy fucking wedding.”

He pauses, cocking his head to the side. He looks like he wants to say something and gives up at last minute, sighing. “Ridiculous is right.” Harry blinks once, twice. “Ah, fuck, you look really good tonight.”

Louis chokes out a laugh, wasn’t expecting that. He knows it's a cop out, a distraction, something to break the sudden tension, but it's working. “Thank you.”

Harry smiles briefly, jamming his hands into his pockets. “Do you want another drink?”

He looks down at his watch. 10:11. He already feels like he’s on thin ice, and he's afraid to completely sink through. “No,” he says, “it’s getting late. I don't want to wake up sick to my stomach or with a massive hangover. Trying to make the flight home as easy as possible.”


They don't say anything else about it, and Louis would like to say he keeps his hands to himself throughout the rest of the night, but Harry keeps grabbing at him, kissing his jaw without asking, whispering to him whenever no one’s paying attention. Harry is clearly on the verge of losing his mind, unsure of what to do, what to say, how to stop, and Louis is right there with him.

They’re still pretending, but now, they’re pretending for themselves.

He would like to say he's fine, that he's unaffected by the lingering touches and smiles reserved just for him, but that might be the biggest lie he's told since they touched down in Hawaii nine days ago, and he's told a lot.

It’s past midnight when Liam requests his fifth or sixth round of the macarena. Louis isn’t drunk
enough anymore to find it funny; he’s fairly positive that this song will be ringing in his ears for
the next year and a half. But Liam is laughing, his eyes crinkled in the corner, his moves sloppy,
Annie’s even sloppier, all eyes on them as they make total asses of themselves in the center of the
dance floor. Louis can’t help it, has to smile into his glass as he finishes off the liquor, mostly just
watered down ice.

The remaining guests collectively groan together when Liam chants, “DJ! One! More! Time!”
stumbling stupidly, trying and failing to sing the lyrics, Annie hopping next to him sans high heels,
her drink sloshing out of the sides.

“At least they make each other happy,” Louis says under his breath, rolling his eyes, and Harry
snorts.

“I want to shoot this DJ dead. Hey, Liam!” he calls out. “No one wants to hear this song again!”

“Good thing no one asked you, Styles!” Liam yells back, swaying as he puts his hands on Annie’s
hips and moves them, not even close to being in time to the beat of the music.

Even with the incessant, repetitive music, Louis feels happy to be here, happy to see Liam and
Annie falling over one another amongst all their friends and family. It might be the alcohol, it
might be the way Harry is winking at him, it might be the fact that it’s Hawaii, still stunning, even
with the storm. He traces his finger along the rim of his glass, thinking about the past several days,
still completely shocked that everything, for the most part, went off without a hitch. They did it.
It’s over. And he knows the next part - going home - is going to be the hard part, but right now, all
he feels is relief.

The combination of the late hour and the alcohol is starting to take his toll on him. He yawns,
deciding that one in the morning is late enough to call it quits, and he makes his way to the dance
floor. Liam lights up when he sees him, holding out his arms.

“Back for another round, Tommo?!”

Liam swats him away, smiling. “No, just wanted to tell you that I’m gonna head back up to the
room. I’m fucking beat.”

“You mean boring.”

He rolls his eyes, stifling another yawn. “Yeah, that, too.”

Liam laughs a beat too hard, gripping Louis’ shoulder for balance. “Louis.”

“Liam…”

“Thank you for being my best man.”

Louis exhales, forcing a smile, doing his best to not show how difficult this past week has been.
“Of course.”

“Harry, too.” Liam looks over Louis’ shoulder, presumably to where Harry is still sitting at their
table. “You two were the best choices for this. None of this would have been the same without you
here.”

“Ah, Christ, Liam, enough.”

He shakes his head. “No. I just. Love you a lot.”
“You also love alcohol a lot, clearly.”

He laughs, throwing his head back. “I do. Hey.” His grip on Louis’ shoulder tightens. “I don’t know why you haven’t discussed this but it’s my wedding so I have full immunity and you can’t get mad--”

“I don’t think that’s how weddings work…”

“--but I know you and Harry went through a weird patch over the past few months.” Liam’s eyes are glassy, yet focused, and Louis is having a hard time standing still. “Like I said, I don’t know exactly what went on, but I’m so glad it’s fixed.”

Louis scuffs his shoes against the dance floor, biting down on his bottom lip. “Yeah,” is all he can think to say.

“That boy loves you so much. Look at him.”

He doesn’t want to look at him, but he finds himself turning around, anyway. Harry is staring at the two of them, lopsided grin stuck on his face, his cheeks pink, his tie loose, and fuck, Louis loves that boy so much, too. He sighs. “Yeah, he’s something.”

“Can I be the best man at your wedding?”

“Who do you keep trying to plan our wedding.”

“I’ll have to try to come up with a speech better than yours,” Liam continues, ignoring Louis entirely. “Maybe I’ll write a song.” He gasps. “And a dance!”

“Oh my God,” Louis laughs. “Okay, you work on that, and I’m gonna think of a way to be a more obnoxious groom-to-be than you were. It’ll be hard to beat but I’ll do my best.”

“Um, rude.”

He pats Liam on the head. “I gotta go get some sleep. Not everyone is making this island their permanent home, remember? We’re heading out tomorrow afternoon.”

“Right, right. And then it’s honeymoon time for me,” he says, waggling his brows.

“Yup, disgusting. Goodnight, Payno, and congratulations.” Louis goes to pull him in for a hug, but Liam is already on the same page, arms wrapped around Louis as quickly as his drunken limbs will allow him.

“Thank you. For everything.”

Louis nods, swallowing the lump in his throat, looking over Liam’s shoulder and seeing that Harry is, indeed, still staring, still gorgeous.

He thinks he could crumble at any moment.

When Louis tells Harry he’s heading back up to his room, Harry’s insistent that he walks him, as much as Louis protests.

“No, really, I’m good, Harry,” he argues, “I just want to be in my bed. I’m exhausted. You stay here. Keep partying. You don’t have to follow me.”
“I’m ready, too. Really. Your room is on the way.”

_I’m trying to get away from this_. “Fine.”

Harry sighs as they exit the party. “Besides,” he says, voice low, “I think I’d follow you anywhere, really.”

Louis doesn’t know what to say to that, so he keeps his mouth shut, and thankfully, Harry doesn’t say anything else, either.

They walk back to Louis’ room in silence, arms brushing together with every other step. The hallways are dim, mostly silent, just the sound of the waves lapping against the shore in the distance, the rain hitting the windowpanes. It’s comforting. It’s distracting.

Louis fishes for his room key card out of his wallet, neck burning, knowing Harry is staring at him from behind. He knows he needs to say something, but he can’t find the words. Harry beats him to it.

“Liam and Annie are, like… kind of disgusting.”

He laughs, turning around, leaning up against the hallway wall. “Yeah, they kind of are.”

“It’s nice.”

Louis hums in agreement. “It is.”

Harry drags his hands through his curls, pausing, eyes drifting to Louis’ lips in a way that’s not subtle, not at all. “Tonight was fun.”

“Surprisingly.”

He smiles briefly, letting it fade away. “You looked breathtaking.”

“Harry…” Louis warns.

“Couldn’t take my eyes off you. Truly.”

“Don’t let Annie hear that,” he tries to joke, but it comes out sounding a little strangled. “She’s the bride.”

Harry nods, taking a step forward. The tips of their shoes touch. “It can be our secret.”

And fuck, if that isn’t the problem. _Everything_ between them over the past several weeks has been a secret. Whether it’s secrets from one another or from other people, Louis feels like he’s spent every waking moment lying and holding back words and acting for the better part of seven months. He reaches out and grips Harry’s elbows, Harry inhaling sharply. “I’m so tired of secrets,” he whispers. “Everything feels… Hollow.”

Harry’s even closer, now. “Okay. No more secrets.”

Up close, Louis can see the dark circles under his eyes, how bloodshot they are, how rundown he clearly is. He hates that he wants to fix it, fix him, fix everything. “Okay,” he agrees.

Harry presses his hips against Louis’. Anyone could see them, could see the way Harry is staring at him like he wants it all, at the way Louis now can’t keep his hands from roaming across Harry’s chest, shoulders, hipbones. These are the movements they’ve been practicing for days; this time,
it's not for show. This time, it's just for them.

“Did you know I’ve been obsessed with you since the day I met you? Like, sometimes I lose my
train of thought because I can’t stop thinking about you.”

Louis blinks heavily, heart pounding. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Harry says. “I couldn’t tell you a single thing that happened today because I couldn’t focus
on anything other than you.”

He sighs, trying to force himself into believing it’s the alcohol talking, forces himself to believe it’s
nothing more than that. If he lets himself think Harry’s being honest, he’ll spiral. “Might make
Liam mad if he finds that out. The bride and groom are gonna be out to get you, Styles.”

Harry nods, smiling softly. "Did I ever tell you that the first time we slept together, I was so
nervous, I thought I was honestly going to puke?"

Louis briefly closes his eyes and smirks. "Another secret?"

“Not anymore.”

“You never told me that. Could have fooled me, though.”

"Good."

He traces the flower in Harry's lapel, his hands moving on their own accord. "Why were you
nervous? I’m pretty sure you’d done it once or twice."

Harry leans into the touch. "I didn't really have you yet. I was afraid to lose you before you were
even mine. I wanted you so bad, Lou. Every bit of you in every way."

Louis nods, his chest aching. He doesn’t need Harry to tell him why he’s choosing right now to
share this particular secret. He knows, he can tell. This moment feels like that moment did, so
many years ago. They were both unsure, unsteady, afraid to lose something they didn’t have. Louis
forces away the first date nerves in the pit of his stomach and looks up at Harry, letting the honesty
slip out for the first time in too long. "You had me," he whispers, hating that they've permanently
gone from have to had. "The second you first kissed me, you had me. And every second after
that."

Harry chews on his bottom lip. "Kiss was just that good?" he mumbles after a beat.

"No, we were just that good," he corrects, this entire thing like deja vu. They’ve had this
conversation so many times, but it’s never mattered more than right now. “Never been kissed like
that before. I told you that.”

“You did tell me that,” Harry says.

“Knew we'd be good together in every way, and that was just what sealed the deal." He sighs.
"Always so good, H."

Harry brings his hand up to Louis' face, cupping his jaw, tracing his thumb across his cheekbone.
“I miss you.”

Louis closes his eyes, letting his head thud against the wall behind him. “I’m. Like…” He can’t
come up with anything else to say, so he doesn’t, just lets Harry keep touching him, and even with
his eyes closed, he knows Harry’s staring.

Harry takes a deep breath, a second, several more. "Lou. Can I kiss you like that again? Right now?"

He doesn’t think about it, nods only once before Harry’s lips are on his, searing, perfect. His mind is screaming how terrible of an idea this is, mostly sober and too vulnerable and feels like he could cry at any minute, but Harry’s hands are all over him like he wants him more than anything, and Louis believes him, can relate. For the first time in ten weeks - ten months - he doesn’t feel like he’s drowning, and he deserves this, deserves to have Harry for just a little while longer, deserves to be loved and safe and feel like he’s coming apart from the inside out like he always does when he’s with Harry. He knows he’s backtracking, but then Harry’s tongue is twisting with his and he finds it hard to care. Harry is his insanity, his sanity, somehow, and he needs it, even if it’s only for tonight. Then he’ll go back to figuring this all out on his own. It’s time. He’s done relapsing.

He forces himself to pull back, Harry breathing hard, eyes closed. "Only for tonight," Louis breathes, echoing his thoughts, needs Harry to listen. "This has to be it." Closure.

Harry’s eyes crack open at that, mouth red. He doesn't answer, doesn't nod or shake or do anything, just kisses Louis harder instead. It feels like an argument, a protest, a disagreement, and Louis is too weak to fight back. Being with Harry is like waves, he thinks, and he lets himself get knocked down in the wake, doesn’t try to get up as he fumbles to unlock his door, Harry's lips never once falling from his own. They’ve been kissing all night, all week, but this one is different. This one takes his breath away, makes his lungs feel like he’s on fire. He doesn’t try to get away from it, just welcomes the burn.

Louis walks backward into his hotel room, pulling Harry along with him, stepping over his wet suit on the floor, the door closing softly behind them. Unlike the past several times they’ve been together, the urgency has been replaced with something more intense, something nearly palpable. It’s like they’re both trying to take their time, to savor one another, and when Harry pushes Louis up against the wall beside the bed, his hands cradling the back of Louis’ head, Louis wants to go as slow as possible, wants to relearn every inch of one another. It’s been months of anything as remotely intimate as this, of anything other than just using one another to get off to release some tension, and this is what he needs their last time to be like: torturously slow, a little painful, drawn out, and in the pitch blackness of the bedroom where Harry can’t see the worn down expression on Louis’ face. He can feel Harry’s heart beating wildly underneath the weight of his palm and Louis feels like absolute shit for loving that brilliant heart, for wanting it, when it’s already too late.

He moves his fingers across Harry’s chest to the front of his shirt, does his best to start unbuttoning the best he can with Harry’s mouth traveling across his neck, jaw, that place beneath his ear that always makes him squirm. He pulls the shirt free, letting his hands glide across Harry’s skin, imagining he can see the ink across his abdomen. His tattoos have always been one of Louis’ favorite things; he loves the way Harry carefully and meticulously planned out all the bigger pieces, talking about them like they’re all separate stories, but somehow, on his body, it’s like one, beautiful continuous timeline. He’s spent hours tracing across the raised edges, edges that have fallen flat overtime, and it’s like they were always there, always a part of Harry’s anatomy. Louis vividly remembers the night Harry came home sporting matching laurel tattoos riding extremely low on his hips. Louis had spent the better part of an hour barely touching them, mouth and hands simply grazing, teasing, but it was enough for Harry to grip at the sheets and beg for more.

He digs his nails into Harry’s sides thinking about that night, and Harry whines in response to the sting, rocking his hips forward. His breath is hot against Louis’ jaw and his voice comes out sounding slightly strangled. “Lou. Is this really happening?”
Louis closes his eyes, squeezes at Harry’s sides again. “I hope so,” he whispers back.

Harry’s lips make their way back up to Louis’ mouth, searing, and he kisses him like he always has, sure of himself and sure of them. Louis whines, just barely, at the way Harry’s tongue traces the inside of his mouth, breathing slow and steady, his hands moving carefully up and down his spine. And the room is still too dark for Louis to be able to properly see the way Harry looks, but he can imagine it, and it’s enough to have him pushing Harry backward toward the bed.

He lays down, pulling Harry down on top of him, pushing Harry’s shirt off of him, and he drags his fingers down his chest, feeling Harry’s stomach muscles go tense underneath his touch. Louis is vaguely aware that the wind and rain seems to be dying down, less noisy, but then Harry’s mouth is back on his neck, his hips rolling down, and all Louis can hear is static. He wiggles around until Harry gets the hint to pull off his shirt, leaving them both naked from the waist up, bare skin against bare skin. Harry’s chest is hot, his mouth is hotter, and Louis’ mind goes blank, stops thinking after that.

They’re both quiet as Harry sits up on his knees to unbutton Louis’ pants, Louis lifting his hips to give Harry easier access, and Harry slides his hands up and down Louis’ bare thighs, squeezing.

“You’re beautiful,” he murmurs, voice breaking the silence in the room.

Louis exhales loudly. “You can’t even see me.”

“Don’t need to see you to know.” He bends back down and kisses Louis’ shoulder, down his arm, his wrist, his palm, his knuckles. He’s moving from memory, steadily and surely.

Louis’ already hard when Harry gets his hand around him, his movements practiced and even, and Louis groans, jerking, when Harry drags his thumb across the head. And it hasn’t been that long since they’ve been together - less than a week - but Louis swears it feels like ages. Unlike the last few times, he doesn’t feel like he’s going to scream, doesn’t feel so tightly wound. Instead, he already feels boneless, sated, and he melts into the mattress, lets Harry manipulate his body, twisting his hand up and down the way he knows Louis likes it best.

He reaches up to wrap his arms around Harry’s neck, wants to kiss him, and Harry obliges, keeps his hand wrapped around Louis’ cock. Louis’ breath hitches into Harry’s mouth when he speeds up his movements, and he grips at Harry’s back. His eyes have adjusted to the pitch blackness of the room, and now that he can see the look on Harry’s face, he can see his every thought and it feels like so much, too much. He’s so torn between wanting to go slow and wanting it to be frantic. The quicker they go, the more likely he is to forget all of this, and he can’t figure out if he wants to add this to his never ending pile of memories or push it away.

Harry makes the decision for him by taking his sweet time turning Louis on, his voice coming out slowly and easily, body strong against Louis’.

“I dream of the way you sound,” he huffs against Louis’ neck. “You’re ridiculously sexy, it’s so frustrating.”

Louis pushes his hips further up into Harry’s grip, sweat starting to build on his forehead, his chest. He loves being taken apart like this, and Harry knows it. “That started off as a compliment, not sure what happened there at the end,” he grits out, gasping when Harry bites down on his shoulder.

“The whole thing was a compliment,” Harry mumbles against his skin, kissing, sucking. “Can’t find a single bad thing to say about you.”

“Wanna make you feel good. Yeah?”

Louis doesn’t answer, just leans up to kiss Harry again, instead, a little bruising, definitely too rough compared to the way Harry’s hand is jerking him slowly, the pressure *exactly* how he likes it. It’s enough to have his stomach muscles tense up, heat coiling up at the base of his spine, and he knows it wouldn’t take much more to come, Harry’s touch too good to hold off. Harry must be able to tell he’s getting close, too, because he slows his hand down until it’s just light touches that have Louis’ legs twitching.

He takes a moment to breathe, Harry hovering over him and tracing his fingers across Louis’ chest piece before he dips down to kiss at him deeply, purposefully, tongue moving against Louis’. Louis pushes him away when it gets to be too much, when Harry rocks down, the friction just shy of perfect. Harry goes down onto his back willingly, staring at Louis all the while, hands wandering across Louis’ skin. He murmurs again how stunning Louis is, and Louis does his best to calm his racing heart.

He kisses Harry’s neck, shoulders, chest, before he moves his hands to unzip Harry’s pants. He can feel Harry already hard, thick against his thigh, and Louis slides his hand inside, squeezing Harry’s cock over the material of his briefs. Harry groans low in his throat, swallowing loudly, and he looks up at Louis, licking his lips.

“Love your hands,” he says, eyes fluttering closed before he opens them again. “One of my favorite things about you.”

Louis takes that as *keep going*, so he does, pulling Harry’s pants and briefs off all the way, his cock hard, standing straight up. He braces himself on Harry’s thighs, digging his fingertips in, leaving behind crescent moon shapes. Harry groans, arching his back slightly, and Louis knows what he’s asking for. Normally, he would scoff at Harry’s forwardness, or for being a pig, but he doesn’t feel like playing. He just wants Harry incoherent, loose and fumbling his words, his thoughts, a mirror of how Louis feels right now.

He takes Harry halfway into his mouth, suctioning his cheeks, using his hand to make up for what he can’t yet swallow, slicking Harry up, humming. It’s been a while since they’ve done this, but he closes his eyes and relaxes his throat, living for the way Harry has already started to shift around restlessly. And call Louis vain, but giving Harry head has always been one of Louis’ favorite things, just based on the way Harry reacts to him. Harry is usually the one who takes charge, leads, and Louis loves that. He likes that he gets a break from his usual bossy persona in favor of Harry being a little mouthier, rougher, never too careful, always possessive and always eager. But what he likes even *more* is when Harry physically can’t do anything, say anything, just murmurs on repeat about how good Louis is, how obsessed he is with Louis’ body, his mind. Louis gets off on it, the way Harry loses control when Louis brushes his nose against Harry’s navel, swallowing around him, and right now is no different.

“Christ,” Harry grits out, hands holding tightly onto Louis’ shoulders, “baby, you’re so good at this.”

Louis bobs his head in response, twists his hand, scrapes just barely with a hint of teeth and it has Harry whining, hands sliding off of Louis and gripping at the sheets.

“So hot,” he murmurs, “so ridiculously gorgeous.”

He licks up the length before he pops off all the way completely, watching the way it jerks in his
hand, precome pearling at the head. He leans down to lick it away, looking up at Harry as he goes, and that’s when Harry snaps, his chest heaving and his breathing heavy.

Harry pushes Louis off of him, hooking his arms around his shoulders and flipping him onto his back in one, fluid motion. He’s pulled that move a thousand times on Louis but it still has him sputtering, caught off guard. He blinks up at him, watching the way Harry’s throat bobs as he swallows, and it makes Louis’ stomach muscles clench. He wants him, wants him all the Goddamn time.

Louis rolls his hips up at the same time Harry pushes him down; it has Louis moaning, Harry clenching his jaw. He’s hard, so hard, and the minor stimulation has him groaning into Harry’s chest, panting against his skin. He feels like he’s been waiting to get off for hours, days, needs some release, and Harry seems to be content taking his sweet fucking time, touching Louis’ overheated skin, rocking down slowly.

“Harry, c’mon,” he grits out, feel like he can’t get enough air in his lungs. “Need your fingers.”

Harry ignores him in favor of kissing his neck, murmuring, “You this hard for me?”

“Jesus Christ, what a fucking stupid question.”

He smiles against Louis’ collarbone, pressing a kiss there, too. “Love when you’re worked up.”

And suddenly, Louis is embarrassingly self conscious. He’s never felt that way with Harry before, not even in the very beginning, not the first time they slept together, not the last. But right now, he needs Harry to tell him he wants him back, even if it’s entirely evident based on his movements, the way he’s looking at Louis. He needs it to be verbal, so afraid to be alone in this, sick of feeling alone.

“Do you want me,” he asks, his voice almost unrecognizable to himself, digging his nails into Harry’s hips. He needs to hear it, to ease the pounding in his chest.

Harry nods instantly, sitting back, perched on Louis’ thighs. He looks down at Louis’ chest as he skims his fingers across Louis’ skin, goosebumps rising. “I have wanted you every single day for six years.”

It’s not the simple yes he was holding his breath for, and it’s worse. It’s so honest, it’s so Harry, and it has Louis whining.

No more talking. Bad idea.

Normally, Louis lives for Harry’s constant praise, loves that he talks so much in bed. It’s one of the fastest ways for Louis to get off, hearing Harry whisper filthy words right into his ear, or tell him how crazy he is about him, unable to stop himself. But Louis is emotionally drained, he’s exhausted, and he can’t watch Harry’s lips form the words that’ll make him fall apart. It’s already too much.

Louis can tell Harry wants to keep talking, but he can’t listen to it without panicking. He grabs Harry’s chin and pulls it down to his mouth, kissing him, shutting him up, and the way Harry kisses back is almost worse than hearing him speak. He bites at Louis’ bottom lip and soothes the sting with his tongue, hips still moving on their own accord, rocking against Louis’ over and over again.

“Wish you could see yourself right now,” Harry mutters. “All torn up for me.”
Stop fucking talking. He squeezes his eyes shut, doesn’t feel like pretending he’s not completely fucked up. “Yeah, for you,” he echoes.

“So hot, baby,” he says on an inhale, kissing Louis again before he pulls back completely, climbing out of bed.

Louis props himself up on his elbows to watch him start rummaging through the suitcase on the floor, his back muscles rippling, so unbearably attractive even when he doesn’t know it. He lays down flat on his back, blinking up at the ceiling, tries to catch his breath.

“Lou? Lube anywhere?”

“Um.” He can’t think, can’t think about fucking anything other than Harry’s back, his arms, his eyes that hold depth and laughter and secrets and make Louis’ knees weak. “Fuck. I don’t know. Might be some in the front pocket. I don’t think I took it out from our last trip.”

“To Vail last year?” he asks, still rummaging. “Good, it’s still here.”

Louis claws at the sheets. “Yes, Vail, and thanks for the update.”

Harry laughs under his breath as he slides back onto the bed, hovering over Louis, eyes wide. “Vail was so fucking good.”

He swallows, remembering the way they skied for 13 hours straight, and even though Louis was dead tired and wanted nothing more than to crawl under the blankets and sleep for a small eternity, Harry had teased him, sucked him off, until Louis was shaking and begging for Harry to do more, eventually coming harder than he ever had. “Was definitely fucking good,” Louis agrees, his voice low.

Harry groans at that, wrapping his arms around Louis’ frame as he grinds down. Harry’s holding on like he wants to remember; Louis is squeezing his eyes, trying to forget.

“Fuck, Harry, okay, it’s enough, just.” He wiggles his hips, body like a spring, coiled, ready to unfurl.

Harry doesn’t answer as he peels himself off of Louis, pushing two fingers into Louis’ mouth. Louis hollows his cheeks, getting them wet, and Harry slides his way down to Louis’ thighs. Louis spreads his legs apart so much, it almost hurts.

“Seriously, focus,” Louis hisses, arching his back when he feels Harry’s finger start to push in, halting.

“How am I supposed to focus on anything when you’re looking at me like that?”

He doesn’t want to know what face he’s making. He throws his arm over his eyes, whispering, “Just go.”

And Harry does.

He works one finger in, then two, and in the darkness of the hotel room, Louis can only make out the outline of Harry’s body, opening him up, lips on his inner thigh, kissing and biting. He does his best to relax into it, but it’s hard when he’s already so on edge, buzzing with the need to come, even worse when Harry’s attention is locked on him, and then Harry adds his tongue along with his fingers and Louis all but whites out. It’s hot, the pressure is perfect, and when Harry crooks his fingers to the left, Louis’ legs spasm.
Harry gives it another few minutes of Louis sweating into the sheets, tiny gasps escaping his lips without permission. He presses soft kisses up Louis’ stomach, his chest, a drastic contrast to the way his fingers are stretching Louis out, and Louis is about to scream, body riddled with shakes, mouth dry as he watches Harry slick himself up with lube. He grabs Louis’ thighs, pushes them apart, murmurs something Louis doesn’t hear, and pushes in all the way. Louis groans at that, Harry inescapable, overwhelming, unfairly perfect.

All he can do there is hang on as Harry moves, each thrust more forceful than the last. Harry doesn’t say much, just pushes into him evenly, steadily, his stomach rubbing against Louis’ cock, the friction just barely there and enough to drive Louis to the brink of insanity. Louis isn’t sure if this is Harry trying to give it to him the best he can for their last time, if he's trying to kill him, or if it's always been this good between them and Louis has somehow forgotten.

“Fuck,” Louis murmurs as Harry changes his angle, “right there, fuck, Harry, please.”

Harry curls into Louis impossibly closer, his hands and his mouth touching everywhere, anywhere. “You’re the best I’ve ever had,” he whispers, no prompting. “Never want anyone else.”

It’s the closest thing to I love you that Louis is gonna allow him to say. He doesn’t answer that, doesn’t know how, just mumbles for Harry to fuck him harder, make him come, make him come now, and Harry listens. He gets his hand around Louis’ cock, grips him just right, jerks him in time with his thrusts. That, combined with the way he’s biting down on his bottom lip, his cheeks bright red, has Louis coming with a shout, every muscle in his body contracting. Harry’s eyes are squeezed shut when he follows suit moments later, breathing out Louis’ name against his lips, body slumping like dead weight.

Louis is still shaking as he drags his hands up and down Harry’s back, trying to soothe Harry, trying to soothe himself. It seems to be working, their breathing slowing down. Harry breaks the silence first with a broken voice.

“Louis, do I have to go back to my room?”

"No,” Louis says instantly. “Stay with me.”

“Thank God.” Harry pulls out slowly, peppering kisses along Louis’ hairline as he moves, and Louis doesn’t realize he’s holding his breath until Harry is laying down beside him, hauling Louis into his arms. His thumbs brush across Louis’ biceps, his breath warm against the back of Louis’ neck. Harry hums, pressing a kiss to the nape of his neck.

“Better than Vail,” he mutters. He tries to make it come out like a joke, but his voice is weak.

He can feel Harry smile against his shoulder. “You’re unbelievable,” he whispers, pulling Louis in closer.

Louis sighs, rests his head against Harry’s shoulder, tries to get his heart to stop racing. He somehow feels both hot and cold. “I need a blanket. Or a sheet.”

The smile widens as he reaches down to pull the comforter up from where it’s been kicked at the end of the bed. “Better?”

“Mmm,” he hums, twisting around in Harry’s grip, now face to face, heavy blanket weighing him down. He doesn’t say anything else, just stares, and he notices Harry’s jaw is red and blotchy. It’s from his stubble, he realizes, and when he brings his finger up to trace along the marks, Harry flinches, the skin probably raw and sore, but he stays completely still otherwise, clearly just wants
to be touched by Louis, his eyes not blinking, not leaving Louis’ face.

They’re quiet, the sound of the AC kicking on combined with the sound of the wind outside the only noise, and Louis swears they’re the only two people on this planet, no one else to be found. He focuses in on the way Harry blinks, the way he licks his lips right before he leans in to kiss Louis slowly, the way he sniffs every so often, his nose cold from the air conditioning. And he can tell Harry’s thinking about something, based on the way he’s swallowing compulsively and blinking too quickly. Louis touches the spot in between Harry’s brows where it’s furrowed, smoothing it out, and Harry’s body immediately goes slack. Louis doesn’t ask what’s going on in his mind, and Harry doesn’t tell.

He has no idea how long they lay there for. He knows he should try to sleep, but he isn’t done touching, looking, being. He wants this for a little bit longer, because in the morning, it won’t be an option anymore. He takes his time, and Harry seems to be okay with that, too.

“Hey,” Harry whispers eventually, cupping Louis’ hip in his hand, “what’re you thinking.”

He smiles briefly, because he must be just as easy to read. He could say so many things. His mind is running, and this would be the perfect time to be honest, especially now that he feels like he’s drowning under the weight of their memories, under the way Harry feels in his hands, the way they move together. Instead, he shrugs. “Wish I had some more of that cake from the wedding. I only had a bite or two but it was so fucking good.”

Harry laughs. “I could go get you some more, if you wanted it.”

“You don’t think that’s all packed up by now?”

He shrugs. “ Probably. But I’d find a way.”

Louis nods, because that’s definitely true. “Like that time before we started dating and you got me that chocolate cake for breakfast.”

“Wait, you remember that?”

He twists a curl around his finger. “I remember most things.”

Harry stares at Louis until he starts to squirm, his gaze too intense, unwavering. “Baby…” mumbles, breathing the word out like a secret. His breath is hot against Louis’ cheek, and Louis knows what he’s going to say. He can feel it. He has to stop it.

“No. Harry, don’t. Please.”

He pauses for a moment, then nods, pressing a kiss to Louis’ shoulder, instead. “But you know, though, right?”

Louis’ voice comes out shakier than he intended on. “Yeah, I know.”

“Okay.”

Slow exhale. “I do, too.”

They lay there for a long time, whispering quietly to one another, Harry’s voice comforting, Louis’ favorite sound. He twists his fingers into Harry’s curls, Harry leaves kisses on the inside of Louis’
wrist.

“I noticed it the last time we were together,” Harry starts out, hushed, “but you’ve lost weight.”

Louis frowns. “Nuh uh.”

“Just a little bit. It’s okay. You’re still stunning.”

“I’m just.” He shrugs. “Stressed.”

Harry nods. “I know.” It sounds a lot like I’m sorry.

He doesn’t know how to respond to that, just shakes his head and ignores it in favor of sliding his hands beneath the sheets, down Harry’s chest, down to his lap. He doesn’t break eye contact as he starts to stroke Harry. Harry winces.

“’m gonna ride you,” Louis says, flicking his wrist. “We have to get up in, like, four hours, but. One more time.” One last time.

Harry breathes out sharply. He seems to understand. “Okay.”

When Louis straddles Harry’s lap and sinks down, his eyes closed, he doesn’t fuck himself down onto Harry like he normally would. He rocks back and forth slowly, feeling every inch, trying to memorize how warm Harry’s hands are, how he’s looking up at him. It takes every ounce of energy he has left to not fall apart, and based on the way Harry can’t stop whispering Louis’ name like a dark secret, obviously just as ripped apart as Louis is, Louis finally doesn’t feel so alone.

Louis wakes up the next morning feeling momentarily tricked into thinking he’s happy. He can feel Harry warm beside him, can smell the linger of his cologne, remembers the way Harry had kissed him and fucked him and touched him until the morning sun was threatening to burst from behind the clouds and spill in through the windows. He squeezes his eyes shut, conflicted if he wants to erase the past 24 hours or savor it.

He rolls over to find Harry already sitting up, sheets pooled around his waist, shirtless, hair pushed back behind his ears. Harry looks down when he hears Louis stirring and smiles weakly.

“Hey.”

Louis forces a smile back. “What’re you doing?”

He shrugs, tracing his finger along the edge of the sheet. “Thinking.”

“Couldn’t do that laying down?”

“No, you were snoring in my face and it was annoying.”

He pinches Harry’s thigh through the sheet. “Fuck off.”

Harry laughs, tracing his thumb across the back of Louis’ knuckles. “Always a morning person.”

It’s achingly familiar, and for a second, Louis almost expects Harry to climb out of bed and grab a sweatshirt from their closet, head into the kitchen, and make them both coffee. Maybe he’ll rent a movie, maybe he’ll brave the freezing Denver weather and head down the block to pick up donuts - a perfect Sunday morning in January.
He shakes his head, sitting up beside Harry. His head pounds. “How much longer until check out?”

“Two hours.” Harry nods toward the door. “I gotta go to my room and pack the rest of my stuff.”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot you had another room.”

“Me, too.” He puts his hand on Louis’ knee. “Lou.”

He knows what Harry is going to say, and it’s too early for this. He hasn’t eaten yet, hasn’t had any caffeine, is too fucking tired in every regard to put on his fight face. He can’t do it. “Don’t.”

“I forgot I had another room because this ,” he says gesturing between them, completely ignoring Louis’ request, “is the most natural thing. Like I’m supposed to be here.”

“Except you’re not.” Louis climbs out of bed, suddenly very aware of the fact that he’s naked. He spins around until he finds his boxers on the floor and yanks them on, Harry’s eyes on him the whole time. “I told you in the hallway, Harry. Last night was it.”

“No. No, it can’t be it,” he replies, voice sounding so, so small, disbelief written all over it. “We’re Harry and Louis.”

Louis clenches his jaw. “You’re Harry. I’m Louis. Separate. That ship has sailed. You’re just caught up in the wedding. It was romantic and we had alcohol and that’s it. It didn’t mean anything.” Even he can hear how weak that sounds. “We can’t just sleep together and pretend everything is fixed. It was a moment of weakness, okay? That’s all it was.”

Harry shakes his head before Louis is even done talking. “That’s a lie and you know it.”

“It’s back to reality. Back to…” He tries to swallow; his throat hurts. “Back to trying to moving on. We’re done pretending.”

“No. No .” Harry grips the sheets in his fists, like he needs something to hold onto. “I stopped pretending the moment I woke up beside you that second morning. I’ve been pretending for an entire year - to be fine, to be happy - and then one week with you and I’m not faking anything anymore. It was really that easy.”

Harry, what the hell, no . It’s not that easy. You can’t kiss me and dance with me and buy me breakfast and say everything is magically fixed. That’s not how this works. We have to be done and we have to move on and why the fuck are you choosing to do this now, on our last fucking day here, Christ.”

“Because you gave me no other choice. It’s like I had to corner you. This is the most you’ve said in a year .”

Louis doesn’t say anything; he’s being called out. Harry keeps going.

“This past year, all I’ve done is miss you, and I feel like I have you again. I can’t break up with you again. I can’t go through that again. I’m not strong enough. I could barely do it the first time.” He shakes his head, like it’ll make Louis change his mind. “I don’t think I can articulate how much I miss you. It’s like… I’m constantly reaching out for you and you aren’t there and I feel like I’m barely getting by without you.”

“This is so unfair,” Louis whispers, “for you to do this right now. You’ve had months to say something and you decided now is the right time? Two hours before we have to leave and get on a plane together? After all the shit we’ve put ourselves through over the past week? Fuck.” He curls
his hands into fists hanging loosely by his sides. “And don’t give me that speech. You are the one who left me.”

“I didn’t want to, Louis,” he argues, brows furrowed. “I never wanted to.”

“Okay, awesome, and that makes it better. Great, time is now turned back and we’re still together. Good work, Styles.”

“You don’t have to be like that.”

“Be like what? Angry? Annoyed? So hurt, I can’t think straight? Because yeah, I think I’m allowed the courtesy of ‘being like that.’ You broke up with me and left me alone in our too big apartment and our cat that you know likes you better and too many pictures and records and, and…” He trails off, hands still balled at his sides, tighter now. His whole body feels on edge.

“And then we came here and we pretended to be what we used to be and I’m going to have to spend the few thousand waking hours getting back to a place where I don’t think I’m going to break down at the mention of your fucking name.”

Harry’s breathing heavily, his eyes red, nostrils flared. “Everything that’s happened between us over the past eight days are the things that I’ve been missing with you for so, so long.” He sounds slightly desperate but gentle, like he’s trying not to spook Louis. “I made a mistake. And now I have clarity. I’m positive.”

“Good for fucking you, Harry,” Louis says, shaking his head. “I’ve had clarity for five years with you. And then we go through a rough patch and you fucking bail. You didn’t even fight for us.”

“Wait, no.” Harry climbs out of bed, finding his own pair of briefs, stands in front of Louis. “You didn’t fight either, Louis. I may have actually said the words out loud, but we both ended it months ago. I just had the fucking guts to say it.”

“Fuck you,” he says under his breath, chest heaving. “Seriously, fuck you.”

“You never said a damn word for months,” Harry continues, “and then when I told you I wanted to move out, you said, ‘Okay.’ That’s all you had to say. Do you have any idea what that did to me? You didn’t fucking care and I just… You didn’t fight either,” he repeats, more timid this time. “Louis, how was I supposed to fix it when you wouldn’t let me? You wouldn’t let me in. You kept pushing me away and I still don’t know why.”

“I was in denial, okay?!” Louis shouts, the words out of his mouth before he was even able to process them. “I was afraid to admit we needed to fix ourselves because that meant there was something to fix. I didn’t want to hear it. I was too afraid to lose you and I was freaked out at the possibility of that happening. And then I fucking lost you, anyway. It felt like a lose-lose situation, no matter what.” He rubs his hands down his thighs mindlessly. “I couldn’t make myself talk. It’s like I was choking on the words and nothing was coming out and my God, I have never felt so afraid or so fucking weak in my life.”

Harry nods, closing his eyes. “I get it, Lou. I felt that way, too. But I pushed through that unbelievable, horrible fucking fear and tried to fight for you. And it seemed like you didn’t want to be fought for. That’s when I started to give up. That’s when I walked out. It takes a lot of nerve to admit that you think you’re failing and need help, and when I tried, you fucking brushed me off. You can say I broke your heart, but mine was broken long before then.” When he opens his eyes again, they’re bright. They’re angry. They’re hurt. “You didn’t try, so I didn’t, either. It wasn’t all my fault and you know that.”
“Okay, no,” Louis starts, thinking how very wrong Harry is. He thinks back on the breakdown that followed Harry’s departure, how Harry obviously isn’t aware that Louis could only spit out the word Okay because if he’d attempted to say anything else, he would have stopped breathing. Louis isn’t about to inform him any of that. He doesn’t owe him that. “We were crumbling for months but I never walked out on you because the idea of being lost beside you felt a hell of a lot appealing than being lost without you.” He looks up at the ceiling, as if he’ll find the answers there, waiting for him. “You gave up on me. You gave up on us. And that’s not what a relationship is. It’s supposed to be hard work but we’re supposed to do it together, not bail when it gets to be too much. That’s not what we were. We were always better than that, always different.” Louis licks his lips. “But maybe not.”

He shifts his weight back and forth between his feet, looking down at the carpet. “I lost my fucking mind, Louis. I fucked up so bad. I couldn’t take the silence anymore and you didn’t ever try to break it and I fucked up. I didn’t know what else to do.”

Louis nods, mindlessly scratching at his arm. “You have always been the solid one, always the one to take care of everything and make sure I was okay and I never had to worry about a damn thing because I had you.” Harry is looking at him, now, but Louis can’t make eye contact. “When I first met you, it took me a matter of weeks to know you would be in my life forever. Like, I never had any doubts. You’d be with me in one way or another. And look at us.” He feels absolutely pathetic, standing in front of his ex, half naked and standing an arm’s length away, far enough to not touch, not allowed to do that anymore from this point forward. “There’s too much damage that’s been done to ever get back to where we were.”

Harry waits a beat, then nods, pursing his lips. His cheeks are bright pink and Louis can tell he’s trying not to cry. He doesn’t mention it. “You’re right,” he says, his voice tight. “I gave up. I didn’t know how to fix us, so I left. Like a fucking coward. Do you know how stupid I feel? Louis.” He takes a step closer, his eyes finally shining. “I am so in love with you, I feel like I can’t breathe. You are the reason for everything I do. I’m going to fix the damage. I’ll reverse it. Let me do it. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Let me try. Please.”

“Stop,” Louis warns, voice wobbling. “Please stop.”

“What the fuck was I thinking?” he asks, sounding slightly hysterical. “I’m so angry all the time, because it’s like my life isn’t even real to me anymore. It’s not fucking real unless you’re there, you’re in it, unless I’m sharing it with you. Fuck, just. My God, Louis, even when I hate you, even when I can’t stand to look at you, I love you so much. You’re, like, the dream I never want to wake up from. I’m not leaving this island unless I’m going home with you,” he pleads, voice trembling. “I love you, okay? I'm in love with you and I don't want to do this without you.”

Louis doesn't realize he's crying until he tastes the salt on his lips. “I love you, too,” he whispers back, because that's never been the problem, and it most likely never will be. Loving Harry is the easiest thing he’s ever done. “But Harry, nothing has changed.”

“I want to change it.”

“Are you still teaching three times a week? And then photography on weekends? And writing in every other free moment you have?”

Harry’s eyes pool over. “Yes.”

“And am I still neck deep in med school? Plus working 35 hours a week? Plus interning at the hospital?”
Long pause. “Yes.”

“Then there’s nothing you can do to change it. Everything is exactly the same. We’re stuck. It’s… It is what it is.”

Harry drags his thumb under his eyes, collecting tears, inhaling sharply. “Don’t say stuff like that and pretend it was only me who stopped fighting,” he whispers. “You clearly did, too.”

Louis swallows, crossing his arms across his chest, suddenly freezing and skin riddled with goosebumps. He doesn’t want to do this anymore. He has to shower and pack and go find Liam and say goodbye, all the while pretending he didn’t just spend the entire night wrapped up in his ex’s embrace, the entire morning fighting and crying with him. “I need to find all my stuff,” he says, looking around the room. “Need to check out soon. Need a banana or a bagel, or something. I don’t know. I’m rambling.”

“Lou…”

“No. It’s done, okay? It needs to be done. Just go back to your room and pack and we’ll meet for the cab.”

“Louis, please,” Harry whispers, eyes darting across Louis’ face.

Louis can feel fresh tears sliding down his face; he doesn’t do anything about them. “You crushed me when you walked out,” he says, voice barely audible. “I’m tired of constantly feeling sad and angry and missing you and the only thing we can do now is move forward. Our situation hasn’t changed, okay? It hasn’t. I… I have to put myself back together, and I can’t do it like this. Please.” He doesn’t know what he’s asking for anymore, but he just needs Harry to give it to him.

Harry closes his eyes, shoulders slumped, looking unbearably small, and Louis fights the urge to pull him into his arms, the way he’s done for the past five years after an argument or bad news or just because he wanted to touch, always wanted to touch. “I’ll meet you in the lobby,” he says, voice cracking on the last word.

Louis nods, heart thumping wildly in his chest.

He’s out of words.

It doesn’t take long for Louis to get everything together and zipped into his suitcase; he wants to get the hell out of this room as quickly as possible, doesn’t want to look back. He stops by Liam and Annie’s room on his way to the lobby, Liam teasing him for wearing sunglasses inside, and Louis doesn’t bother explaining they’re to hide puffy eyes. Instead, he takes the mild abuse, hugging them both and murmuring more congratulatory words, making up a bogus lie that Harry was in the bathroom, would be by shortly to say goodbye, too, suddenly realizing that this entire charade is over. The second Liam and Annie touch back down on Denver soil, he’ll have to retell this entire story, and God, his head fucking hurts just thinking about it.

“Have a safe flight, Tommo,” Liam says, patting Louis on the back.

“Yeah, thanks, guys. See you in a week.”

“Don’t miss us too much.”

He shrugs his backpack over his shoulder, musters up a smile, and heads out into the lobby,
dragging his suitcase behind him. Harry’s already standing at the front desk, chatting with Terri, and he turns when he hears Louis approaching.

“Liam and Annie are up if you wanted to go say bye,” Louis mutters. “We have a few minutes before we need to go.”

“Yeah, I’ll go do that.” Harry readjusts his own sunglasses sliding down the bridge of his nose. “Oh, wait.” He reaches into his carry on bag, pulling out a banana and a bagel. “They didn’t have any peanut butter for the banana, but they had chive and onion cream cheese for the bagel. Figured that would suffice.” He holds out his hand, like a peace offering. “I know you like that stuff.”

Louis fights against the lump in his throat, taking the food from Harry. “Thank you.”

Harry nods, but he doesn’t say anything else.

The flight back home ends up being even worse than the flight there, somehow. Instead of Louis trying to find ways to pick on Harry and get under his skin for the most immature retaliation he could come up with, they’re both completely silent, both conscious not to touch. Louis watches out of his peripheral vision as Harry puts on his headphones and closes his eyes, but he notices a few minutes later that the headphones aren’t attached to his iPod or connected to the TV on the headrest in front of him.

“Harry,” Louis says, twisting in his seat to look at Harry.

Harry doesn’t answer, doesn’t even flinch, even though Louis knows Harry can hear him, clearly doing his best to not have to converse at all.

About an hour later, though, Harry falls asleep for real, his breathing even, eyelids fluttering every so often, and when he slumps down in his seat and rests his head against Louis’ shoulder, Louis doesn’t dare move.

There’s about four hours left of the flight, four hours left to pretend that this is all okay. He sinks down into his chair, too, breathing in the scent of Harry’s lingering shampoo, the warmth of Harry pressed up against him making him feel safe, like nothing can touch him.

Four more hours of this.

Just as long as Harry doesn’t know, he’ll give himself this one, he’ll let himself slide.

Inhale, exhale.

They touch down just after dinner. It’s too early to sleep, but all Louis wants to do is climb into his bed, pull the blankets up over his head, and not come up for air for the rest of the week.

He follows Harry out of the airport, their bags amongst the first few to arrive at baggage claim, and once they’re standing on the freezing cold sidewalk outside, Harry asks through chattering teeth, “Want to get a cab together? We’ll pass your apartment on the way to mine.”

Louis shakes his head, thinking that he still doesn’t actually know where Harry lives. He’s never asked, didn’t want a visual. “It’s alright. My mom has Prudence. I have to go pick her up. Lottie can probably drive me back home from there, if she’s around.”
“You sure? I can go with you.”

“No. Harry. Go home. I’m sure I’ll see you around at some point.”

Harry bites at his bottom lip, more words clearly on the tip of his tongue, but he refrains, taking a step backward. “Alright.”

He doesn’t really know how to walk away. It’s unbearably uncomfortable, Harry’s gaze strong and unwavering, as if he’s expecting Louis to change his mind or punch him, maybe, or something other than stand there stupidly, body shaking from the cold. He fishes into his pocket for his phone. “I’m gonna call Lottie.”

“Okay.”

He swallows heavily, trying to figure out how to do this, how to sever himself from Harry for the first time for real, hating every second of it. “Text me when you get home? Looks like it’s starting to snow.”

Harry nods, looking down at the ground. “I will.”

It feels unfinished when he turns away without another word, dragging his suitcase across the wet pavement. He hails for a cab, doing his best not to look back at Harry, and when he slides into the car across the leather seats, giving the driver his mom’s address, he has a nagging thought in the back of his mind that this is truly day one of being alone. There’s no more Hawaii looming in the horizon, no more prospect of Harry, no more boyfriend to come home to, pretend or real. He leans his head against the cool glass of the window, watching the airport whizz by, accepting the sinking feeling in his gut. It’s not a new feeling, and it never seems to leave.

He gets a text from Harry about 45 minutes later, just as he’s entering his mom’s neighborhood. I’m home .

Louis doesn’t answer, just turns his phone off completely, instead, and after he pays a hefty cab fee, he makes his way inside his house. It smells the same, like cinnamon candles, and sounds the same, too, loud and hectic. His siblings greet him like they always do - as if he’s the most important person on the planet - and his mom pulls him in for a hug that seems to last longer every time he sees her. It’s all comforting, safe, familiar…

It’s not what he wants. It’s not enough.

“Mom, can I stay tonight? Weather is shitty,” he lies.

“Of course, baby. I’ll grab you some blankets.”

He goes to bed with Prudence curled up on his chest, purring softly, and just as he’s finally drifting off, he hopes that maybe this will be the night he finally has a dreamless sleep.

Around three in the morning, he wakes up in a cold sweat. He doesn’t remember every detail of the nightmare, but he has an idea.
Louis ends up staying with his family for the rest of the weekend and into late Wednesday.

He knows he needs to get back home and wash about 37 loads of laundry, do some basic grocery shopping, and log back into his online classes now that break is over, but he can’t force himself to move, to pack up Prudence, to pretend that any of that seems appealing. Instead, he watches movies with the older twins, draws and paints with the younger, spends time with his mom in the kitchen, laughs and jokes in every spare moment in between. He doesn’t want to leave them, especially when he knows what’s waiting for him back at his apartment: a whole bunch of nothing.

His mom treads lightly, obviously aware that something is wrong, but she doesn’t press it and Louis is grateful. It’s the first time in a long time that he hasn’t been agonizing over his relationship and it feels good to not think, to not feel like he has to dwell on a thousand little details that threaten to break him down piece by piece.

Lottie, however, is less cautious than their mother.

“It’s ridiculous,” she says late Sunday night as she pours herself a drink, “that you’re being this stubborn.”

“Excuse me?”

“If you want him back, then do it. He’d gladly take you.”

Louis makes a face. “You don’t have any idea what you’re talking about.”

She raises a brow. “Sure.”

“And anyway, I’m not going to say anything to him. He was the one who broke up--”

“For the love of God,” she interrupts. “I can’t hear you say that anymore. You’re starting to sound like Ross fucking Gellar with his ‘we were on a break’ bullshit.”

“But they were on a--”

“Oh my God, shut up. Louis.” Lottie sets her glass down on the counter and crosses her arms across her chest. “Harry loves the hell out of you. If you want to fix it, go fucking fix it. If you’re ready to start trying to be without him, then do that. But complaining and moping will get you nowhere. It’s time to decide.”

Louis taps his foot on the tile, annoyed that she’s right. “Mom is a lot nicer than you, you know.”

“Not my job to coddle you.”

“Yeah, you just made that extremely clear.” He reaches for his phone, typing in his password to unlock it. “Go away. I have to make a call.”

“Are you calling Harry?”

“No, I’m calling someone who will coddle me.”

She rolls her eyes. “Can’t believe you’re seven years older than me, it’s like I’m babysitting you.”

“Okay, that’s enough.” Louis grabs his sweatshirt and makes his way into the garage, looking over
his shoulder to make sure no one is following him. It’s freezing; his breath comes out in puffs as he pulls the hood up over his head and slides into the driver’s seat of his mom’s car. He clicks the overhead light on and off several times before leaving it off and closes his eyes, counts to ten, has to work up the nerve to make the call.

He picks up on the third ring.

“Tommo?”

“Okay, listen, I know you’re on your honeymoon and I’m so sorry I’m calling but I couldn’t not talk to you,” Louis says quietly, forehead leaning against the leather steering wheel. “I have to tell you something.”

“What? What’s wrong?” Liam asks, concern written all over his voice, and Louis already wants to cry.

“We, um.” Spit it out. Get used to saying it. “Harry and I. We broke up.”

Liam laughs through the phone. “Funny.”

“I’m not trying to be funny….”

“Good joke,” he continues, “as if I didn’t just see you guys together for the past week.”

Well, at least they were convincing. “Liam, we’ve been broken up for months.”

The laughter dies down, Liam obviously understanding Louis’ tone. “I’m sorry, what?”

“We broke up in October,” Louis says, rubbing his eye, “and figured it would be easier to not say anything to you so you didn’t have to worry about it.”

Liam is quiet. “I don’t get it.”

He resists the urge to slam his head repeatedly into the steering wheel. “We’re not together, Liam. That’s really all you need to know.”

“Hold on. You’re telling me that you and Harry broke up three months ago and decided the best plan of action was to pretend you were still dating so it didn’t disrupt my wedding plans?”

Louis groans. “Yes.”

“Do you realize how fucking crazy that sounds?”

He groans louder. “It wasn’t my idea.”

“But you went along with it.”

“For you! We didn’t want to fuck up your wedding week!”

“That is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard, Louis.”

“Fuck you, I called thinking you would be nice but you’re worse than Lottie.”

Liam laughs. “Hey, I love you guys for thinking you had to do that for me but you know that was absolutely not necessary, right? We would have figured it out.”
Louis nods even though Liam can’t see him. “Yeah. I think… I think I liked the idea of Harry still wanting to be with me. So I went along with it.”

He’s quiet, probably thinking. “Do you want to talk about it? About what happened?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Okay.”

Louis leans back in the chair. He’s still cold. “I hate my internship.”

“At the hospital? What does that have to do with anything?”

“I hate it. I see the cafeteria on the first floor more than I see my boyfriend. My ex-boyfriend,” he corrects, gripping the phone tighter. “I’m an asshole. All I’ve done is blame Harry for this. Over and over and over again.”

“Ah. Lou…”

His vision goes blurry. He’s so fucking tired of crying. “It was both of us. It was both of us. Why can’t I spit out an apology? What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I admit we both lost sight of what was really important and then we fell apart? Why can’t.” He’s rambling, pauses to listen to Liam breathing through the line. “I hate this. What am I supposed to do.”

“I’m so sorry Louis,” Liam murmurs, and he sounds like he really means it. “I wish I had known.”

“I didn’t want you to. That was the whole point.”

“I wish I had known,” he repeats, firmer this time. “No more pretending, okay?”

He takes a shaky breath. “I’m tired of lying. I need you to be honest.”

“Alright.”

“What do I do.”

“Shit, Louis, I don’t--”

“Tell me. Tell me what to do.”

Liam clears his throat. “I’m not going to give you instructions, but I think we both know you’re happiest when you’re with that boy. I don’t know the whole story and I’m not quite sure why either of you gave up so quickly…” He pauses and sighs. “You should probably go to him.”

Louis wants to protest, that it’s too late, that he didn’t give up too quickly, that he can be happy on his own. But. “Yeah. I know.”

“To which part?”

“All of it.”

Liam hums. “You gonna call him?”

“I don’t know,” Louis replies honestly. “Probably not. It’s too much to think about right now.”

“Can I make a safe bet that you’re still at your mom’s?”
He smiles. “Mhm. I’m still here.”

“Go home. You’re not going to be able to figure out anything hiding away there.”

“I know. Why else do you think I haven’t left yet.”

Liam laughs. “Hey. You’ll be okay.”

Louis almost believes him. He ignores the pounding his head as he opens the car door, ready to head back inside, grab his shit, leave. It’s time. It needs to be.

On the ride back to his house with Prudence in the back seat and Lottie in the driver’s, Louis goes over in his head how much of a complete and utter jackass he’s been. To Harry, to himself. He doesn’t necessarily know how to move forward, doesn’t know where or how to start, but he does know he owes Harry an apology. Maybe after he can force out an I’m sorry, the rest will come a little easier.

Maybe. Hopefully.

The snow is coming down steadily by the time Lottie pulls up to Louis’ apartment, the headlights reflecting off the glare of the snowflakes. It feels like they’re in a snowglobe. Louis shakes his head as he starts to gather his things; another fucking storm.

“Lottie, I’m not sure I want you driving home in this,” he says, squinting. “Do you want to stay with me and head back in the morning?”

“No, I’ve had enough of your moping for a while.” Lottie puts the car into four-wheel drive. “All good.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, Mom, it’s only 12 miles.”

Louis nods, readjusting his backpack strap over his shoulder. “Call me if you get stuck anywhere. Or need anything.”

She sighs. “I will.

“Okay. Thanks for bringing me back.”

“No problem.” She cranks the dial on the heat, the air blasting. “I’m sorry everything sucks right now. It’ll get better.”

He looks down at the ground, his feet crunching in the snow. “I hope so.”

Louis drags his luggage behind him in one hand, carrying Prudence’s cat carrier in the other, teeth chattering in the freezing cold. Since arriving back in Denver, he hasn’t once wanted to go back to Hawaii, but the windchill is making him reconsider.

The first thing he notices when he kicks open the front door to his apartment is the smell of the heat from the vents. It feels nice, thawing him from the cold, but then he groans.

“Shit, did I leave the heat turned up this high the entire time I was gone?” he says out loud to
himself. “Shit, fuck, how did I forget that.”

“No, I turned it up when I got here,” a voice replies from the other room. “It was freezing. And jeez, Lou, I was starting to think you’d moved into your mom’s house. It’s Wednesday. Oh, and we’re out of milk.”

Louis almost stops breathing as he peers around the corner. “I know what day it is. What are you doing in my living room. You told me you went home.”

Harry is sitting on the couch watching TV, feet up on the coffee table, like he never left in the first place. “I know. I am home.”

“No, what the fuck. How did you even get in?” He feels off balance, completely thrown. “Harry, what are you doing.”

“I’ve been saying for years that a key under the doormat is the shittiest place to hide it. Anyone could get in.”

Louis gestures at him. “Yeah, case in point.”

Harry runs his fingers through his hair, reaching for the remote. He mutes the TV. “The cab driver asked where I wanted to go.” He shrugs. “I wanted to go here.”

“Yeah, well, I want to go to Paris, but you don’t see me fucking off there. It doesn’t work that way, Harry, Christ.”

“I’ll take you to Paris,” he says surely. “If that’s what you want, I’ll do it.”

Louis drags his hands across his face. “What are you trying to do, I don’t underst--”

“You became the subject of all my pictures again,” Harry says, cutting him off. He looks up at Louis, his eyes bright. “You’ve been missing for so long and then, over the course of a week, you came back. We fell back into place. It’s like you were never gone. So many gorgeous photos of you, and I just. I can’t go back to a camera roll without you, or an apartment without you, or a life without you. Now that I know what it feels like to not have you, I can’t go back to that. I won’t.”

He clenches and unclenches his fists, his heart racing. “We can’t just…”

“I can’t lose you, Louis.”

“But. You already did. It’s done.” It sounds weak, even to Louis.

“No. I refuse to accept that.” Harry’s eyes dart frantically across Louis’ face. “I lost myself and then I lost you, too, but I’m ready to find it all again. You asked me why I’m here. I’m here to figure this out. I’m here because I wanted to come home.” He bites on his bottom lip. “I’m here to fight.”

Louis shakes his head, a lump in his throat. “What are you talking about.”

He gets up off the couch and stands in front of Louis. He leaves a few feet of space between them, jamming his hands into his pockets. “You told me I gave up and I didn’t fight hard enough for us. So that’s what I’m here to do. Because you’re right, I didn’t fight for you. Not hard enough, anyway. Not the way you deserved. Not the way we deserved. So I’m gonna fight, and you’re gonna fight back, because you owe it to us, too. This can’t all be on me, okay?”
“That’s not what I meant, Harry.” He feels like he could start begging at any moment. Please, stop. Please don’t make this harder. “You shouldn’t be here.”

He rocks back and forth on his feet. “Okay, fine I’ll start. Everything I’ve wanted to say that I never did.”

“Harry…” Louis warns.

“I hate that you grind your teeth in your sleep. I keep asking you to go to the dentist to get it figured out but you keep ignoring me. You’re gonna get migraines. Or ruin your teeth. And it keeps me awake at night. Why won’t you go to the dentist?”

He makes a face. “That is what you want to fight me on? Are you serious?”

“I hate that you never wash your cereal bowls out,” Harry continues. “The dishwasher is right fucking next to the sink. Would it honestly kill you to put them away?”

Louis crosses his arms over his chest, pursing his lips. He doesn’t say anything.

“I hate how you eat Oreos. You’re supposed to twist the tops off and eat the icing. Why the hell do you bite into them?”

“Because I’m not a fucking five-year-old!”

“You know how much I hate Dateline,” Harry says, looking up at the ceiling. “You know it gives me nightmares. Even when I ask you to turn it off, you ignore me. Why are you always ignoring me. I talk, and you don’t fucking listen.”

Louis’ chest hurts, hearing the double meaning. “That’s not--”

“And more than anything, I hate that you pushed me away. You didn’t let me try to fix us. You shut me out completely.”

He licks his lips. He feels like he could scream. “No, I didn’t,” he mumbles, a blatant lie.

Harry looks desperate. “Yes, you did. Louis. Fight me. Fight me back.” He has tears pooling in his eyes, his lips are parted, and that’s when it clicks for Louis, that’s the moment he finally gets it. Harry was just as afraid to lose Louis, and he needed to hear Louis fight for him. Louis never did. Not once. He thinks he might be sick.

“I’m.” Louis tries to spit out the words; they seem to be caught in his throat.

He takes a step closer, so they’re only a foot away now. “Fight. Back.”

Fuck, everything hurts. He wanted to leave this behind in Honolulu, not have to deal with this anymore, but Harry’s in front of him and he’s wearing Louis’ t-shirt and he has tears rolling down his cheeks and Louis thinks he might stop breathing.

He tries to keep his breathing even, looking everywhere but Harry’s eyes. “I hate that you never remember to fill the ice cube trays,” he says quietly.

Harry nods, exhaling, shoulders slumping. “What else.”

“I hate that you always feel the need to correct everyone’s grammar. You can shut up sometimes, you know.”
“You’re right. It’s annoying.”

Louis’ own eyes well up. “I hate that I don’t know what you’ve been writing for the past six months. I hate that I almost forgot how to use your camera last week, because it had been so long since I’d used it. I hate that our bed is too big without you.”

He pulls his hands out of his pockets and grips Louis’ wrists, rubbing his thumb across his skin. “I hate all of that, too.”

Shit, he’s really crying now. “I hate how selfish I was. I hate that I couldn’t tell you I was panicked and I pushed you out the door, I did, I know I did. I hate that we both decided we couldn’t have careers and each other. I hate that I relied on you to take care of everything and that you’re still the one trying to fix it.”

Harry lets go of Louis’ wrists in favor of wrapping his arms around him, holding him achingly tightly. “It’s okay. Lou, it’s okay.”

Louis shakes his head, lets Harry thread his fingers through his hair. “It’s not okay, though,” he whispers against Harry’s chest. “I was so pathetically afraid. I didn’t know how to say it and you weren’t there so I shut down and I really am fucking five-years-old.”

Harry doesn’t laugh, just keeps touching him. “You’re saying it now, though.”

“Harry.” He forces himself out of Harry’s arms and takes a step back. “It’s too late for me to say it. You’ve moved out. We’re… Over.”

He shakes his head. “Sunday morning, you told me that when you first met me, it only took you a matter of weeks to know that we’d be in each other’s lives forever. Lou, I knew in a matter of days. I can’t remember what it feels like not to love you. I’m not leaving.” He winces at himself. “Again.”

Louis takes a minute to breathe. He can either push Harry away for the hundredth time, make him go home, and start to finally sever himself from their relationship, or he can fall back into the person who knows him inside and out, loves him with a fierceness that’s intimidating, the same person that walked out, then walked back in like it was nothing.

He must be quiet for a beat too long because Harry drops his chin to his chest. “Louis, please let me come home.”

That’s all it takes for Louis to stop thinking. He knows what he wants, what he needs to do. He’s nodding before he can stop himself, murmuring, “Okay, yes, come home, come home, we’ll figure it out, just come home,” and instantly, Harry’s mouth is on his, his hands on Louis’ back, holding him close, closer. Harry buries his face in Louis’ neck, breathing shakingly, whispering that he missed him so much, that he’s so sorry. Louis grips him as tightly as he can, murmurs back the same words, and for the first time in months, Louis doesn’t feel like his heart is breaking.

It’s a start. It’s everything.

It’s 11 o’clock by the time Dominos knocks on the door. Louis suggested pizza, Harry agreed instantly, and Louis honestly doesn’t care if Harry was just going along with it so quickly because he didn’t want to start an argument. He’s that hungry.

They settle in on the couch together. Louis reaches for a slice of pizza, hoping it isn’t evident that
he’s feeling slightly uncomfortable in his own home and, instead, scoffs at the way Prudence makes herself cozy on Harry’s lap.

“Told you she likes you better.”

Harry smirks, scratching behind her ears. “I missed her. I missed you, too.”

Louis hums. “I started trying to come up with things for you to pick up just so I could see you.”

“Oh, yeah? Like what?”

He shrugs. “I found a shoelace of yours in the closet. Thought about calling you to come get it.”

“I would have, probably.”

Louis smiles briefly as he picks at his pizza. “This isn’t going to all be fixed in one night.”

“I know.”

“It’s gonna take a while.”

“Most likely.”

“I don’t really know where to start,” he admits.

Harry puts his free hand on Louis’ thigh. “I’ll start.”

He pauses. “Okay.”

Harry tells Louis about how frustrating it was to come home to an apartment where he felt like he couldn’t talk, felt like he couldn’t save a person that didn’t want to be saved. He squeezes Louis’ leg when he talks about the first time he realized they were slipping, how he felt like a jackass hiding away at the college, how Louis’ apparent lack of interest in their relationship made Harry feel like complete shit. And Louis listens, even though he doesn’t want to hear most of it. It’s like he somehow managed to convince himself that he was the only one struggling, that Harry had no feelings, that it was all one-sided. He waits for Harry to finish talking, his voice quiet as he tells Louis about his phone call with Gemma many, many weeks ago.

“Gemma told me I would know what to do. I thought that meant giving a half-assed job as salvaging us before I gave up entirely. Or maybe if I left, that’s when you would have finally said something. And it’s, just.” Harry shakes his head. “I would have been okay eventually, I think. But why would I want to be just okay? I am the happiest I’ve ever been when I’m with you, even through all the bullshit we’ve gone through together. I love you so much, it hurts sometimes.”

Louis swallows; he feels frozen. Now is not the time to choke up. “I feel the same way.”

“I knew from the moment I moved out that it was a stupid decision,” Harry continues. “But then you didn’t try to stop me and I thought maybe we were on different pages. I didn’t know how to handle that. I’m not sure I would have ever figured out how to.”

Louis leans his head against the back of the couch. “I would have said something, Harry. To be completely honest, I probably would have snapped.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was too quiet for too long. If Hawaii hadn’t happened, I’d most likely be at your apartment right
now, banging down the front door, demanding why you were able to leave me behind so easily. I’d need more answers.”

Harry smiles and grabs Louis’ hand, kissing the back of it. “It wasn’t easy. But I would have given you all the answers, if you asked, or if you let me talk about it. You know that, right?”

“I was afraid to hear the answers,” he says, and sighs. “I never wanted you to go. I just couldn’t get the words out.”

He nods. “I know that now.”

Louis looks around the apartment, at the photo of the two of them still resting on the shelf near the TV that he couldn’t bring himself to take down, at the potted plant Anne gave them as a gift when they first moved in, at the peeling wallpaper above the doorframe that he’s been bugging Harry to take care of for months because he can’t reach. “Alright, while we’re being honest…”

“Yes?”

Louis squirms around on the cushion. “Are we still doing the whole, ‘no more secrets’ thing?”

“Ideally.”

“Okay. So. Remember that first weekend you came back to our apartment to pack up all your stuff and talk about Liam’s wedding plans, and you suggested not telling anyone that we weren’t together?”

“I do, yes.”

“And I was a giant pain in the ass about it.”

Harry nods, rolling his eyes. “Understatement.”

“I was, uh.” He makes a face at himself. “I was hoping that the time in between the breakup and the wedding, we would have fixed everything and would have gotten back together by then. Coming up with a plan felt too real and I hated it. So I was just kind of, like. In denial.” He picks at the fabric on the couch. “I think I was the whole time. Right up until this past weekend.” It feels like a giant weight has been lifted, even just admitting that tiny part. He looks over at Harry. “I’m so sorry.”

“Hey,” Harry whispers, sliding across the couch, pulling Louis into his arms. “I’m sorry, too.” He presses a kiss to the top of Louis’, lingering, and Louis feels so achingly safe.

Harry doesn’t say anything else, and neither does Louis. He has a lot he wants to get out, now that he feels like he can, but the apartment is warm and Harry is warmer. His eyelids are starting to close, lulled by the way Harry’s gently rubbing circles in between his shoulder blades.

“Lou,” he murmurs, his own voice riddled with fatigue, “do you think we’re a little codependent on each other?”

“Mmm. Probably.”

He laughs lightly. “I don’t rely on you to keep me happy. I want to rely on you. I think that’s the difference. I could function without you, but why would I want to?”

“Harry,” he whispers. His heart is suddenly hammering like mad, can’t come up with the right
words to say.

“Can’t believe I found someone to love this much.”

Louis twists out of Harry’s arms, needs to look at his face. “I don’t know how to do this.”

“Do what?”

“Do I ask you to come to bed with me? Like, it’s your bed, too.”

Harry smirks, relief written all over his face, like he thought Louis would change his mind. “Is it? My bed, too?”


He’s less tired when he watches Harry strip out of his clothes in their dimly lit bedroom, within the walls that haven’t seen him in too many moons. He’s less tired when Harry comes up behind him as he’s brushing his teeth, and kisses Louis’ shoulders, his neck, his chin. He’s less tired when Harry covers him like a blanket, sheets twisted by their ankles, and when he tells Harry he loves him, can’t not say it, repeats I’m sorry until he doesn’t feel like he’s choking anymore, Harry whines against his lips, his hips stuttering, his forehead damp against Louis’. He whispers to Louis that he loves him, too, and no, Louis isn’t tired anymore. Not at all.

Louis wakes up the next morning alone, but he can hear Harry padding around in the kitchen. He sounds like he always does when he’s rummaging in the cabinets looking for coffee filters, and it makes Louis smile. He’s home, his boy is home.

He climbs out of bed and shrugs into a sweatshirt before he joins Harry on the other side of the door, trying and failing to smooth the cowlick on the back of his hair down, knowing Harry will tease him for it regardless. His glasses are smudged with greasy fingerprints all across the lenses, and he squints through them, tripping over his unpacked suitcase, stubbing his toe, nearly falling flat onto his face. Normally, he’d grumble about it, or curse loudly, but there’s his boy at the sink, filling the ice cube trays.

He turns when he hears Louis approaching. “Hi, baby,” he murmurs. “Sleep well?”

Louis nods, blush creeping up his cheeks. “Yeah. Someone kept hogging the blankets, though.”

“I should have a talk with him.”

“You should,” Louis agrees.

He places the trays in the freezer. “I did a lot of thinking over the past few days--”

“That’s never good.”

“--when I was stuck here alone, waiting for you to cut the cord and leave your mom’s.” Harry smirks. “I think you might be right. These yellow walls are actually kind of hideous.”

Louis shrugs as he crowds Harry up against the cabinets, Harry going willingly. “Eh, I don’t know. They’ve grown on me.”
It still feels a bit like walking on glass. There are a lot of unspoken thoughts, a lot of questions, that they haven’t yet gone over, and they’re both painfully aware of it. As Louis unpacks his suitcase and tosses everything into the laundry basket by the bathroom, Harry’s phone goes off. He looks down and winces.

“What’s with the face? Who is it?” Louis asks, dumping everything from out of his backpack.

“No one.”

“Wow, what a unique and creative lie.”

Harry rolls his eyes. “Go back to your laundry.”

“No, for real. Were you, like.” He waves his hands around, pit in his stomach. “I dunno, dating, in the past few months?”

“Are you serious? You think I just skirted around my lover?”

“I don’t know! You’re being shady!”

Harry scoffs. “To be clear, I haven’t dated anyone other than you since the dawn of time. You have to know how ridiculous you sound. And that was the college calling.”

“Oh.”

“Wanted to see how I was feeling.”

Louis sorts through the mess of carry on items on the floor. “Why would they be asking that?”

“Called out all this week. Wanted to make sure we were okay before I started working again.”

“Harry… You can’t not work. I’m going back tomorrow. And I’m logging back into classes later today. Life doesn’t stop because we have issues.”

Harry looks down at the floor. “That’s the problem, though.”

“What is?”

“Life didn’t stop when we had problems, and look what happened.” He runs his fingers through his hair; his voice is a little unsteady when he continues. “I’m making you my priority, and I need to make sure you’re doing the same thing. Because this,” he says, gesturing between them, “is what matters. Everything else comes second. We have to find a way to include each other into all aspects of our lives. I want to.”

Louis nods slowly, but doesn’t say anything else.

“And the look on your face when I said it was the college calling.” Harry shakes his head. “We have to do something about that, Lou. Our careers can’t be sore topics. I’m not… losing you again to a fucking job. I won’t allow that to happen.”

He looks at the sheer volume of crap from his luggage. It’s going to take forever to sort through. It’ll still be the easiest part of his day. “We need a solution, then. Because as far as I know, we have the same work schedules and we’re both doing the exact same thing we’ve been doing for a year. That has proven in the past to obviously not work for us.”

Harry licks his lips. “The campaigning is over.”
Louis raises his brow. “Yes… It is.”

“And, like, I write for the political column.”

“Politics don’t stop when the election ends.”

“No, but now I don’t have to go to rallies and follow two separate candidates and essentially dedicate my life to writing about it. I’m allowed to cut back now. Or, rather, I told them I’m cutting back.”

“You told them you’re cutting back?” Louis repeats, surprised. “Is that allowed?”

Harry gets out of his chair from the kitchen table and sits down on the floor beside Louis. “Not really. We’ll see what happens. But, the thing is.” He pauses to push Louis’ hair out of his eyes. “If I had to choose between writing for the column and you, I would choose you, every single time.”

“But you love that column.”

He shrugs. “Sure. But I love you more.”

Louis swallows. “I don’t want you to resent me. This already feels like trouble. You giving up a full-time job you’re crazy about just because--”

“Not ‘just because.’ No. You mean more to me than anything. I lost sight of that. I told you in Honolulu that I have clarity now. I know what’s important. And what’s important is you.” Harry pushes his bare feet under Louis’ thighs, like he’s using Louis’ body to stay warm. “The only thing I could ever resent is myself, knowing I could have prevented any hurt between us.”

It’s a lot to be loved by Harry; that much, Louis has always known. He loves with his whole heart, his whole being, and Louis still can’t believe that he gets to be one of the chosen people Harry holds so close to him. He drags his finger down Harry’s forearm, wondering if his tear ducts will ever quit it. “I love you.”

Harry smiles. “How did I get so lucky?”

He squeezes Harry’s wrist, holding on. “Funny. I was just thinking the same thing.”

That weekend, they head to Harry’s apartment together. Harry was able to get out of his lease - just needs to pay the next month’s rent - and is free to move back in with Louis. Permanently. Louis told Harry he’d bought a matching set of ankle monitors so neither of them can stray too far, courtesy of the Denver Police Department. Harry laughed, but Louis made a face.

“Not quite sure why you think I’m joking, but okay.”

It’s not a far drive between their current place and Harry’s studio, and it turns out to be a building Louis has driven past several times, oblivious that it was Harry’s new home. Harry puts the car into park and turns to look at Louis.

“It’s not much,” Harry warns, can already tell that Louis is obviously not pleased. “And the inside is even worse, somehow. But that’s my own doing. I didn’t unpack, really, which makes it easier for us to load everything up…”

Louis frowns. “I hate it.”

“I knew you would,” he says, laughing.
“No, I really hate it.”

“It’s not that bad, Lou. Just not as nice as what we live in now.”

“There are bars on the windows!”

“Which is a good thing. Extra security.”

He groans. “Let’s get you the hell out of here.”

Harry laughs again. “Okay.”

It’s a dump.

The apartment itself isn’t terrible, but it’s obvious Harry has been using the space mainly to sleep and shower only. The refrigerator is completely empty, his clothes are still in boxes, and his twin mattress is pushed up against the far wall on the floor, no box spring or headboard.

“Good fucking God, Styles,” Louis says, kicking a pair of shoes out of the way. “This just proves that I am the one with the impeccable taste and, apparently, hygiene. This place is disgusting.”

Harry rolls his eyes. “I was barely ever here.”

“Yeah, I’ll say.” He puts his hands on his hips and looks around. “Well. At least this isn’t gonna take more than an hour or two. It’s essentially a big closet. Hand me the tape.”

They work side by side for half an hour in silence, Harry shoving loose items into already stuffed boxes, Louis taping them up, and once they have the living room/bedroom under control, Louis sits down on the ground, crossing his legs. His face must be projecting his wary thoughts, because Harry stills, too.

“You okay?”

Louis shrugs. “I hate that you had to live here.”

“It’s a safe building, Louis, it’s fine. I never had any issues with it, I swear.”

“No, I just hate that you had to live anywhere that wasn’t with me.”

Harry stuffs an armful of towels into an empty box. “I moved out. You didn’t tell me to.”

“I also didn’t tell you to stay.”

“Okay, while that’s true, we can’t do this forever.” He sits down on the mattress, his knees pulled up to his chest. “Neither of us can keep going over it. Stop beating yourself up. We’re not going to be able to move forward if we keep focusing on what’s behind us.”

Louis nods. He’s right. “Can I say something?”

“If I said no, would that actually stop you.”

He holds up his middle finger and Harry smiles. “I’ve been thinking for the past few days, before you told me about cutting back on hours for the column. You can’t be the only one making some changes. I have to meet you halfway. I didn’t do that before.”
Harry traces his finger along the edge of the mattress. “What’d you have in mind?”

“I talked to Danny this morning about changing my hours at the restaurant. He gave me two nights off during the week. I’m gonna have to work Saturday afternoons to make up the hours, but I figured it evens out because you’re usually shooting with clients on Saturdays, anyway, and then we have two nights a week to have dinner together, or to go out.” He shrugs. “Baby adjustments, I guess.”

“Baby adjustments,” he repeats, nodding. He looks at Louis and grins. “I can’t wait to have dinner with you again.”

Louis releases the breath he didn’t know he was holding. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Harry leans over to press a kiss to Louis’ throat, his cheek. “Let’s get the hell out of this apartment. I wanna take you on a date.”

He lolls his head to the side when Harry’s lips start trailing back down his jaw. “What’d you have in mind?”

“I’ll figure something out.”

He does; they both do.

They go to a small, hole in the wall Mexican restaurant downtown. Louis drinks too many margaritas, Harry orders another round of queso and tortilla chips to go, and when they get home, it feels remarkably like it used to, before all the bullshit. Louis kicks off his shoes and complains that the lights are too bright, Harry rolls his eyes and hits the dimmer, mumbling, “It’s a good thing you’re cute because otherwise, this bratty charade would not fly.”

“Mhm,” Louis agrees. “Mind heating up the queso for me?”

“You suck,” he says under his breath, but then he’s in the kitchen, opening up the microwave door before Louis can get another word in.

It’s the first of many dates. They take their time falling back into their relationship, cautious not to take on too much too quickly, and it’s definitely the right thing to do. There’s less pressure this way. It seems backwards when he tries to explain it to Niall (who is over the moon ecstatic when he finds out his “dads are calling off the divorce”), seeing as they live together and are “taking it slow,” but it’s working. They aren’t arguing, and they’re finding the energy to focus on the small things, the intimate details that they’d lost along the way. It feels a lot like falling in love all over again, and Louis can’t believe he has the opportunity to do so twice in his short lifetime.

There are still times that it feels impossible, like moving forward and getting over their setbacks will never happen. Harry seems to be resistent to talk about his classes, answering with a simple, “Work was good,” after Louis asks, both of them unsure of how to discuss the pieces of their lives that initially drew them apart. And when Louis gets called in for an extra shift at the restaurant, or gets stuck at the hospital much longer than he anticipated, he feels guilty, almost, when he calls Harry to let him know. Of course, Harry is never angry about it, but there’s disappointment in his voice, a little bit of fear. Like he’s afraid one night will set them back in weeks of progress.

Louis won’t let that happen. Not again.
The weekend before Valentine’s Day, Louis finds Harry on the couch, going through his camera roll with a concentrated look on his face. Louis watches the way Harry’s thumb goes back and forth across the dial, clearly stuck between two or three photos, trying to choose the best one. He works up the courage to lay down on the couch, putting his head in Harry’s lap. Harry looks down and smirks.

“Hello, can I help you with something?”

“What’re you looking at?”

Harry aims the camera down, and Louis smiles when he sees pictures of Liam and Annie during the wedding week. “I realized I still haven’t picked a photo to have framed for them. There are some really decent ones. I want to choose the best.” He pauses. “Help me?”

Louis sits up, drapes his legs across Harry’s lap. “Yes.”

“Thank God.”

They go through the camera roll together, narrowing it down to two photos, and naturally, Louis is stuck on photo number one, Harry on photo number two. They go back and forth, pointing out the best parts, the flaws, and Louis can’t help but think of their lost Sunday morning tradition. He worms his way further into Harry’s lap and pokes at his chin.

“Hey. You know what we haven’t done in a while?”

“Mmm. What.”

“Coffee and bagels and pictures.”

Harry smiles, bats Louis’ hand away when he sticks his pinky finger in Harry’s dimple. “I miss it.”

“Me, too.”

He nods and turns off the camera. “Okay. Let’s go, then.”

“Uh, it’s five o’clock on a Saturday night. You wanna get breakfast. Right now.”

“Yeah, we’ve got some making up to do.”

“Alright,” Louis says smiling, “just making sure.”

It’s dark outside, snow lining the sidewalks, when they sit down with coffee and breakfast sandwiches. They don’t have any physical copies of photos to go through, but Harry’s Canon suffices, and Harry’s in the middle of pouring another cup of coffee when Louis finally blurts it out after, the words stuck on the tip of his tongue for months.

“Tell me about what you’ve been writing.”

Harry looks up, surprised. “Huh?”

“I wanna know. You said you don’t have to go to rallies and stuff as much anymore, so what have you been writing? Or what about your classes? I’m sure you already have a favorite student, even though the semester just started a month ago.”
He takes a sip of his coffee. “Yeah, okay, I wanna tell you about Summer.”


Harry talks about his class in obnoxious detail, describing what feels like months worth of information, and that’s probably because it is. It’s been close to a year of keeping all sorts of thoughts bottled up, so Louis sits patiently and listens, ripping off pieces of his bagel to dip into cream cheese when Harry starts up about the column. They sit there for over three hours, trading work stories, and eventually, the owner tells them they have to get out, that it’s closing time.

It’s been a long time of Louis feeling like he hasn’t been a part of Harry’s world, but right now, with the way Harry’s looking at him, it’s hard to imagine that anything else exists outside of the two of them, anyway.

It’s a slow process, rebuilding themselves, and a lot of it is spent apologizing, but God, is Louis happy. This time around, Louis is ready to fight, ready to fight back, and it makes a world of a difference. He doesn’t filter himself anymore, just shouts out when he’s bothered, lets Harry know when something isn’t working or if it’s too overwhelming, and Harry is more than happy to do his best to try to fix what’s broken.

They take care of it. They take care of each other.

Winter falls away slowly, about as slowly as it takes to find their footing within one another again, and with it comes a breath of fresh air. Louis gets an impressive and well deserved raise, Harry gets an offer to teach a new class for Wednesday mornings that has him positively beaming with contagious excitement, and overall, coming home to his boy at the end of the day feels like a reward, not a chore. Louis thinks that April might be his favorite month. He’d always been partial to December before, but now, he’s willing to change his tune.

Harry shows up from work one night with a bundle of flowers in his arms, all reds and oranges and greens. His smile is shy when he sets them down on the kitchen table, like he isn’t sure if directly handing them to Louis would be overkill, and just shrugs when he sees Louis staring.

“They’re beautiful. Made me think of you. Don’t make fun of me.”

Louis just shakes his head, can’t hold back his smile. “Jesus. C’mere. Gonna make fun of you all night.”

“All night? Really?” he asks, already striding over to Louis on the couch.

He wraps his arms around Harry’s neck when he hovers over him, leaning in for a kiss. “Really.”

Later on, Harry stands in the kitchen in just his briefs, riding impressively low on his hips. He looks over his shoulder at Louis.

“You know what my favorite part about living with you is, other than the fact that there’s always ice cream in the freezer to support your rocky road addiction?”

“What?”
Harry smirks, pulling the carton out of the freezer. “Living with you.”

Louis grabs the afghan draped across the back of the couch and wraps it around his shoulders. “You don’t have to try to win me over still, Styles. I’m yours.”

He walks over to the couch and hands Louis a spoon. “Music to my ears.”

And it’s the small things like that that get them back on track. Harry makes them breakfast on the mornings they’re both home together, Louis asks Harry to meet him for drinks at the restaurant when his shift ends, and it feels like everyday is filled with new surprises, big and small. Harry’s reaction is worth it every single time, which is why Louis takes a long lunch on this one particular Tuesday, wants to see that look on Harry’s face over and over again.

He picks up sandwiches and soup from a Panera next to the college and finds his way to Harry’s one o’clock class. It’s small, no more than 11 or so students, but Harry doesn’t immediately notice him when he sneaks into the back of the classroom, too busy working with a student at her desk.

Louis watches, smile on his face, happy to see Harry in his element. It’s one thing to hear about it, but it’s another to see it up close and personal. He clearly loves this, bending down to talk to one of his students in that professor type of way, his expression animated and his voice excited as he praises the girl for her job well done. It’s enticing, almost, to see Harry so eager to teach and demonstrate and encourage; Louis doesn’t realize he’s smiling until his cheeks start to ache.

He leans against the back wall and has to hold back a snort when one of the girls starts blatantly flirting, twisting her hair and laughing too loudly. Harry brushes her off politely, moving onto the next desk, undeterred, ignoring the way the girl is still staring. Eventually, though, some of the students realize Louis’ there, and start looking back curiously. Harry catches on when he sees the majority of his students staring at the back door, and he lights up upon seeing Louis, his smile bright and impossible to replicate.

“Hey! What’re you doing here? In my classroom?!”

Louis holds up the bags of Panera. “Thought you might be hungry.”

“Oh my God, my angel. Hey, guys, this is Louis, my boyfriend.”

A collective ooh goes around the room, a couple of the boys in the back of the room snickering, and Louis threads in and out of desks as he makes his way to the front of the room. Harry kisses his cheek, quick and easy, but it has Louis blushing, anyway.

Harry sets him up at an empty desk, dismissing the class with a few minutes extra to spare. On their way out of the room, one girl whispers to another, “Did you know he was gay?”

“No,” the second girl replies. “How tragic.”

Louis laughs after she’s out of earshot and raises his brows at Harry. “You hear that? She thinks we’re tragic .”

Harry blows the steam off his soup, smirking. “Not anymore, we aren’t.”

It’s pouring rain when they leave together; it’s coming down hard , and Louis looks at Harry with a look that clearly screams hell no am I walking to my car in that . Harry rolls his eyes.
“It’s just water. You won’t melt.”

“But my hair looks so good today.”

He nods. “Yeah, you do look pretty perfect today, baby.”

Louis tugs on one of Harry’s curls, twisting his finger around it, and Harry leans into it. “Should we just make a run for it? And I’ll meet you back at home?”

“Sounds like a good plan. Also, can I tell you how thrilled I am that you chose today to wear a white t-shirt?”

“Oh my God.” Louis flicks him across the nose before he takes off through the parking lot, puddles already ankle deep, his vision completely blinded, raindrops freezing cold against his bare arms. He looks back over his shoulder to see Harry’s hair matted against his face, laughing hysterically at both of their expenses.

It’s a strong storm, this one, but Louis doesn’t mind it. Not at all.

In fact, he loves it.

The first time Louis met Harry, they were completely wasted, tripping over themselves and unable to think straight. Louis was in the middle of making an ass of himself, singing some Avril Lavigne song, and Harry was cheering him on like it was the most natural thing in the world to do with a stranger. When the song ended, Louis slapped him on the back, asking, “Who the hell are you?” and Harry replied, “I’m good, thanks for asking. Nice to meet you, skater boy.”

Louis laughed so hard he choked, and that was the very beginning.

He truly never had any inkling that Harry viewed him as something more than a best friend. He was completely taken aback the moment Harry spewed out that he wanted to take him on a date. Louis’ first initial thought was Were you dared? But the look on Harry’s face made it evident that he was very serious, and Louis had trouble swallowing.

He agreed only because Harry was so adamant, so fidgety, the look in his eyes blazing, and Louis convinced himself that worst case scenario, they’d have an awkward dinner and forget about it over a round of tequila shots. It wouldn’t be that bad. After all, it was Harry, the person he was most comfortable with, the person who’d seen him streak across the football field on campus at three in the morning, embarrassingly sober. Nothing was off limits.

And boy, was he wrong.

The date was a disaster, despite Harry’s efforts, the poor guy. Louis couldn’t stop wincing throughout the entire evening, felt so bad that Harry couldn’t calm down, couldn’t focus or do anything considered normal dating behavior whatsoever. It was around the third round of desperately needed wine that Louis realized Harry was so off because this was a big fucking deal to him, that he genuinely wanted Louis. That made Louis want to try. Try for Harry.

Together they stood outside of Louis’ door, shuffling awkwardly back and forth, and Louis, for once, couldn’t read the look on Harry’s face. His pitiful, crestfallen face. Good grief.

“So…” Louis started. “What’re you thinking.”

Harry swallowed, pursing his lips together. “I’m thinking that I just went on a horrible fucking date
and I’m embarrassed and all I want to do is call my best friend and tell him all about it, like I normally would, but my best friend was there. He knows how bad it was. No need to go over it again.”

He laughed, appreciating the honesty. “You’re right. I was there. And it was definitely shitty.”

“I hate that I want to take you out again,” he whispered quietly. “My face hurts and my head is pounding and I think I ate a piece of wine glass from when it shattered into my dish…”

Louis resisted the urge to laugh, instead asking, “You think we have the chemistry? To go out again?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe not.”

“What if all we have is friend chemistry? Is that a thing?” Seems most likely, at this point.

“That’s possible.” He looked so incredibly serious that it made Louis squirm. “I want to try again, Lou.”

“Ah, I dunno…”

“Louis.” Harry reached out and gripped Louis’ hip, firm, steady. “One more time. Something less fancy. Something more us. This could be so good, I know it. I really do. Tonight was bad. I was too nervous and I don’t even really like wine but I really like you. So much. I’m.”


“What?”

“Just. Come here.” He exhaled deeply, fighting the nagging voice in the back of his head telling this was a bad idea, would only make this night worse. But the thing is, he wasn’t blind. He knew Harry was stunning, and objectively, everything Louis looked for in a guy. Tall, lean, a smile that made Louis melt. Kissing him - just to test out their chemistry - wouldn’t be the most terrible thing in the world. Keep telling yourself that. “I need to see if it’s just friend chemistry, to see if you’re totally insane.”

He looped his arms up around Harry’s neck, pulling him in, and Harry went willingly, inhaling sharply as he went. And.

Louis could not believe Harry Styles knew how to kiss like this. His hands were everywhere Louis wanted them without having to say anything, his lips firm against his as if he was trying to prove something, and when Harry pulled him flush up against his chest, Louis’ knees nearly gave out. It was a lot to be kissed like this - and by Harry - and when Harry groaned low in his throat, Louis stopped overthinking it, just let it happen.

He let his head slump forward when they broke apart; Harry rubbed his hands up and down Louis’ back. He felt so safe, so weirdly happy.

Huh.

“Shit,” he murmured. “Hey, Styles.”

“Lou,” he whispered back, voice a little gruff.

“Wanna go out tomorrow night?”
Harry laughed. “Really?”

Louis looked up. “That is not the kind of chemistry friends have. I’m, uh.” Focus. “That was a really good kiss, Styles. You kiss everyone like that?”

He shook his head. “No, I don’t.”

“Oh, can you, like, not kiss anyone else anymore? Especially like that?” Louis asked, half cringing at himself.

Harry smirked before he leaned in to kiss Louis again, cupping the back of his neck. “I won’t.”

Louis believed him, thinking this could really be something.

And he was right.

One night, one kiss, that’s all it took.

He never looked back.

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